10 *Transparency and Truth in Organic Certification*

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A question I am often asked when sharing my research on certified organic agriculture undertaken by smallholder farmers in northern India, goes along the following lines: "So, were these farmers *really* organic?"[1] For a long time, I was inclined to treat questions like this as peripheral to my research. They often puzzled and even troubled me, for the purpose of my work is not to assess and evaluate farmers but to better understand how the quality of becoming, and being, organic is assembled in the first place. Over time, the frequency with which such questions have been posed pushed me to pay more attention – instead of tuning them out, I reflected on why such a question could be ethnographically significant in its own right. As I have discussed elsewhere, a question like this needs to be located in histories of racialized suspicion and *mis*trust (see Galvin 2022). But to ask whether farmers are "really organic" also assumes that there is something that organic *really* is. And so, unraveling this question can help us understand how transparency projects like those associated with organic certification come to constitute truth regimes.

In what follows, I work to develop a different stance toward the question "Is it *really* organic?" by thinking more carefully about some of the assumptions and implications latent in it – particularly the assumption that organic has an objective and verifiable truth status. I aim to show not only how transparency works in certification, but what transparency does; I do this by exploring how transparency instruments and aspirations work as semiotic technologies (Hull 2003; 2008; 2012b) and practices that actively produce – rather than merely reveal – a quality called "organic." In this regard, my work is inspired by research that attends to the importance of semiotic

[1] I engage with this question, and its implications, more fully in an essay published online by Allegra Laboratory from which portions of this chapter are drawn (see Galvin 2022).

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technologies and infrastructures in bureaucratic processes (Hull 2003; 2008; 2012b; Weichselbraun 2019). In his study of Pakistan's Capital Development Authority, Hull (2003; 2008; 2012b) demonstrates the importance of what he terms graphic artifacts – files, lists, maps, stamps, and signatures, among other things – for understanding meaning-making and signification within bureaucratic and governmental processes. Hull's effort to advance understandings of "governance as material practice" (2008: 501) is pushed further by Weichselbraun, who examines how the material semiotic characteristics of metal seals used by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Iran's uranium conversion facilities function as "the *semiotic infrastructure* of nuclear governance that materializes international law and geopolitical relations between states through the IAEA's supposedly neutral techno-epistemic devices and practices of interpretation" (Weichselbraun 2019: 505, emphasis in the original). For these scholars, conceptualizing particular material artifacts as semiotic technologies or infrastructures has yielded important insights around questions of agency and intentionality.

Building on this, I suggest that, in the case of organic certification, semiotic technologies that range from certification documents to tags affixed to sacks of rice bring organic quality into being as something endowed with a particular reality or truth. Pushing on what the editors of this volume characterize as the paradox of transparency – a process of mediation that presents itself as one of disintermediation – I argue that this process is a fundamentally productive and political one, in which institutionally anchored semiotic technologies are essential not simply for mediating between an object (say, organic quality) and an observing subject (in this case inspectors responsible for organic certification), but for producing the object itself.

Transparency Beyond Opacity

Transparency, understood as discourse (West and Sanders 2003) as well as a "political technology [and] form of intervention" (Ballestero 2012: 160), has been most closely associated with the late twentieth-century turn to voluntary regulation, accountability, and public management. Without question, transparency projects have profoundly shaped "political and legal landscapes" (Ballestero 2012: 160), but they are informed and legitimated by, and seek also to produce, ethical

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and normative ideas, practices, and dispositions. Transparency is promoted as an indispensable element of good governance, conveying "trust, openness, fairness" (West and Sanders 2003). In this regard, the rise and expansion of audit as an instrument of new public management in the late twentieth century is especially illustrative of the power of transparency as a global social and economic value; as Power observes, audits "promise external visibility of internal processes" (1996: 21).

Such notions of transparency resonate powerfully in India. Secrecy has long been enshrined in the practice of government and linked with the legacies of colonial power. In the late twentieth century, transparency impulses in India not only reflected global discourses, but also moved in step with domestic political reforms harboring democratizing and participatory objectives as well as with processes of economic liberalization. At this time, Mazzarella observes, transparency was "much beloved by the NGO business and other transnational growers of civil society, [as] the term ostensibly suggested public accountability in political processes" (2006: 489). Transparency has also been taken as an expression of a more enduring form of what Bornstein and Sharma call "technomoral politics," the "complex, strategic integration of technical and moral vocabularies as political tactics" (2016: 77).

The ascendance of transparency as a technomoral value with global currency has necessarily drawn anthropological attention toward its tensions and contradictions, in particular with varying forms of concealment, secrecy, opacity, and ignorance (Mathews 2008). Comaroff and Comaroff historicize the contemporary fascination with transparency, placing it within the enduring relation of "the manifest and the inscrutable," as an indelible facet of power (2003: 288). West and Sanders likewise posit that "ideas that power operates in hidden ways make necessary claims that it operates in the open" (2003: 12).

Yet the emphasis on transparency as affording (or not) a kind of technomanagerial visibility or legibility (Scott 1998) risks overlooking the particular kind of *revelatory*, purportedly truth-telling work that projects, such as audit, undertaken in the name of transparency do. Dunn writes:

> [T]he self-representations contained in auditable documents are supposed to create "transparency." That is, they purport to have a one-to-one correspondence with what actually goes on in a firm or an organization, thereby granting the auditors (and, by proxy, those who trust the auditors) the ability

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to look into the firm and *see what actually happens there*. (Dunn 2007: 42, emphasis added)

The truth-telling powers ascribed to audit, and what the editors of this volume signal in their Introduction as disintermediation, have been taken up within public policy in the context of welfare delivery, democratization, and anti-corruption. A number of scholars have critically engaged with such processes, querying what the revelatory potentialities of audit and other transparency projects in fact produce. In India, the Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGA) built in considerable documentary infrastructure to ensure transparency and avert corruption, but ultimately led to "an enhanced focus on the production of what my informants described as the *sarkari zindagi* (state life) of NREGA, a life that, more often than not, does not readily map onto its *asli zindagi* (real life)" (Mathur 2016: 7). This distinction that transparency produces between the "state life" and "real life" of the state bears affinity with Hansen's (2001) distinction between the profane and sublime dimensions of state power. For Mazzarella, the "game of revelation" in which the Indian state engages through its various transparency projects "reinstates the constitutive mystique of the state" (2006: 494). In the fields and offices of Uttarakhand's organic program, the "game of revelation," undertaken at various moments and through diverse practices of certification, is in fact crucial to producing organic quality as something real and true in the first place.

Transparently Organic?

Unlike the fertile Indo-Gangetic plain in which India's Green Revolution took root, or the districts of southern and western India where horticulture and GM cotton have taken hold, Uttarakhand is a region that many people claim has always been organic. Bypassed by agrarian transformations that swept through other regions of the subcontinent – on account of a mountainous terrain, rain-fed agriculture, and sparse road and transport networks – for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Uttarakhand was rendered politically and economically peripheral (Berreman 1985; Mawdsley 1998; 1999). Yet, in 2003, shortly after Uttarakhand was hived off from the plains of Uttar Pradesh and created as a state, the new state government established the Uttarakhand Organic Commodity Board, the first commodity board of its kind in India focused on the development and

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promotion of organic agriculture.[2] In the years that followed, the Organic Commodity Board facilitated the development of contract farming between aspiring organic farmers and a major India rice retailer that would procure organic basmati rice from the Doon Valley, a fertile region surrounding the state capital of Dehradun.

My research in Uttarakhand explores the tensions of being "organic by default" and becoming "organic by design," through, among other things, the adoption of certification schemes and contract farming in the twenty-first century (Galvin 2014). As I have described elsewhere, certification, paradoxically, often generates uncertainty and does not always succeed in enlisting farmers as faithful subjects of its audit and inspections regimes (Galvin 2018; 2021). In the Doon Valley, the kind of transparency and legibility that certification systems seek (and often claim) to achieve proved elusive as documents were invariably incomplete and on-site inspection interviews produced conflicting accounts of agricultural practices.

Organic certification often manifests as a commitment to transparency, requiring farmers, producers, and processors to make their work visible and legible through documentation, inspections, and sometimes also residue testing of their crops and land to check for the presence of prohibited inputs. Yet, as a characteristic or property of comestibles, organic does not manifest in any readily knowable way, in a material or physical sense. Organic, therefore, remains a quality largely intangible for everyone other than those who labor to produce it. Paradoxically, it is precisely this difficulty of discerning organic quality that impels the work of transparency, assembling a multitude of practices, documents, and sociotechnical objects to make visible something which cannot be readily seen, and to make more perceptible and traceable the production processes that bring organic, as a quality of comestibles, into being.

From Paper Work to Digital Transparency

Organic certification is accompanied by copious practices of documentation. Upon registering with the Organic Commodity Board, farmers

[2] Uttarakhand was formed in the year 2000, when it separated from the larger and mostly plains state of Uttar Pradesh following a movement for statehood that waxed and waned over the course of the twentieth century.

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are given a farmers' diary in which they are to record virtually every facet of their agricultural activities. Through the Board, farmers were also assigned a "master trainer," an extension worker who advised farmers on issues related to cultivation, certification, contract farming, and marketing and who completed booklets called "farm files." These contained the same information as the farmers' diaries and even more, documenting every plot of land cultivated by a farmer (most farmers would cultivate multiple plots of land) and such things as the history of cultivation, irrigation sources, and future cropping plans. The Board, moreover, employed a cadre of internal inspectors whose task was to review these documents and conduct inspections of every farm registered with the Board.

During the four years when I conducted most of my fieldwork, from 2005 to 2008, internal inspectors produced internal inspection reports and spreadsheets (called actual farmers' lists) which were forwarded to a third-party certification agency. There, third-party inspectors reviewed documents in order to prepare formal risk assessments, an exercise that helped them identify subsets of farmers to follow up with for further inspection. For example, if internal inspections yielded questions and concerns about whether farmers maintained adequate buffer zones between conventional and organic plots, or about the source of their seeds, third-party inspectors would note these as "risky farmers" whom they needed to contact. Third-party inspections therefore focused on a narrower set of farmers who had been signaled in internal reports and spreadsheets as "riskier."

Third-party inspections also produced further sets of documents, among them observation sheets, which recorded any issues or problems arising from the inspection, and finally led to the preparation of an inspection report. This report was then evaluated by a certification committee, which made recommendations for actions to be taken for subsequent years; the committee also conducted its own inspections of a subset of farmers registered with the Organic Commodity Board (especially those whose risk assessments had identified them as being at greater risk of noncompliance).

This system of linking internal control systems to third-party certification agencies through the manual preparation of documents changed in 2010 with the development of TraceNet, a web-based platform for managing the certification process which claims to be the "world's first online system for organic traceability." Promising to offer its users the

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ability to "track the trail" across an entire food supply chain and thereby to afford "transparency across the system," TraceNet has digitized many aspects of the certification process. Since its introduction, the Board's internal inspectors no longer forward their inspection reports and actual farmers' lists to the third-party certification agency but instead enter details into TraceNet, which then algorithmically generates lists of farmers identified for further inspection by third-party certification inspectors. Third-party certification agencies similarly use TraceNet to enter data gathered from their review of documentation and field inspections. Scope certificates, issued to producers, and transaction certificates, issued to buyers and exporters, are issued via the TraceNet platform by these certification agencies.

The introduction of TraceNet was hailed by the Organic Commodity Board's certification manager as an enhancement of transparency. "Now there is no bias," he told me in 2016, as he described the changes TraceNet had brought about in carrying out the everyday work of certification. This sentiment intimates the kind of "fantasy of immediation, of frictionless social mechanisms" that Mazzarella (2006: 499) describes in relation to the rise of e-governance in India. It is a fantasy that appears to be especially associated with digitization, but Hull reminds us that documents, too, have been "overlooked because it is easy to see them as simply giving immediate access to what they document" (2012a: 253). The rise of digital platforms and technologies such as TraceNet similarly seem to afford such access, bestowing transparency with a seemingly frictionless form. A promotional video for TraceNet, produced by the Delhi-based software company that developed it, lauds its "in-built checks and balances [that] enable instant reference of previous steps in the supply chain … GPS system to trace farmers … real time information of producers, processors, traders, and their trading activities, anytime, anywhere, 365 by 24 by 7."[3] In appearing to make the fantasy of immediation a reality, TraceNet also obscures the ways in which it has itself become a crucial mediator of the certification process. While seemingly providing a transparent and "frictionless" platform for recording and generating information about certification, it centralizes the collection of data from inspection reports at the national level by

[3] "TraceNet: Traceability Solution for Organic Products Exported from India," www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zb1K_hLSu0 (accessed July 27, 2023).

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the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority within the Ministry of Commerce.

Tag and Trace

As the introduction of TraceNet exemplifies, traceability is taken to be integral to the kind of transparency sought in many supply chains, including one that organic certification processes also seek to establish. Because organic is not a quality inherent in any product, but one that is conferred on basmati through the land on and practices through which it was cultivated, along with the methods of storing, transporting, and processing it after harvest, it is necessary to trace or follow the products of the land as they are harvested, stored, transported, processed, and packaged. In the Doon Valley, the procurement of basmati by a large Indian rice retailer which I refer to as Hira Foods, the company with which farmers had formed a contract arrangement, marked an important moment when grains of rice themselves were made traceable. Procurement occurred, shortly after basmati was harvested, when farmers brought their unmilled basmati paddy to a collection point to be evaluated by quality and technical inspectors from Hira Foods. At this stage, quality inspectors were evaluating unmilled basmati not primarily for its compliance with organic standards (this had happened during certification inspections), but instead in relation to government of India standards for export-quality basmati rice. At this stage, transparency efforts were directed less at making visible the organic or agricultural practices of farmers; instead, since rice was collected from hundreds of farmers across the valley, the tagging of bags ensured that it would be possible to trace an individual grain back to the sack and farm from which it originated. As bags of paddy were unloaded and weighed by daily laborers, Hira Foods' technical adviser, Dr. Sharma, kept detailed records in a document called "Procurement of Organic Basmati, Kharīf 2007." These details included the variety, the stage of conversion and/or organic status, the precise weight of each bag, the total number of bags brought by the farmer, and the total price per quintal.

While the bags were sewn closed, Dr. Sharma filled out tags to be affixed to each sack. The tags included information on the administrative block, the date, the farmer's name and a unique code number,

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the variety of rice, the year of organic conversion, the number of bags brought by the farmer, the total weight, and the pre-agreed price named in the contract (and dependent on the stage of conversion). In addition to these written details, the tags were also color coded, with different colors indexing different stages of conversion (zero, first, and second year, and fully organic). Dr. Sharma explained to me that the color coding was intended to ensure that illiterate laborers who handled the paddy as it was transported and processed at the rice mill would be able to separate paddy at different stages of organic conversion. As material semiotic objects, these tags, through the detailed information they relayed through both their form (color) and the written script, brought the paddy into a larger regime of traceability. They ensured that appropriate measures could be taken to separate paddy at different stages of conversion and certification, and made it possible to know, even as rice was aggregated and processed in batches at the rice mill, from which farmer, and which place, the paddy originated.

The tagging of bags, and the tags themselves, not only distinguished organic from conventional rice, but also indexed distinctions within the category of organic according to the stage of conversion. Marking distinctions in this way mattered, because the stage of conversion could determine in which international markets basmati might be sold as organic. In particular, basmati rice that had been certified organic for a period of two years (marked as second year on the tags) could be sold as certified organic in Indian domestic as well as European markets, but not in the US, which required producers to undergo a three-year conversion period before their products could be certified organic according to United States Department of Agriculture organic standards. Tags attached to sacks of unmilled basmati paddy served crucially as what Latour has called immutable mobiles – material and semiotic objects that produce transformations as they travel, without being themselves transformed (Latour 1987; 2005; see also Dun 2005). These tags are intended to reflect, and to inscribe, on mobile and mutable grains, an organic status acquired through place and methods of production and to render these grains traceable as they move through the supply chain. Linking national and international standards regimes with sacks of rice, these innocuous objects do crucial semiotic work – making organic something that is materially meaningful and discernible.

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Organic Truths

The revelatory work that transparency projects claim to do connects them with practices of truth-telling and, more potently, of truth-making. In this regard, transparency projects such as organic certification might be seen to be emblematic of what Foucault described as "the will to truth" (1980). Truth, he writes, is a "thing of this world … Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth" (1980: 131–132).

Truth regimes, indeed, operate in a range of ways that themselves shift over time in step with transparency's shifting forms. For example, as asylum claims in Europe are made subject to ever greater scrutiny, Fassin and D'Halluin (2005) recount how, in France, medical certificates documenting evidence of torture through physical bodily harm and injury are increasingly necessary forms of evidence. While in the past the truth of asylum claims was adjudicated on the basis of asylum seekers' testimony, these authors describe how in recent decades it has been increasingly mediated through medical expertise and the production of medical certificates that authorize such truths. These authors argue that, "whether it reproduces the account or attests to the consequences, the scriptural trace envelopes the fragile words and invisible wounds of the asylum seeker in its legitimacy … In the context of generalized skepticism, the written testimony is the highest form of truth-telling" (Fassin and D'Halluin 2005: 606). Similar kinds of processes are evident in other settings: for example, criminal trials, where DNA samples are seen to work as a "truth machine." Lynch observes that, within the space of a few years:

> [The] statistical procedures and correction factors, which had seemed so obscure when compared with the tidy declarations of fingerprint examiners, now stood as emblems of transparency, only now transparency did not mean intuitively *apparent*; instead it referred to calculations of probative value that were logically traceable through formulae accepted by experts. (Lynch 2008: 65)

Organic agriculture and its certification may be a far cry from such settings, but parallels nonetheless exist insofar as documents and now the forensic testing of grains for prohibited residues are regarded as indispensable "proof" of organic status. This revelatory power of transparency and the insertion of transparency instruments in

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proliferating regimes of truth built around audit and other forms of inspection and surveillance are what sustain and explain transparency's power as a value and a form of action. This chapter began by reflecting on a question that often arises in relation to products that are marked as certified organic: "Is it *really* organic?" Revealing of the ways in which racialized suspicion mingles with the normative and ideological power of transparency, it is a question that in fact urges us to query how it is that certification produces organic (or anything else) as a truth in the first place.

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