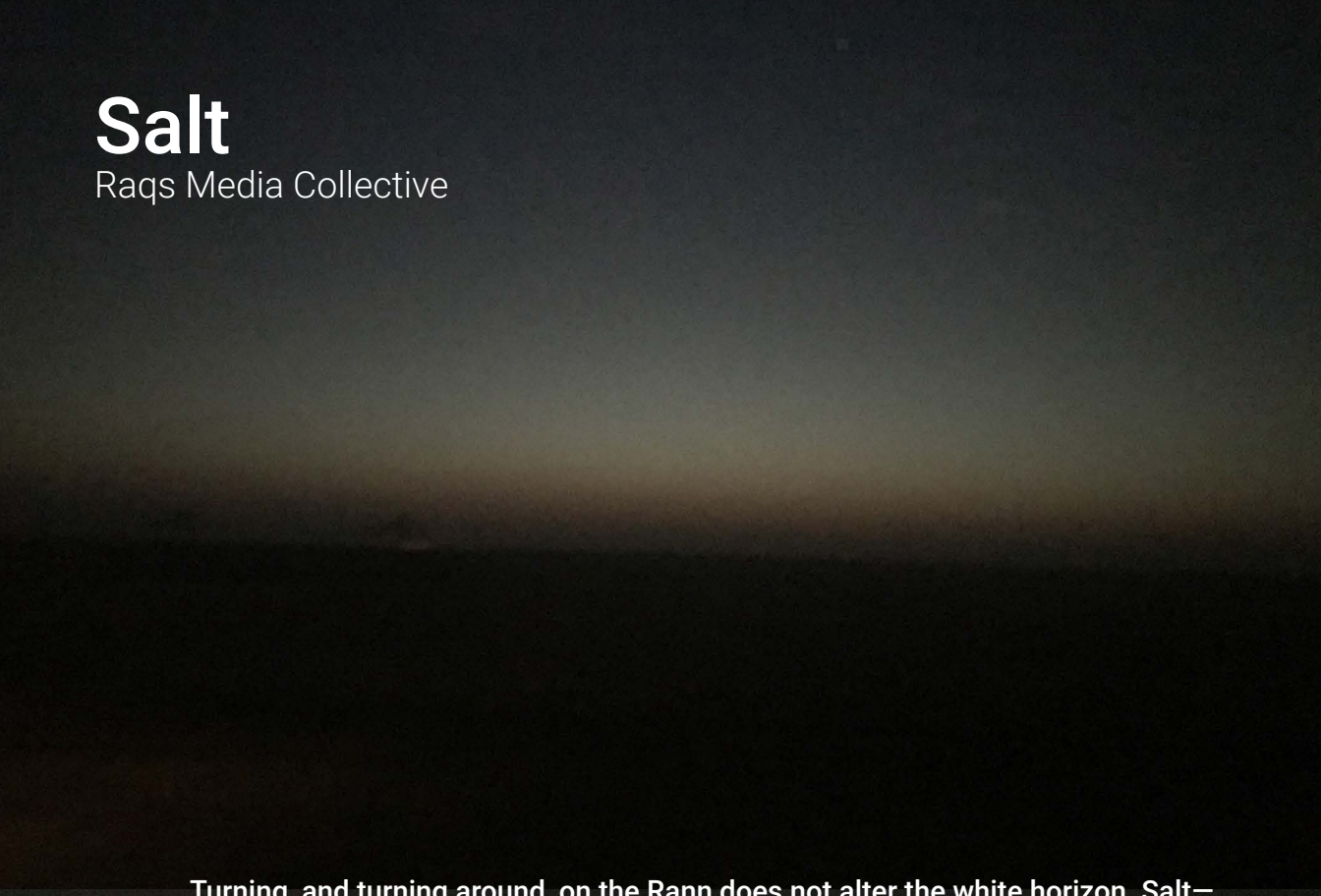
Salt

Raqs Media Collective



Turning, and turning around, on the Rann does not alter the white horizon. Salt—brilliant under the sun—dazzles the eyes, opens the lachrymal canals. We taste our own salinity as time seasons us.

The Little and Great Rann of Kutch stretch salt on the surface of the earth as far as the eye can see. They are earth that becomes sea, and sea that becomes earth, and land that turns to salt as it dries. Once the Rann of Kutch was a forest, with dinosaurs that are now fossils under the salt. Then, as the Arabian Sea made its claims on the shore, it became something like a marine drag queen, masquerading for half the year as land.

Every year it transgresses itself.

"The opening of the Kutch basin to the north of Saurashtra peninsula coincided with the transgressive phase of the sea onto the coastal areas of other parts of Gondwanaland, including the western margin of the Indian plate during Jurassic-Cretaceous time. The basin formed the site for westerly deepening epi-continental sea, probably an extension of the Tethys, in which a thick pile of sediments, ranging in age from Middle Jurassic to Early Cretaceous, were deposited in shallow marine to deltaic environments."

Note on Rann of Kutch
Directorate General of Hydrocarbons, Ministry of Petroleum & Natural Gas, Government of India

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No one can quite do without it. Salt, we know, is a universally recognized criterion of value, and source of revenue—the first "good" seized by the sovereign. Ancient manuals of statecraft, like Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, provide for a "salting officer"—*lavanan-adhyaksa*—who was responsible for collecting taxes on transactions of salt and issuing licenses for its production.

Conversely, salt lends itself to stand for what it takes to compensate a person for their labor. Hence the alternative word for "wages": *salary,* which is rooted in "sal," or salt. Elsewhere, rules are framed for those who can transact in it, and those who are polluted by its salinity. *Manusmriti*, a 3rd-century-CE manual of rules for caste and gender hierarchy, obedience, and punishment, decrees that "*by selling meat, lac, or salt, a Brahmin falls immediately from his caste*."

"The total area under salt production is about 6.47 lakh acre (Patta land, State Govt. land, Port land, Salt Department land). Out of this, 59,946 acres land belongs to Salt Department for manufacture of salt."

10th Report (July 2000) of Expenditure Reforms Commission, Government of India.

The memory of a tax on salt goes back a few thousand years.



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The Agariya are a nomadic tribe of the Rann of Kutch, now classed as “de-notified,” as in they are no longer “notified” as a “criminal tribe” but still required to be under the constant surveillance of local police stations.

Agariyas’ tradition-sanctioned occupation, which most of them are still bound by, is salt farming. There are somewhere around 10 thousand Agariya families concentrated in the Dhrangadhra, Kharaghoda, Halvad, Santalpur, Adesar, and Malia salt zones of the Gud-Khur Sanctuary, the recently demarcated reserve for the endangered Indian wild ass, *Equus hemionus khur.*

Agariyas pump brine from the soil to dig a new salt bore. The pump runs on diesel. An Agariya salt farmer can easily consume nine barrels of diesel in a season to make the salt that can be taken to market. The escalation of the price of diesel escalates the cost of farming salt.

A book from the 1990s, *Kali Majuri, Dholo Mithoo* (Black Labor, White Salt) by Dilip Ranpara, describes the legs of Agariyas as hardened by exposure to salt, of a lifetime spent working with salt. When an Agariya dies, their legs have too much salt in them. Salt is inert, nonflammable; it is used as a natural fire extinguisher. Agariya legs do not catch fire when cremated. They are removed from their bodies and buried in the salt flats, along with their salt-making tools.



The oldest dinosaur fossil found in the 21st century is a possibly 135-million-year-old Jurassic-era dinosaur hip and two leg bones from Lodai village in the Rann of Kutch. Salt fossilizes organic remains through a process known as perimineralization. The memory of the forest that existed before land became sea and sea became land is kept alive by salt crystals. The fossils of Agariya limbs too will be faithfully preserved for posterity.

Landscapes remember the labor lost in them.

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In folkloric invocation of the value of salt as a token of filial love: there's one of a princess who tells her father, the king, that she loves him as much as she loves salt; salt becomes a token of truth and loyalty, of authenticity and integrity. The salt of the earth, the salt promise, the salt promise breaker—the *namak haram*—all find their way into thought. Language gets salted regularly.

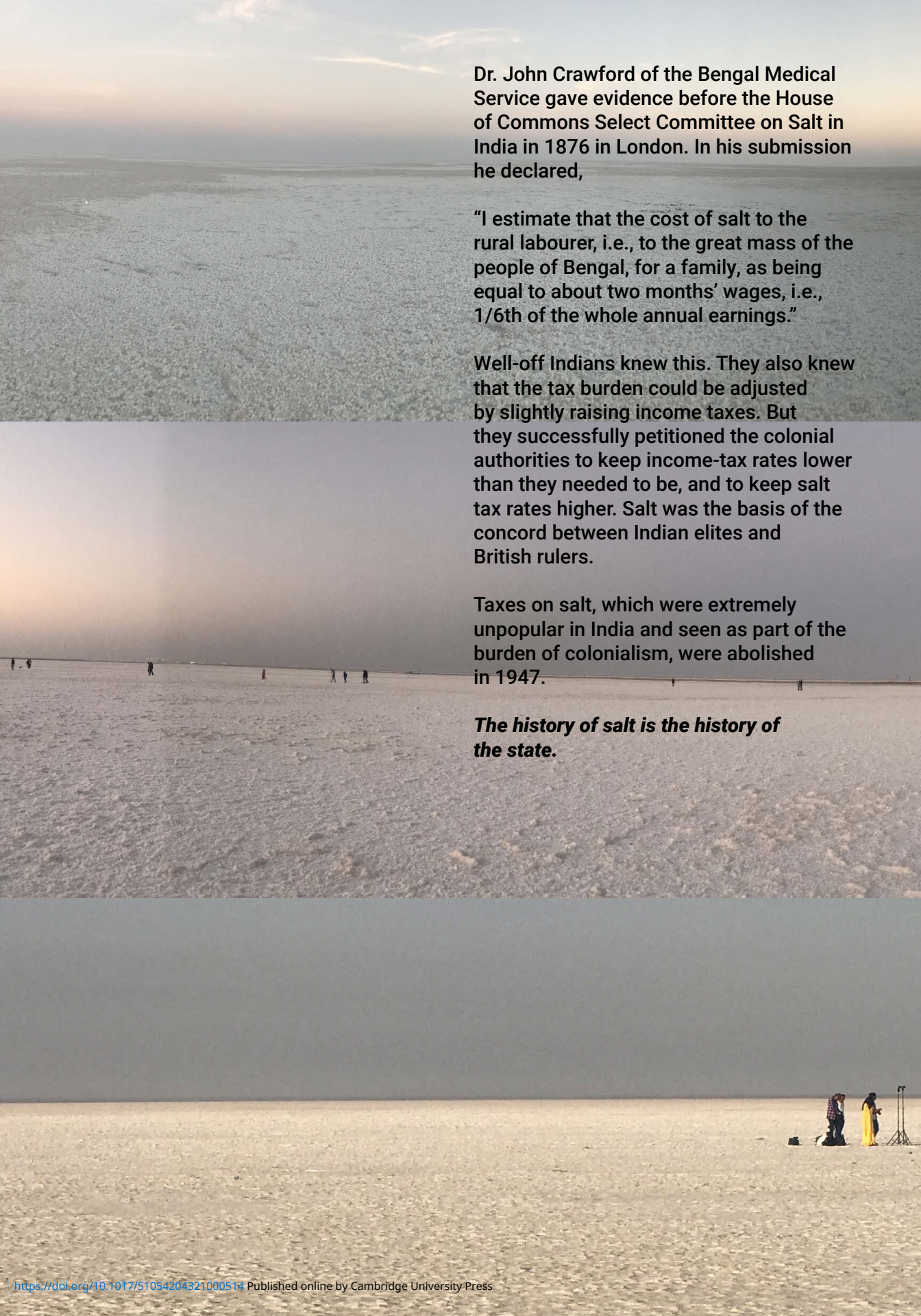
In 1925, Munshi Premchand writes of a modest "salt inspector," Vanshidhar, rewarded for his honesty by the corrupt landlord and salt trader Pandit Alopidin. Vanshidhar arrests the dishonest salt trader for evading the tax on salt, newly doubled by the colonial state. Vanshidhar is not able to bring any evidence to back his charge in court and is therefore dismissed from service. Subsequently, Pandit Alopidin appoints the honest salt inspector manager of his estate because he has seen him tested for honesty.

Vanshidhar's dramatic turn as a protagonist is accompanied by his anagnorisis—a transformation from ignorance to knowledge—as he becomes aware of how much a dishonest man values his honesty. Salt is the basis of this reversal of fortune.

Peripeteia is a dramatic turn in the destiny of a protagonist.



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Dr. John Crawford of the Bengal Medical Service gave evidence before the House of Commons Select Committee on Salt in India in 1876 in London. In his submission he declared,

"I estimate that the cost of salt to the rural labourer, i.e., to the great mass of the people of Bengal, for a family, as being equal to about two months' wages, i.e., 1/6th of the whole annual earnings."

Well-off Indians knew this. They also knew that the tax burden could be adjusted by slightly raising income taxes. But they successfully petitioned the colonial authorities to keep income-tax rates lower than they needed to be, and to keep salt tax rates higher. Salt was the basis of the concord between Indian elites and British rulers.

Taxes on salt, which were extremely unpopular in India and seen as part of the burden of colonialism, were abolished in 1947.

The history of salt is the history of the state.

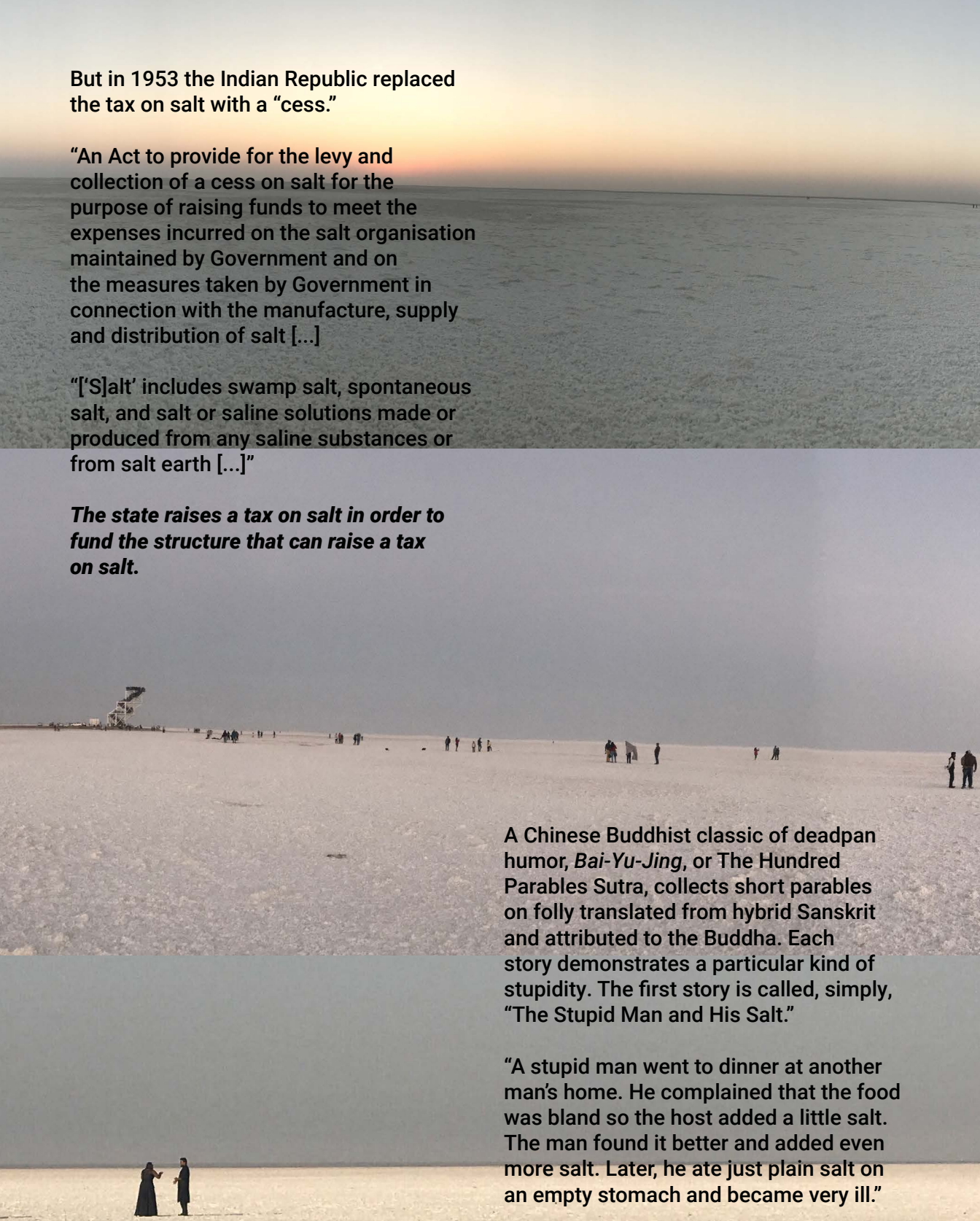
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But in 1953 the Indian Republic replaced the tax on salt with a "cess."

"An Act to provide for the levy and collection of a cess on salt for the purpose of raising funds to meet the expenses incurred on the salt organisation maintained by Government and on the measures taken by Government in connection with the manufacture, supply and distribution of salt [...]

"['S]alt' includes swamp salt, spontaneous salt, and salt or saline solutions made or produced from any saline substances or from salt earth [...]"

The state raises a tax on salt in order to fund the structure that can raise a tax on salt.



A Chinese Buddhist classic of deadpan humor, *Bai-Yu-Jing*, or The Hundred Parables Sutra, collects short parables on folly translated from hybrid Sanskrit and attributed to the Buddha. Each story demonstrates a particular kind of stupidity. The first story is called, simply, "The Stupid Man and His Salt."

"A stupid man went to dinner at another man's home. He complained that the food was bland so the host added a little salt. The man found it better and added even more salt. Later, he ate just plain salt on an empty stomach and became very ill."

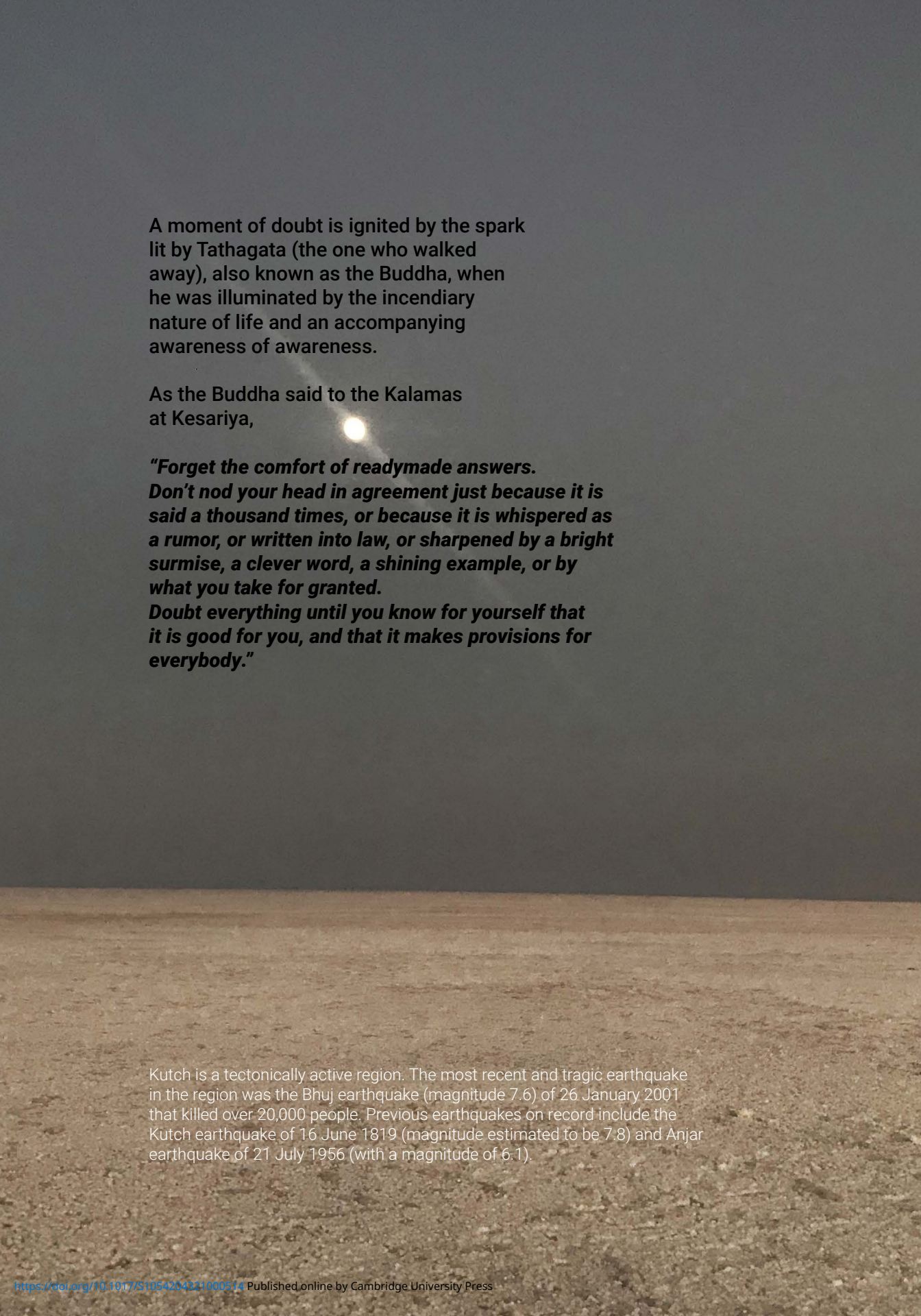
If the state seasons all social transactions, then would it not be wise to know when to stop salting your dish?

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A moment of doubt is ignited by the spark lit by Tathagata (the one who walked away), also known as the Buddha, when he was illuminated by the incendiary nature of life and an accompanying awareness of awareness.

As the Buddha said to the Kalamas at Kesariya,

"Forget the comfort of readymade answers. Don't nod your head in agreement just because it is said a thousand times, or because it is whispered as a rumor, or written into law, or sharpened by a bright surmise, a clever word, a shining example, or by what you take for granted.
Doubt everything until you know for yourself that it is good for you, and that it makes provisions for everybody."



Kutch is a tectonically active region. The most recent and tragic earthquake in the region was the Bhuj earthquake (magnitude 7.6) of 26 January 2001 that killed over 20,000 people. Previous earthquakes on record include the Kutch earthquake of 16 June 1819 (magnitude estimated to be 7.8) and Anjar earthquake of 21 July 1956 (with a magnitude of 6.1).

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