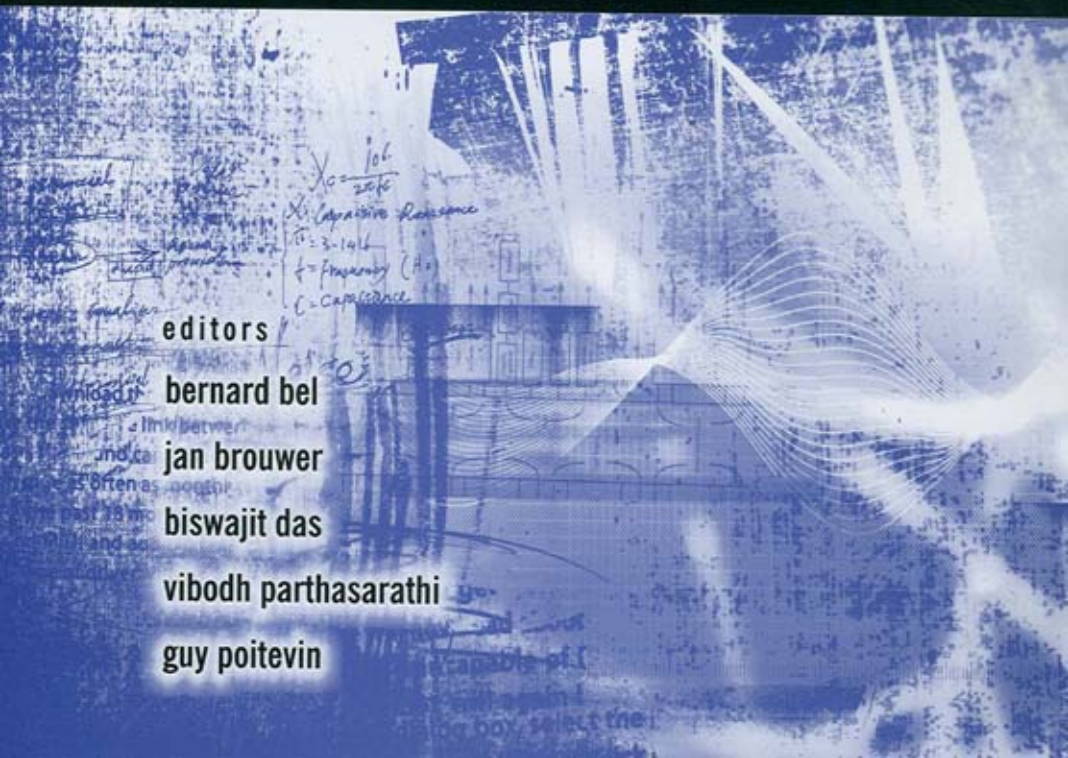




COMMUNICATION PROCESSES VOLUME 2

# the **social** and the **symbolic**



**editors**

**bernard bel**

**jan brouwer**

**biswajit das**

**vibodh parthasarathi**

**guy poitevin**

# THE SOCIAL AND THE SYMBOLIC

## Communication Processes

**Series Editors:** Bernard Bel, Jan Brouwer, Biswajit Das,  
Vibodh Parthasarathi, Guy Poitevin

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**THE SOCIAL AND THE SYMBOLIC**

Editors

Bernard Bel, Jan Brouwer,  
Biswajit Das, Vibodh Parthasarathi,  
Guy Poitevin

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# OVERTURE: Recasting 'the Social' as 'the Symbolic'

BERNARD BEL, JAN BROUWER, BISWAJIT DAS,  
VIBODH PARTHASARATHI, GUY POITEVIN

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## Society as System of Symbolic Relations

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The binding of individuals into a collective exists on the strength of language. The symbolic function consists in capturing the world through turning it into signs which are events of expression to be exchanged (Tarot 1999: 59). This process is specific to the way human beings articulate their thoughts with the aid of languages. A group must express itself to exist. To that effect, in the human world—the subject of all social sciences—everything can become a signifier, that is, carry significance. In the beginning of man is the *muthos* or *logos*, the word or the discourse—namely, an exchange of signs which carry, or rather incorporate, a significance. The sign which is exchanged is a *symbolon*, which is, according to the etymology of the Greek term, 'an object divided between strangers, who could come to recognize each other when the pieces are fitted together' and tally (M.A.U.S.S. 1998: 56, n. 36).

The symbolic function of language makes individuals relate to one another as a social grouping, establishing networks of mutual relationship. Symbolic thought is relational by nature (Lévi-Strauss 1960: xLvii). It inserts itself between man and nature as a distinct order of reality, a province of its own distinct from nature, functionally necessary to the constitution of a human world. It

provides meaningful patterns of behaviour and relations which, imperatively shared by all, design and govern the rapport between individuals, binding them into a collective of members of human society.

The symbolic function as being competent to produce meaningful signs is at the heart of the social. It originates the symbolic as a collection of symbols. Communication, an exchange of symbols, is the societal essence of the human collective. The social is identical to the symbolic, and its persistence is secured by the acceptance and transmission—which is tradition—of common symbolic codes. Society constitutes itself through the exchange of expressive forms which associate its members through the forms being shared because they incorporate systems of meanings. The significations that they enshrine stimulate the affects and pattern the relations that prevail between all those who partake of them. Their meanings weave a social order by articulating relations between individuals and norms of behaviour.

But symbolic forms should not be mistaken for collective representations. A human collective, in relation to the world, constitutes itself not only by defining and fixing its own representations; it also has to constantly negotiate and design these representations through exchanging them in comprehensible forms. Human minds transact with one another only by means of symbolic mutually intelligible intermediaries which they share—dance, rhythm, sound, tune, image, art, technical skill, custom, institution, occupational habit, linguistic resource, myth, belief, performance, ritual, health care practice, birthing practice, etc. Thus, the symbolic is more than a mental representation and ‘the symbols are more real than what they symbolize’ (Lévi-Strauss 1960: xxxii). The symbolic does not simply reflect mental states. Common signs are external to the mental states of individuals, and their symbolic meaningfulness goes beyond the subjective states they contribute to create. Communication as sharing of symbolic forms is a form of action, as it does not merely represent or describe but actually moulds and symbolically constitutes society through the articulation of symbols that are exchanged and shared (Tarot 1999: 13, 242, 272).

Symbolic forms do not only express representations, excite to action, mould, fix and transmit significations: this transmission also binds those individuals who assent to this common value into

a distinctive group, and accords to the latter social substance. Constrained to live collectively, to relate to one another, human beings cannot dispense with consenting on common symbolic forms that make sense to all of them, and instrumentalize their quest for agreement, relation and exchange.

There is in any accord a subjective truth and an objective truth; and in any sequence of such symbolic accords a minimum of reality, namely, the coordination of these accords. And even if these symbols correspond only in imagination and arbitrarily to things, they at least correspond to human beings who understand them and believe in them, and for whom they are useful as total expression of these things and of their knowledge, of their logics and of their technics, as well as of their arts and their affectivities. (Tarot 1999: 277)

While owning and internalizing the symbolic forms that it creates, the group accedes to a collective conscience that governs it, and can at any moment identify itself in the mirror of its symbolic devices: the symbolic is the *sine qua non* of its own self-recognition as a social reality. The conducts of individuals grouped together do not automatically constitute a collective: they are only elements upon which a symbolic system which constitutes the collective is built up. It belongs to the nature of the social to express itself and construct itself symbolically through its customs and institutions (Lévi-Strauss 1960: xvi). The nexus of systems of symbolic forms and structures of social agency constitutes a human collective. The foundation of the social rests upon the consent given by human participants to systemic sets of symbolic forms—rules of behaviour to be observed, rituals to be performed, representations to be honoured, norms to be followed. Social facts

are bound to the sharing of mental states, representations and beliefs, which have an efficiency of their own, are sometimes objects of enthusiastic attachment, attract upon themselves energies which have not been heard of; it happens that men prefer their values, their culture, their beliefs and the representations of their life to their own life itself. (Tarot 1999: 239)

Although there are rules only for a subject, social rules are neither subjective nor imaginary because, to the extent that they

are not deprived of communication through language and are handed down along generations, they institute a symbolic order that imposes its reality on all the partners in the collective. Attitudes towards the world are created, articulated and conveyed through the construction of symbolic and expressive systems.

## The Symbolic Constitution of the World

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Three features characterize the function of symbolization and, as a consequence, the symbolic constitution of the world of humankind.

The first feature: as anything may become a sign, the symbolic function that specifically defines the human mind gives rise to an indefinite number of forms of exchange that can hardly always be reconciled with one another.

On the one hand, symbolic thinking is the source of, and reason for, any exchange in any of its forms, whatever its contents. The exchange of signifiers creates human societies as distinct systems of symbolic communication, or systems of social relation. These systems get their singular unity from the internal equilibrium or intrinsic arrangement of the various forms of exchange that they comprise of.

But, on the other hand, the concord that substantiates the reality of a particular society is far from a consensus even within the limits of a given collective, let alone with other collectives. Language necessarily turns objects of the world into signs—this is its essence and *raison d'être* because human beings need to live in groups. But the processes of symbolization are arbitrary. Human reason appears fragmented in an indefinite multiplicity of cultures, values, cognitive systems and goals. The social is never universal, always particular. Human reason appears scattered, torn apart.

This feature raises two questions: The first is that of the legitimacy of the arbitrary symbolic orders considered by collectives, or sections within collectives, as distinctive parameters for identity. This points to the issue of the parameters of power within groups and communities and between collectives. Collectives cannot avoid facing, in one way or other, dissidence from within and confrontation from without. In the absence of free assent, the

acceptance of common symbolic systems is likely to be enforced by the dominant actors, both insiders and outsiders. We shall come back later to this point, as it impinges significantly on all the studies in this book.

The second question is about the possibility not only of general theoretical statements about particular human collectivities—namely, to discover the exact rules presiding in any society over the creation of cycles of reciprocal relation and to dispel the initial impression of arbitrariness—but also mainly of one universal human reason and the unity of the human race. Humankind presents itself in fragments that often do not cohere. Reason does not manifest itself in one universal symbol in which all the symbolic formations integrate or match with one another.

Nevertheless, the scientific utopia of social knowledge is that of transcending the multiplicity of facts, qualities and modalities, and of being capable of the same rigorous construction of the social world of men analogous to that of the physical world by natural sciences. The dream is to carry through a conceptualization of the symbolic so as to reach deeper realities of an intellectual nature, mapping of symbols that reveal systems, fundamental forms and the laws of their transformations in the course of communication processes. The scientists' firm conviction is that the multiplicity of forms of social communication and processes of symbolic exchange can be reduced to the smallest possible number of communicational patterns and exchange operations.

In this regard, the firm conviction of Lévi-Strauss (1960: xxxvii) is well known: 'Exchange is the common denominator of a great number of social activities apparently heterogenous to one another.' Exchange is the original phenomenon that the multiple discrete operations of social life tend to fracture. Exchange is the primordial logical principle that explains the circulation of symbolic forms. It is the rule that catalyses and organizes the social processes of symbolic communication that constitute social life as a set of systems of relations. 'The unity of the whole is still more real than that of its parts' (ibid.: xxxviii), although that totality may not be perceived. 'Exchange is not a complex construction built up on the basis of obligation to give, receive and give in return, with the help of an affective and mystic cement. It is a synthesis immediately given to, and by, the symbolic thinking' (ibid.: xlvi).

All the essays in this book, each in its own particular, analytic way, are attempts to apprehend the deeper symbolic resources that various forms of social communication and exchange—occupational and economic, political and social, cultural and religious—are built upon. Three areas have been purposely selected for their particular relevance in communication studies: identity, work and health—although, or rather because, this relevance is hardly recognized.

Six essays intend to recognize the symbolic landmarks that communities—the Minas in Chapter 3, the Vaḍārs and the Māṅg in Chapters 4 and 5, a nation, India, as construed by a school of its nationalist leaders in Chapter 1, and even marginalized individuals in Chapters 3 and 6—construe as essential references of their distinct identities as social entities. No wonder that the symbolic appears equally crucial in almost all the other chapters whenever the theme of identity recurs, as the symbolic is the milieu *par excellence* in which groups and individuals find the resources needed to invent their identity. Identity is by essence a communicational effect—and possibly the most significant effect of communicational interactions—resulting from shared accords on forms of symbolic exchange.

Seven essays concern themselves with the symbolic grounds of systems of occupational relations that define the social status and identity of artisans in Chapter 7, peasants in Chapter 8, Vaḍār stone-breakers in Chapter 9, Paṛiṭ washermen in Chapter 10, and birth attendants in Chapters 13, 14 and 15. Practices of work and division of labour are—secondarily—markers of socio-economic collectives and class or gender relations, primarily due to the symbolic value that a society invests them with. Occupational partitions and labour relations are shaped by symbolic motives that monitor the social forms and systems of work communication.

Six essays unearth the various symbolic foundations based on which antithetic forms of health care practices and institutions are planned and shaped. Chapter 2 lays open the symbolic foundations that modern medical power thrives on. The five essays of Part 3 display indigenous and traditional ways of human communication through social bonds of health grounded in the different ways that human life is perceived. The age-long birthing practices in the world at large in Chapter 13, in Rajasthan in Chapter 14, and in Maharashtra in Chapter 15, are extensively reviewed for

their symbolic relevance. These essays bring attention to the human body and, in particular, the biological dimension of human life as the most effective signifying sensible material to construct systems of symbolic communication and to enforce social orders.

The second constitutive feature of the function of symbolization is that the various series of symbols form chains and aggregates that link up to form composite constructions through correspondence. The symbolic of a group or community is a network of sets of signifying forms. As a consequence, a relation of translation prevails between the various symbolic configurations, to the exclusion of any causal determination (Lévi-Strauss 1960: xvi).

The symbolic is not a layer added to other levels or components such as, for instance, those that regulate the exchange of gifts according to the rules of religious or secular rituals, the circulation of women as per the kinship rules, the trading of commodities in terms of the rules of economic systems, the commerce of words and cultural productions according to social stratifications, etc. The symbolic is what accounts for the social to become an arrangement of multiple layering so as to correspond to one another by multiple semantic affinities (Tarot 1999: 639). In other words, the symbolic is the rule of organization and circulation of material and intangible goods. But it is independent from that which it organizes and buttresses.

This is the perspective of Mauss' *Essay on Gift* (1960: 143–279) which, in the view of Lévi-Strauss (1960: xxxv–xxxvii) opens up a new era for the constitution of the social sciences (Douglas 1994), but the promises of which the community of social scientists has not yet fully appraised.

For the first time in the history of ethnological thought, an attempt is being made to transcend the empirical observation and reach more profound realities. For the first time, the social ceases to be a matter pertaining to the domain of pure quality: anecdote, curiosity, object of moralising description or erudite comparison, and becomes a system between constituents of which connections, equivalences and solidarities can be discovered. The products of social activity (technic, economic, ritual, aesthetic or religious—tools, manufactured products, food-stuff, magic formulae, ornaments, songs, dances and myths—are made comparable with one another on account of the



common character that all possess of being transferable, according to modalities which can be analysed and classified, and which [...] are reducible to more fundamental forms, which are general. (Lévi-Strauss 1960: xxxiii)

Comparison is only the first step. Beyond it, the products of social activity can be substituted to one another, as different values can take the place of one another in the same operation. What matters, above all, through the events of social life, are the operations which, despite their diversity, can always be reduced to a smaller number of processes in which one can find, ultimately, the fundamental terms of an equilibrium specific to each type of society. Then once defined by intrinsic characters which are no more qualitative but rational, types of society may be compared with one another with reference to the number and arrangement of constitutive elements in each type (*ibid.*: xxxiii–xxxiv).

The third characteristic of the symbolic constitution of the human world is that the symbolic is not grounded in an analogy of the object and its figure: it originates in an activity of the human mind that takes hold of disparate world elements and organizes them in meaningful systems of signs. This means that the symbol does not mainly refer to the thing or the object for which it is a substitute, but to other symbolic forms—one language, in fact, refers to another language. The symbolic differs in this respect from symbolism: the resemblance between the object and its sign is often problematic, or may even not exist; it is, in any case, not required (Tarot 1999: 621–22). Symbolic systems are bound to communicate with one another as they are all expressive configurations of the same collective constructing its own language.

All forms of exchange derive from the initial relational nature of symbolic thought, which constitutes the human mind. Symbolic thinking reflects itself subjectively in many forms of exchange that it stimulates and regulates, such as, for instance, the taboo against incest, matrimonial rules, the discrete formation of phonemes, the rules of economic exchange, language formations, etc. The origin of language, its essential means, might even be found in the anteriority of the signifier to the signified, when, all of a sudden, the universe became signifying, although it did not become better known. The universe started being significant

much before mankind could know what it could signify. Then, from that moment, the human mind could perceive signs—and not only signals—as linked to other signs through the agency of language, and everything in the universe became potentially signifying, and channels of communication were created. An indefinite number of signifiers could be carved into the experiences open to the senses, and an equivalently indefinite number of human collectives constituted through the sharing of experiences. Everything could, and ought, to say something while aggregating human beings into communities. Although the signified might not be immediately given (Lévi-Strauss 1960: xLVii–xLViii), it remained available for the endless hermeneutical investigations into what human beings exchange, share and communicate.

## Communication, a category of Symbolic Exchange

---

Any culture can be considered as a singular constellation of systems of symbolic exchange of which language, matrimonial rules, economic relations, art, science and religion form the highest echelon. Each of these systems tends to express some disparate aspect of the totality of the physical and social reality. But, still much more significantly, they reflect the relations that both these types of reality entertain with one another, and those that the symbolic systems themselves entertain with each other (Lévi-Strauss 1960: xix).

The view that 'society is a system of symbols' (Pickering 1984: 281) which incorporate 'a range of social statements' (Thapar 2000: 28) implies a decisive methodological perspective regarding the categories of social communication. These categories can by no means be mixed up with descriptive and classificatory terms such as 'means' and 'procedures' of communication. These designations have no analytical value and yield no critical insight: they are just an inventory of a profusion of techniques, material systems and levels of transportation of information over time and space.

Moreover, communication becomes a social science concept only when we demythologize the rhetoric of the communication

revolution, people's participation through the diffusion of knowledge, communication development and universal understanding, transparency and democratization, etc., generated by the technological explosion of the communications media. Communication technologies do not provide a readymade panacea to the shortfalls of mass education. Communication networks are not an easy democratic alternative to the stranglehold of the communication industries and state controls. Communication certainly cannot bring about equality in human rapport as long as we deceive ourselves by mistaking the means for the ends. Communication is no guarantee of transparency when its forms are mainly construed as aesthetic issues. Communication theories are neither substitutes for social dynamics nor alternatives to power contests (Innis 1950, 1951, 1952).

Simply put, communication processes as modes of symbolic exchange are a kind of human agency operating with forms of expression, structuring sets of social relations. To describe communication is not merely to describe an arrangement of practices that enshrine and determine those ideas, but it is also to describe a constellation of practices that enshrine and determine those ideas in a set of technical and social forms (Carey 1989: 86). This classification of communication overlaps with civilization and categories of culture utilizing symbolic systems. It stresses the function of the symbolic as constituting the social through exchange. This articulation of communication processes through symbolic exchanges holds the concept of the symbolic as the key to the constitution of the social.

Social life, understood as a system of symbolic relations (Lévi-Strauss 1960: xL), begins with that rapport between human beings that is not amenable to biological mechanisms or instinctive drives, but is articulated by compulsory symbolic rules. Two features signal the advent of the social among animate beings: control, or mandatory regulation; and reason, or symbolic import. Social facts are intrinsically symbolic: their significance cannot be separated from their reality under the pretext of preserving their factual, objective nature. To separate fact from meaning is to delete sociality. Meaning and values are not side effects, because social facts exist to express and perform. The term 'social' qualifies the rapport between human individuals to the extent that these relations make sense—that is to say, they are not left to

the immediacy of sensuous attractions and genetic codes but amenable to language and reason.

Chapter 1, 'Negotiating Modernity with Symbolic Resources', by Guy Poitevin, acquires through this perspective the value of a methodological exemplar. It shows how a complex strategy of identity- and nation-building worked through the instruments of ethno-religious symbols. Two main symbols are considered—Hindu Science and 'Mother' India—with the purpose of understanding how they developed their logic and created means efficient enough to forge a Hindu nationalist identity, and to legitimize their right to an independent nation-state. This strategy was closely associated with a tiny social and political elite largely influenced by Brahminical values, which proved effective in manipulating these symbols among the masses during the struggle for Independence. The purpose was to integrate into a single Indian entity a number of different communities, and to build upon this symbolic integration a socially and politically united nation. The multiplicity of expressive levels and systems of relation, and their integration into one totality by networks of symbolic correspondences, is obvious: the symbolic is the key to the constitution of the social.

This book also explores two issues that this model of the social leaves open; the first issue is one of entitlement: who has authority to manage, control or appropriate symbolic resources; the second issue is one of interaction: how do contrasting symbolic claims negotiate their unavoidable encounter? Elaborating on both the issues will help locate the symbolic within a broader theoretical framework, and directly introduce the essays in this book.

## Control over the Symbolic: A Crucial Power stake

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The coordination of accords gives reality its social substance and constitutes a human world. But the symbolic, while being a matter of collective acceptance, is not only, or always, a matter of autonomous assent. If the fundamental form of power is the power to define, allocate, and display reality in expressive forms and communicative practices, then in our time—predictably, no less and no more than in other times—

reality is scarce because of access: so few command the machinery for its determination. Some get to speak and some to listen, some to write and some to read, some to film and some to view. It is fine to be told that we are the species that actively creates the world and then simultaneously to be told that we are part of the subspecies denied access to the machinery by which this miracle is pulled off.... (Carey 1989: 87)

The symbolic is 'the site of social conflict over the real' (ibid.). This contention is not a dissension over the effects of communication. It 'is not a conflict over ideas as disembodied forces. It is not a conflict over technology. It is not a conflict over social relations. It is a conflict over the simultaneous co-determination of ideas, technique, and social relations' (ibid.). A will from within to ascendancy pervades and prompts symbolic communication processes. A will to domination and authority perceives the symbolic as a determinant in the stake for power. Control over, or appropriation of, the symbolic brings competition and confrontation between social actors.

Several contributions collected in this volume accordingly focus on the parameters of power of the relations of symbolic communication. Communication processes are no less than the constitution of the symbolic, and, for the very same reasons cannot be considered in isolation from the relations and networks of power. We may assume that the contingency of the systems of symbolic communication—the extent and the modes of their control over the social fabric—mirror the systems of power relations. Is it not obvious that there is no communication at the individual or collective levels without communicators intervening as social agents with definite, contrasting, if not opposite, intentions? Symbolic communication is a field of interactive processes constantly oscillating between dominance and defiance. This is why communication is a modality of politics. Individual and collective human agents, in a will to control the whole social fabric, engineer social processes destined to transform and reorder the existing systems of knowledge and relation. Issues of legitimacy, leadership and the validity of interpretation are among those that acquire prominence. What is at a stake is the right and the authority to monitor the structuring of the whole social dispensation, primarily to lay its symbolic foundations.

Chapter 2, 'Symbolic Facets of Medical Power', by Bernard Bel illustrates our methodological perspective. Systems of medical and health care practices can be categorized as social systems of symbolic communication for three reasons: first, they turn physical well-being into a social reality called 'health', and make it the sign of one of the most deeply appealing symbolic forms of modern societies; second, the symbolic form of 'health as language' operationally mediates a relation between nature and culture—it turns the human body into a signifier of life and death, while the systems of medical practices symbolically manage the will and the reasons to live; third, practical systems of health care work as worldwide social systems which integrate various levels of symbolic communication—knowledge, research, economic exchange, industrial activities, value systems, authority, power systems, etc. This essay should not be read only as an overview of the manifold visible and invisible abuses of medical power, which should be viewed as social markers, and the essay understood as methodological model for a critique of systems of symbolic communication as power-brokering.

More particularly, as exhortations to patients to become aware and active partners in their relation with the various systems under our consideration, the essay points to the extent of alienation that symbolic consensus could lead to. The specific importance of this detailed study is to expose the modalities and the extent of the tremendous alienation that power could exercise upon the common man by monitoring the networks of symbolic representations that define his mental states. This intractable effect appears due to the ingenious monitoring of a number of correspondences that, consciously and unconsciously, link together several sets and chains of symbolic systems that the language of health interconnects into a wide network. The study illustrates the disalienating power of a deconstructive approach.

Let us remember as a warning that the accord of 'a subjective truth and an objective truth' both of which constitute a social reality, may actually prove an alien determination and not an autonomous resolve of human subjectivities. In the course of his reflection on the symbolic, Lévi-Strauss observes that, for normal thinking, the construction of a symbolic structure can be carried through at the level of social life alone for the following reason:

For it is the one whom we call mentally sane who, actually, alienates himself as he consents to exist in a world which is defined only by the relation of me and the other. The health of individual mind implies participation to social life, as the refusal to do so (still in forms imposed by that life) corresponds to the emergence of mental disorders. (1960: xx)

## Constant Negotiation across Symbolic Boundaries

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The symbolic is held in check on many fronts. One essential reason is that all symbolic forms are confined by limits. Their relevance is sooner or later bound to be contested. A society always exists in time and space, and is, therefore, subject to the challenging impact of other societies. A society is bound to its past and previous stages of development, and is, therefore, committed to own a particular symbolic heritage: this legacy carries with it elements that might not compare with one another, and might, moreover, prove inadequate to cope with newly emerging impelling forces. The intrusions of history introduce alien elements in prevailing symbolic systems of communication, and pull groups and societies off their moorings towards exploring novel homelands. In such circumstances, the relations between various sets of symbolic systems and the interplay of their correspondences is likely to appear problematic, as systems may not measure up to one another, or may not evolve at the same pace. Equivalences become elusive and translations unmanageable (Lévi-Strauss 1960: xix–xx). Societies forced to transit through historical commotion, or encroached upon by external forces, are prone to perceive the latter as jeopardizing their identity and threatening their undisturbed evolution.

The result is that no society is ever integrally and completely symbolic. No collective ever succeeds in offering to all its members, and at the same rate, the means to fully dedicate themselves to the construction of an encompassing symbolic structure which, for normal intellection, can be possible only at the level of social life, as we were just reminded by Lévi-Strauss (1960: xx). As a consequence, all societies happen to be shaken from within by contentions between those who were roughly

categorized as the 'Ancients' and the 'Moderns'. Even as social communication fragments, this breach of communication is often nowadays emblematically articulated in the opposition of 'Tradition' and 'Modernity'. Both are socially staged as two symbolic worlds pitted against one another, as if this partition were obviously demarcating the two alternative idioms between which social actors were actually making decisions, or within which they ought to choose their exclusionary concepts.

What, then, happens in a universe where inevitably groups and individuals find themselves, as it were, out of the system or torn asunder between irreconcilable systems? The constitution of symbolic systems and their implementation implies the possibility of violence—the violence of dogmatism by those in control of the symbolic when they are able to prescribe particular symbolic forms as undisputed, and the violence of resistance by those who refuse to assent to the violence of the powerful (Tarot 1999: 635–36). The contributions in this book suggest several communicational scenarios to manage antagonistic situations, avoid violence and restore social communication.

The recent social and cultural history of Modern India is a case in point: negotiation is one of the first methodologies and keys put forward by various scholars to circumvent the misleading opposition of Tradition and Modernity. The book purposively opens with an elaborate presentation of strategies that resort to symbolic resources precisely to negotiate social conflicts and individuals' identity ruptures, and hopefully avoid frontal oppositions in the context of the overall civilizational confrontation faced by contemporary India. For Traditionalists, baffled by the dilemmas of Modernity, and for Modernists, stymied by the ramparts of Tradition, Tradition and Modernity are theoretically supposed to stand as two antithetic symbolic universes. Against the conflictual historical context of the emergence of 'Modern India' as a background, and with particular reference to the elaboration of a legitimate representation of a nationalist identity, the opening Chapter 1, 'Negotiating Modernity with Symbolic Resources', tries out the analytical relevance of the concept of negotiation as an alternative to the sterile opposition of hidebound symbolic systems and formal civilizational constructs.

The dilemmas are not those of Modernity, but—against a historical background of dominance versus defiance—a dialectic



of Domination versus Appropriation, which can be staged in terms of negotiation between symbolic forms. Indian nationalist thinkers are neither Traditionalists nor Modernists. They are simply emblematic of the logic of the communication processes that are construed in this book as political events. They build up their representations of an Indian national identity by instrumentalizing those symbolic resources that are found to have, at this point in time, a reliable exchange value with their ideological convictions and will to authority, ascendancy and supremacy. Social and political confrontations are substantively grounded in symbolic contentions: adversarial actors disseminate antagonistic symbols with a view to build up a social fabric and a national, or collective, entity of their choice.

The theme of Domination versus Appropriation is the leitmotif that gives a substantive unity to all the studies on communication processes in this book. It will be no surprise to observe that, every now and then, the discursive logic of the dominant consists in camouflaging the nature of the communication processes by representing them in the ideological garb of a paradigm of Tradition obstructing Modernity. This is a concealment strategy that avails of a variety of related idioms such as backwardness hindering creativity, ignorance preventing innovation, custom forbidding variation, illiteracy holding back transformation, etc.

All the contributions in this book disprove concepts of Tradition that leave out the processes of interbreeding of Tradition and Modernity, whose connotations, whether negative or positive, only serve various hegemonic purposes. They condemn to sterility communication studies—indeed, social communication itself—by assuming essentialist conceptions of identity that, in fact, conceal attempts to control and rule. This dissimulation nowadays turns problematic, and possibly dangerous, even in the use of the word ‘identity’. As the word occurs time and again in the chapters of this book, lets us warn the reader to read into it with caution. All we should do is roughly recall the main misleading avatars of the concept of Tradition and simply delete them from our minds, once and for all.

The commonest blunder has been the isolation of tradition *per se*, and its glorification as a potent patrimony. Although bound to die under the spell of modernity—or possibly because of an impending onslaught—‘heritage’ is displayed and made to shine

as a venerable memorial to be revisited with emotion, sometimes sought to be repeated without further consideration, or even forcefully revived. The respect for obsolete traditions (rituals, dramatic forms, aesthetic objects, myths, and beliefs and practices particular to a community considered 'archaic', 'ethnic' or 'exotic') may blend with another attitude: that of a condescending regret for their inanity. As a consequence, traditions may be easily equated with 'folk' and 'ethnic' objects fit only for entertainment, or turned into trade commodities by market forces to meet or create a variety of needs.

For similar reasons, one may simply forget, purposively discard or look down upon tradition as a continent of irrationality replete with the lack of a scientific outlook, of superstitious beliefs and magic rituals, doomed to disappear sooner or later. On the contrary, some would visualize the traditions of yesteryears as a pool of unadulterated potentialities to be resuscitated in order to outplay modern decay. Traditions might become stakes for countercultural (anti-modern) reconstruction. Post-modernism, by definition, might provide further advocacy to them in terms of chances for mankind's survival.

Many are satisfied with simply archiving and preserving a sociocultural patrimony for the sake of curiosity and the knowledge of succeeding generations.

## Privileged Sources of Symbolic Constitution

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Negotiation denotes innovation through interbreeding, modification through the blending of given symbolic forms, the rearrangement of internal elements and semantic reinterpretation. If we raise the question of the main sources of such processes of symbolization, the symbolic forms documented in this book seemingly point to three closely related human capabilities: speech, memory and imagination.

The fact is that the processes of social communication studied here are essentially vocalized events that transmit oral traditions: narratives, myths, linguistic contraptions, religious poetry, melodic prosody, trade discourses, mass media propaganda, occupational skills and associated cultural representations or religious rituals transmitted by word of mouth. The vigour of symbolic forms

is that of the rhetoric of speech. We would not consider it a small achievement if these studies could compel attention back to orality as the most significant and determinant asset in any process of human communication. The act of speech and oral transmission are articulation events only in the present. Communication as a process cannot belong to the past or to the future. It belongs to, and in, the present.

The paradox is that while all the oral traditions studied in this book as communication events are speech acts in the present, they draw upon traditions received from the past. But if the rigorous phenomenological reduction of traditions apprehends them as components of the past, this apprehension is itself a modality of the present. In its essence, the past is a potential horizon of reactivations permanently available in the present alone (Housset 2000: 107).

This *eidos* of tradition confirms and justifies the scientific judgement of the historian for whom ‘traditions are not self-created’ but ‘consciously chosen’ ‘to suit our present needs’ (Thapar 2000: 23). They are ‘socially controlled both in their making as well as in the selection from them of what is required for contemporary purposes’ (ibid.: 25).

Tradition may well turn out to be our contemporary requirements fashioned by the way we wish to interpret the past. Interpretations of the past have also come to be treated as knowledge and are handed down as tradition. (ibid.: 8)

This should prevent anybody from ‘juggling’ with history in the name of Tradition. One appeals authoritatively to tradition actually out of a will to forcefully imprint ‘on the perception of the present’ reactivations of the past selected with a purpose and reconstructed with a definite design (ibid.: 23). Practices of patronage (ibid.: 25–40) are particularly instrumental to the negotiating of traditions whenever a definite interpretation is sought to be imposed, here and now.

Chapter 3 on ‘The Minas Seeking a Place in History’ substantiates the view of historians for whom historical traditions (Thapar 1984: 294–325) are carved into ‘building blocks in the construction of contemporary identities’. They ‘cannot be viewed merely as some kind of mystic communication from one generation to

another, where the people involved are mute recipients' (Thapar 2000: 40).

Now, tradition is a matter of the mind; its embedment in history may be useful but not necessary in a society which refuses to dissociate history from myth. India is a society which has made full use of its plural culture by interpreting and reinterpreting its myriad pasts. And this tradition of using traditions continues. (Nandy 1980: v)

These observations do not only stress the important role of memory in communication processes—they mainly point to the nature of this constitutive role. Anthropologists have long pointed to the fact that, among populations without scripts, the particularly significant role of collective memory consists in giving a seemingly historical foundation to the existence of the ethnic community. Memory tends to equate myth and history while narrating the story of origins, the 'mythic charter'—as termed by Malinovsky—of tradition (Le Goff 1988: 112–13). Chapters 4 and 5 on the dramatic/semantic reappropriations of myths would certainly not disown the particularly significant role ascribed to memory in the construction of ethnic consciousness, but would question the implied statement that this role is due to the lack of script. Rather, the role of memory is to be understood in relation to the determinant function of speech and orality in the symbolic processes of social communication, whether the community does or does not avail of written devices. Memory secures to communities a communication with itself along spans of time and, thus, provides them with a corpus of their own to share. There would be no communication without social transmission or tradition through language, that is, without a memory of symbolic forms.

Moreover, anthropologists point to the third dynamic—the imaginative dimension of the processes of communication through the exchange of symbolic forms—when they stress the fact that, contrary to what is generally believed about societies without script, memory is not a word-for-word transmission. It operates with variations, and mnemonic procedures happen to be rare. A word-for-word repetition is rarely perceived as even necessary. This mnemonic technique would apparently be a practice related to writing, while societies without script grant more freedom to memory. In these societies, the operational modality of the

collective memory seems to be a sort of generative reconstruction and not a mechanical memorizing. In Goody's (1977: 34) opinion, 'The support of the rememoration is not to be found at the superficial level where the word for word operates, neither at the level of those deep structures that many mythologists unearth.' It seems, on the contrary, that the important role is played by the performative dimension of any narrative tradition, and other factual structures of oral performances (Le Goff 1988: 114).

The creativity of oral performances affects all processes of human communication and defines its dynamic features. In this respect, the epistemic function which historians themselves recognize nowadays with regard to oral traditions significantly differs from the imaginative dimension that anthropologists observe in them. 'Memory is the raw material of history. Mental, oral or written, it is the fish-tank for historians to draw from' (ibid.: 10–11). Then, once they recognize popular oral narratives, collective memory, mentalities (Ariès 1988: 167–90) as valid sources for constructing people's history, historians are confronted with new epistemological queries regarding the way they should process and relate to them (White 1987; Canary 1978). But human collectives are not 'historians'. They are not concerned with constructing their past history. They are busy shaping in the present their identity with that wealth of symbolic forms that they have been carrying for generations (Ricœur 1983; Singer 1997). This shaping is not a repetitive exercise but an imaginative rebuilding.

This is the moment when the boundaries between history and myth become uncertain. Both coalesce at the call of the creative imagination of speakers communicating with their audiences. The distinction between fact and fiction is irrelevant in communication studies, which are concerned with the sole act of speech, its rhetoric, its logics and its impact. This holds good, particularly, with the mythical narratives of origin and identity transmitted by word of mouth in cohesive societies allegedly deprived of historical memory. Myths are one of the means of passing on information in societies where the oral tradition is the most functional methods of communication. But once we have reclaimed orality as the most characteristic structural feature of communication processes in human societies, our attention is drawn towards the dimension of the mythical or imaginative creativity of these processes.

In this regard, two attributes characteristic of the transmission of mythical or imaginary stories in cohesive societies may hold good as attributes of communication processes in general. First, they are subject to constant adjustment; myths from earlier periods are recast in conformity with the social assumptions of later periods. Second, the question is not of validating them through ascertaining their historical authenticity; it is, conversely, of probing the reasons of their acceptance as grounds for social validation of beliefs, rituals, values, norms and particular historical actions.

In a historical tradition the themes of myths act as factors of continuity.... Myths made the past intelligible and meaningful, but it was intelligibility and meaningfulness which related to the present, for the continuity of myth is largely with reference to the present.... As validating charters myths have a close connection with social organization, not only representing as they do, the assumptions about the past but also under-pinning the social relations of the present. (Thapar 1984: 296-97)

## Method and Themes

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As a result of the variety of symbolic forms, modes of negotiation and discursive logics, communication studies cut across the boundaries of all disciplines. Any particular disciplinary framework falls short of the theoretical resources required to cope with a chaotic wealth of observations. Our attempt of rational ordering tries to transcend the superficiality of descriptive, classificatory clichés. Prompted by a firm faith in a unique human reason, we attempt to identify, within a baffling empirical multiplicity, comparable processes, deeper general forms of exchange that bring human beings together. This is how we see our attempt as scientific.

Communication is a human agency striving to bring closer beings scattered throughout the world. But the essays in this book would have us perceive communication as a primeval human drive rather one powerless to reach its ends. The very attempts of rapprochement often clash with one another. This is the first internal paradox that a science of communication is bound to raise but would be unable to answer. Our studies give just a hint of this

and take small steps towards identifying a few uneven and contrasted modalities of rapprochement. But their reconciliation cannot be visualized. This is what makes communication studies as exciting as a fascinating if broken puzzle.

Our conviction is that the concept of the symbolic suggested by Marcel Mauss in social anthropology provides a theoretical horizon appropriate to the construction of a concept of communication in social sciences. The Maussian category of the symbolic, with its more impressive Lévi-Straussian outgrowth, is all the more adequate in that it pre-empts the very possibility of any definition and study of communication within the limits of any particular discipline of knowledge. It announces a radically new reordering of our social science concepts that may take time to emerge. The eclectic expertise and multifaceted competence of Marcel Mauss lead him, by a kind of intellectual instinct, to outline a comprehensive framework of intelligence of the social that was bound to prove adequate to the eclectic nature of communication processes themselves.

The disciplinary multiplicity holds good as well with regard to levels of writing and methods of exposition: abstract theoretical discourses go together with case study narratives, personal testimonies and the recording of experiences. We feel that the practice of social science research should not be afraid of facing the chaos of a multitude of concrete human experiences as soon as these experiences are ready and able to represent themselves reflexively. The two write-ups of Chapters 4 and 5 on 'Vaḍār Narratives: Dramatic Reappropriation of a Myth' and 'Māṅg Narratives: Semantic Reappropriation of a Myth' are examples of this subjective reflexivity. And these experiences should not be straitjacketed in order to mould themselves into a format and a rhetoric acceptable to the professional scientist.

In this respect, the reader may sometimes feel that such 'simple' feelings as those of an illiterate leprous woman in Chapter 6, 'Bhakti: A Faith for Rehabilitation', or 'local views' such as those expressed by a small farmer in Chapter 8, 'The Mother Earth of the Mawal Peasant', sound 'native', as if they had been projected by 19th century Orientalists or, currently, politically-correct Films Division texts broadcasted on Doordarshan-1. Similarly, the authors of the contributions in Chapter 9, 'Vaḍār Communities: Traditional Skills in Changing Times', and

Chapter 10, 'Pariṭ Communities: Occupation and Survival', may be perceived as naively activist social workers more than social scientists.

However, discarding spontaneous expression on the ground that they depart from broad theoretical phraseology might amount to denying indigenous voices the right to positive self-assertion *in their own ways*, the capability of valid analytical reflection *of their own* and a cognitive entitlement *of theirs* to articulate a critique differently. When we listen to the discourse of the deprived and the oppressed, in particular, the forms and modes of representation of their assertion, reflection and critique cannot but be deeply affected by environmental constraints, to the point of even becoming hardly recognizable. Chapter 6, 'Bhakti: A Faith for Rehabilitation', is a significant case, in this respect. An effort of refined discernment is needed on the part of the professional scientist. Short-sightedness with regard to the specificity of the 'popular' may simply miss genuine people's dynamics, particularly those that operate as cultural potentialities enabling people to face adverse conditions. People's culture is the perception of self that a common man articulates through personal means when he tries to enunciate his own representations, beliefs or fears. It is simply his view of life. It becomes 'popular' only for the elite. Any view of life should be allowed to speak for itself, even if self-reflective discourses of the common man might defy, or might not match, academically-sanctioned categories and concepts.

As a matter of fact, the question is not one of undue disregard of the social scientist for the layman. It is a matter of epistemology regarding the very nature of the object of the social sciences, the 'total social fact' of Mauss. The latter means, first, that a number of elements of different natures—the various modes of the social: legal, economic, aesthetic, religious, etc.; the various moments in the history of an individual from birth to death; the various forms of expression from physiological reflexes or secretions to conscious representations and unconscious categories—can acquire a global signification and become a totality only as social fact (Lévi-Strauss 1960: xxvi), thanks to the symbolic function of the human mind. It means also, and above all,

that in a science where the observer is of the same nature than his object, the observer is himself part of his observation.... The



particular situation of social sciences is of another nature [than that of physical sciences], which has to do with the intrinsic character of its object of being equally object and subject, or, to speak the language of Durkheim and Mauss, 'thing' and 'representation'. (Lévi-Strauss 1960: xxvii)

Moreover, strategically concerned with breaking open the impasses that stifle communication studies, our attempt is to jointly incorporate in our communication debate the voices of professionals and the experiences of social agents actively engaged in the field. Concretely, we wish to bridge the distance that separates the two worlds—the literate and the illiterate, the reason and the image, the concept and the practice, the fact and the emotion, the event and the theory, the conduct and the insight. Both the poles should interact. Life testimonies from the deprived, religious feelings of a lonely woman, the innate attitudes of a peasant, the quest of dignity of untouchables, etc., offer a germane opportunity for an interface of observation and categorization. They let the alien gaze meet the inbred voice, whereby 'monologically authoritative interpretations' are identified and rejected (Mills 1991: 17).

For instance, in the type of knowledge represented in Chapter 7, 'The Communicating Goddess of the Artisans', we have the elaborate theoretical explanation produced by a professional researcher with abstract cognitive forms, crafted in an alien, scientific language that addresses itself to a chosen audience of academics, members—colleagues, in fact—of a society of scholars. In other contributions, we have a direct articulation of reflexive practices by members of local communities. They express an indigenous understanding of themselves. Both modes of representation hopefully complement one another.

The voices of artisans, manual workers, traditional midwives, peasants, marginalized communities, ostracized untouchables, the urban proletariat and destitute women, are not inserted here to raise the non-mediated consciousness of the native and challenge the theoretical constructs of the anthropologist. First, consciousness is by all means an insight mediated by signs which, as tools of cognition, are symbolic, interpretive constructs. Consciousness without them would simply not exist, nor would culture at large. Claiming to hoist 'immediate popular representation' against 'artificial conceptual constructs' is simply an

oxymoron, since any sort of representation, concrete or abstract, implies a cognitive mediation, an arbitrary sign—namely, a creative symbolic conception.

Communication in such circumstances means a sharing and confrontation of differently constructed forms of social knowledge. The difference opens up a space of transaction between forms and calls for the translation of discourses for two reasons: first, symbolic forms differ; second, they lend themselves to constant reinterpretations.

This Overture and the following chapters (1 and 2) outline and experiment with the theoretical pertinence of the comprehensive cognitive framework opened up by the category of the symbolic and its analytical conceptual tools—symbolic forms, symbolic function, symbolic communication, symbolic systems of social communication, etc.—to grasp the overall substance of social reality. They specifically ascertain the validity in social science of a category of communication as symbolic exchange, with reference to two case studies: nationalist discourses in India, and medical power in the world at large.

The purpose of the other chapters is analytical: they focus on various symbolic processes to highlight modalities, identify structuring logics, discover or invent operational concepts and discern cognitive patterns through which the symbolic function designs its communicational forms and systems of exchange, and, thus, ultimately builds up the social. Essentially, scenarios of transaction and multiple transitivity among alien symbolic forms reveal various kinds of dynamics such as interbreeding, instrumentalization, interpretation, inheritance, etc., with a variety of results and objectives that range from resistance to surrender, assertion to submissiveness, contention to cooptation.

The symbolic is the milieu *par excellence* in which collectives find the resources needed to confront challenges that threaten their very survival. Broadly speaking, three horizons of symbolic constitution are explored: self-identity, work relations, and health care practices, and three types of signifiers are selected accordingly.

In Part 1—'Fonts of Self-Identity', attention is focused on the discursive and narrative processes of emergence and the construction of personal and collective identities, either in reference to, or in defiance of, prevailing models imposed in the name of

dominant traditions, through myths, linguistic innovations, religious idioms, stories and traditions of marginalized communities.

In Part 2—‘Grounds of Work Relations’, attention is focused on occupations and vocations, work experience and practices, and associated representations and rituals of peasant and artisan communities—all manual workers of low social status in western India—at a time when the constraints of modern civilizational contexts disrupt integrated lifestyles.

In Part 3—‘Bonds of Health Practices’, attention is focused on the health care practices and knowledge of traditional communities, mainly the expertise of traditional women birth-attendants in the Indian countryside. This autonomous knowledge of a majority of the women in India becomes the target of medical power and its hegemonic ethos, generally not through direct rejection or modes of exclusionary communication, but typically on the strength of inclusive and cooptative ways of communication. The latter are logically identified as contrary to the modes of the critical reappropriation of one’s own heritage advocated by attempts to empowerment through interactive forms of communication.

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# 1

## NEGOTIATING MODERNITY WITH SYMBOLIC RESOURCES

GUY POITEVIN

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### Two Assumptions, Two Dead ends

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In human sciences, two wrong methodological principles often prompt dichotomous approaches to the relation between Modernity and Tradition. The first is an essentialist and ahistorical concept of culture.<sup>1</sup> The second is the construction of a homogenous concept of social and cultural identity defined in terms of distinctly clear-cut oppositions. This entails the logical incompatibility of the One with the Other—for instance, of the Occident with the Orient.<sup>2</sup> In the colonial context, this implies a non-commensurability, or substantive estrangement, of the ‘traditional’, the ‘popular’, the ‘primitive’, the ‘oral’, and the ‘savage’, and the ‘modern’, the ‘scientific’, the ‘elitist’, the ‘written’, and the ‘enlightened’.<sup>3</sup>

These are the principles that gave comparative cultural anthropology its initial cognitive status, constituted on the basis of a discrimination between the ‘civilized’ and the ‘primitive’, the ‘rational’ and the ‘savage’.<sup>4</sup> They provided a scientific ground to the divide between ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ made by the colonialist authorities.<sup>5</sup> They granted moral legitimacy to imperial claims of administratively and politically rule over culturally inferior populations.<sup>6</sup> They designed cognitive models of cross-cultural

(mis)understanding and behaviour.<sup>7</sup> Prakash (1999: 12–13) stresses in this regard the significant ‘simultaneity’ and

connections between the West’s global expansion and the formation of the disciplines of ethnology, political economy, botany, medicine, geology, and meteorology.... Their development in the course of trade, exploration, conquest, and domination instantiated Western modernity.

The dichotomy soon worked as an obvious opposition. For many learned social scientists who in the name of the 19th century Modernity, for which they sought a ground in the Enlightenment, claimed competence and authority to ponder over cultural matters and the progress of humankind in rationality, Tradition has, on the whole, been assumed to pertain to the realm of the irrational and the esoteric. In particular, it stood opposed, in the words of Chatterjee (1986: 17), to a ‘bourgeois-rational conception of universal history’.

Conversely, especially about the end of the 18th century, for those Romantic Orientalists (Gérard 1963), Western intellectuals (Glaser 1973) and scholars in search of the absolute origin of a pure humankind, the East promised mythical and alternative paradigms to those of Occidental culture such as the theories of social evolution, materialism, mechanism, republicanism (Said 1995: 115) and linear historical progress towards the unique reign on Earth of a Universal Reason. Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829) was particularly influential in placing in ‘the study of the Indian language’ (Sanskrit) the hopes, by an Oriental Renaissance, of ‘the rejuvenation of western sciences and even of the face of the world’, brought about in Italy and Germany by the love of Greek and Latin in the 15th and 16th centuries. The discovery of Sanskrit appeared to Schlegel as evidence that the brightest intelligence had existed among human beings since the origin of humanity. Humans did not start as barbarians or brutes. For instance, the more one goes back to the origins of humankind, the more one comes across Brahmanism with the purest and, therefore, original monotheism. Polytheism, mythology, anthropomorphism and the most extravagant superstitions came later as social degeneracy.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, near the end of the 19th century, eastern natives who were discriminated against and colonized in the name of Universal

Reason and its progressive triumph, could not but enthusiastically share the Orientalists' confidence. The latter even provided them with a manifest self-assurance about their own origins and identity. Tradition shone as the repository of the human hope for dignity and alternative social orders, with harbingering a Golden Age.<sup>9</sup>

For each—Orientalists, Modernists and Traditionalists—the dichotomous paradigm remained, explicitly or implicitly, the unquestioned cognitive framework of reference. That stereotyped opposition has, by now, proved scientifically sterile by reason of sheer conceptual inadequacy; it has also been socially devastating whenever it has worked as an effective symbolic mediation of power contests. Theoretically, it errs because of an abysmal ignorance of the complex transitivity between alien symbolic forms that characterizes the processes of social and cultural encounter and symbolic communication.

## From Antithetic Conceptualization to Complex Negotiation

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In colonial India, within the context of the mutually unyielding confrontation between foreign dominance and native resistance, and the struggle for access to power and Independence, the opposition between Tradition and Modernity was a leitmotif. It prompted a scrutiny of the Past for distinctive assets of cultural identity and indubitable grounds to nationalist claims. Native history, indigenous culture and, in particular, religious traditions were invoked as resources for the recovery and foundation of national identity.<sup>10</sup> The past was revisited as a 'Wonder'<sup>11</sup> in which evidences to legitimize claims of self-rule and idioms to challenge the alien colonial dispensation were unearthed. 'An unashamed glorification of the Ancient Indian past' stood as 'a compensation for the humiliating present.'<sup>12</sup> This new vision of India's glorious past became, in the logic and strategy of the Indian nationalist bourgeoisie,

an important tool which was used to forge and to reinforce a concept of Indian nationhood that was rooted in its long and

antique past and which also shaped its present .... The principal features of a mainstream modern, Indian, nationalist version of India's past had acquired recognisable shape by the later nineteenth century and the early twentieth centuries.<sup>13</sup>

Those 'who sought to depict their tradition as standing firm against the pressure of change'<sup>14</sup> would figure out the demarcation between the indigenous and the alien in terms of the polarity of the traditional and the modern.

Today in India, when so many ardently surrender to the urgency of the modernization of lifestyles and ethos, the repudiation of the Enlightenment is paradoxically becoming a fashion for some Post-Modernist scholars who decry words like 'secular', 'rational' and 'progressive'.<sup>15</sup> They belong to a wide middle-class formation, the upwardly mobile sections of which

are being sucked into globalizing processes that promise material consumerist dividends at the price of dependency. A binary combination of 'material' advancement and 'spiritual' autonomy through surrogate forms of cultural or religious nationalism is not at all uncommon for such groups. Hindutva, with its notable appeal in recent years among metropolitan elites and non-resident Indians, embodies this combination at its most aggressive.<sup>16</sup>

These paradoxical and aggressive attitudes are a contemporary compensation for a guilt feeling that builds up against the internalization of a value-loaded contrariety between Tradition and Modernity inherited from colonial paradigms. For lower middle-class laypersons, accordingly, folk traditions become surrogate evidences of hidden communalist or nationalist identity. They easily feed with 'shallow forms of retrogressive indigenism' the nostalgic moods of an uprooted modern intelligentsia. They nurture 'through an enshrinement of sentimentality', 'a kind of dream of childhood', 'a vague nostalgia that identifies the authentic with the indigenous and locates both in the pasts of an ever-receding community, or a present that can consist of fragments alone.'<sup>17</sup>

In like manner, a number of historians and analysts who nowadays document such processes often use such descriptive, static and unhistorical labels such as 'orthodox', 'fundamentalist', 'revivalist', 'reformist'<sup>18</sup>—terms that make sense with respect to



an apparently clear-cut antagonism between Tradition and Modernity. This is, indeed, a restrictive view.<sup>19</sup>

Referring to her study of 19th-century Banaras, Dalmia advocates a totally different perspective:

Yet to accept these poles as genuinely apart and immune to the influence of the other would be contrary to all the evidence presented in the documents of the period, which bears witness to incessant change and exchange. There was intense interaction with missionaries, orientalist and western ideas.<sup>20</sup>

The same interplay of mythical traditions and rational discourse presides over the construction of historical consciousness and identity among Western-educated Bengali *bhadralok* during the same period:

It is important to guard against exaggerating the break in the substantive content of historical consciousness.... The tension between rational history or *itihasa* and other narratives of the past as embodied in myth (*upakatha*), epic and folklore (*kimbadanti*) is plainly evident in popular middle-class consciousness in Bengal and possibly elsewhere as well. I hope to show that *bhadralok* constructions of self-identity and otherness ... were equally influenced by the fascinating interplay between history and myth that exercised popular *bhadralok* consciousness....<sup>21</sup>

Even as secular a nationalist as Jawaharlal Nehru, imprisoned in Ahmadnagar Fort Jail and writing in 1944 his *Discovery of India*—‘the canonical text of modern Indian nationalism’,—‘identifies the emergence of the nation in the ancient culture and polity, in archaic sciences and philosophies.’<sup>22</sup> His search for India as a nation ‘leads him to describe ancient sciences as its vital force.’<sup>23</sup> Nehru’s quest for freedom was also ‘a discovery of the past.... The importance of the past for modern movements of political emancipation has been undeniable.’<sup>24</sup> ‘The remarkable resurgence of nationalism’, its re-discovery ‘and a new realization of its vital importance’ has ‘altered the form and shape of old problems’, writes Nehru, with reference to ‘old established traditions’ which

in moments of crisis ... rise and dominate the minds of men, and often, as we have seen, a deliberate attempt is made to use

those traditions to rouse a people to a high pitch of effort and sacrifice.<sup>25</sup>

The significant point of departure to be emphasized is that the invocation of the past was not for nationalists 'a nativist boast but an attempt to resignify traditions and position them as knowledge relevant to their contemporary world.'<sup>26</sup> It was an irruption, or a return of the past, not 'its growth and fulfillment'. It was not an evolutionist vision but an 'evocation of the past as an anteriority, not an origin', the 'repetition' of a 'productive moment in the realization of the modern nation.'

'Unlike the organicist concept, the idea of the modern nation' did not emerge 'continuous with the past'. It did not turn nationalism into indigenism but introduced 'a sharp break between the past and the present'. 'The past irrupts'.<sup>27</sup> 'The nationalist imagination drew its compelling ideological force from negotiation, not nativism' (ibid.). The negotiation takes place within the frame of an 'imagined'<sup>28</sup> or 'invented'<sup>29</sup> modern or future nation.<sup>30</sup> As a matter of fact, traditions were called upon as resources to help negotiate modernity in various ways and domains.<sup>31</sup>

I want to explore the cognitive structure of this semantic process of negotiation from the vantage point of communicational exchange.

## Transitivity of Social and Cultural Transactions

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Two types of recent historical studies will exemplify my transitive approach:

While tracing back the consolidation of Hindu tradition—in Northern India from 1850 to 1885—by Harischandra of Banaras, Dalmia's social-historical account documents and analyses 'the process of articulating a collective and popular stand as it took place in the interaction between a wide section of public voices and instances'.<sup>32</sup> This process, 'fraught with tensions and contradictions', is far from mono linear.<sup>33</sup> Dalmia qualifies it as 'a complex issue of assimilation and welding, as also of antagonism and resistance', or the 'interweaving' of 'three distinct interacting

strands, which are together woven into the fabric of the nationalist tradition of this period'—namely, (a) the pre-colonial tradition; (b) the ancient 'Hindu' texts and institutions as mediated also by British and Western Orientalists; and (c) the British colonial administrative, legislative and educational measures and missionary activity.<sup>34</sup> 'The creative act of invention consisted in the rearrangement of older and newer concepts and practice, and the historical links in time and space that were forged anew.'<sup>35</sup> In 'periods of accelerated change', it is 'the configuration of the new and the old, of continuities and innovations, which needs to be studied.'<sup>36</sup>

In this regard, two methodological perspectives defined by Ranajit Guha are seen as significantly appropriate to the question of negotiating the difference between extremes: the one is concerned with the historical articulation of power in colonial India, the other with the interaction of idioms. The two principles of dominance—not to be mistaken with hegemony<sup>37</sup>—and subordination—not to be mistaken with surrender—with their modalities, respectively, of persuasion or coercion, and resistance or collaboration, are meant to represent the ways various idioms may simultaneously overlap, coalesce, cross or subvert one another, and result in unpredictable semantic compounds. The latter reflect the complex pressure of various antagonistic historical agencies.<sup>38</sup> Dalmia accordingly construes and maintains

that Hindu tradition as it articulated itself in the nineteenth century, as any close scrutiny of texts of the period testifies, formed itself in the very process of negotiating the relationship to past idioms and classical texts in the light of present needs and claims, in order to project itself as a coherent and even homogeneous entity.<sup>39</sup>

Dalmia's minute exploration of 19th century Banaras tends, therefore, to be an account, directly from within the milieu, of 'the process of the nationalization of Hindu language, religion and culture at work', in which the old traditions are consolidated through ideologization and politicization.<sup>40</sup> She also registers the fact that this consolidation, 'which allowed for the articulation of an indigenous cultural and political identity in the confrontation with a repressive and all-pervasive colonial power', had both emancipatory and repressive functions.<sup>41</sup>

Recent studies in the field of cultural anthropology similarly draw our attention towards comparable strategic processes. One is, for instance, a discourses of continuity legitimizing and carrying through changes within tradition itself. This raises questions about the status of concepts of social or cultural transformation when change occurs in continuity, and in the name of tradition.

Implicit in the binary opposition between tradition and modernity is the assumption of a stagnant past and a dynamic present. It is as if tradition represents continuity and modernity expresses the power of transformation. The problems of such simple oppositions have long been recognized. Inverting the opposition and discovering forces of transformation within tradition has its problems. While this does historicize tradition, it tends to over-emphasize change and underestimate the significance of continuities.<sup>42</sup>

Evolutionist paradigms in search of continuous or linear manifestations of change or development lead naturally to overlooking the social actors who negotiate the transitions and monitor the transactions with definite purposes. Negotiation implies breaks in the continuum.

Thapar has persistently questioned essentialist and unhistorical notions of tradition, and critiqued the search for simple continuities in the past. She has sought to demonstrate the historicity of traditions, the shifting nature and functions of rituals and practices, the changing meaning of texts and oral cultures, the links between cultural practices and the play of power, the dialectic between heterodoxy and orthodoxy as also between dissent and conformism, and the role that specific constructions of the past play in the politics of the present.<sup>43</sup>

Static interpretation of culture as a one-time event which has survived untampered with from the past to the present fails to see that the historical process is decisive to the definition of culture, and to the transmission of cultural forms or traditions as well.

We often assume that a form is handed down in an unchanging fashion and that what comes to us is its pristine form. However,

the sheer act of handing on a tradition introduces changes .... Even the concept of *parampara*, which at one level appears to be frozen knowledge, reveals on investigation variations and change.<sup>44</sup>

A number of examples might provide evidence, such as the hundreds of tellings of the story of Ram in India, Southeast Asia and beyond,<sup>45</sup> and the free appropriation of the personage of Sita by the women of Maharashtra, and, for that matter, of India, in its immense oral tradition of the grindmill songs over centuries.<sup>46</sup> It is true that particular tellings have attained various degrees of dominance and/or popularity (Valmiki, Tulsi, the televised *Ramayana*).

Nonetheless, there have always been contesting voices. Once explored for themselves, in the light of their own structure and context, the various tellings display a vast diversity of motives and intention. Where Hindu *Ramayanas* have predominated, Jain and Buddhist *Ramayana* poets have criticized or questioned those texts by producing their own tellings.<sup>47</sup> Where male dominance has been prescribed by textual traditions, women's *Ramayana* songs have expressed alternative perspectives that are more in keeping with women's own concerns (CCRSS). The *Ramayana* tradition permits endless refashioning of the story, sometimes in actual opposition to the ways in which the story has previously been told.<sup>48</sup> The same holds good with the *Mahabharata*.<sup>49</sup> 'Traditions are not self-created: they are socially controlled' so as to serve contemporary purposes.<sup>50</sup> 'They are consciously chosen.... We tend to choose that which suits our present needs.'<sup>51</sup>

In short, instead of the processes of cultural, religious and political polarization, we observe deep, multifarious and far-reaching moves of transaction. Depending upon the domains of investigation and the authors' lexicon, these moves are described with the help of a bewildering variety of terms: accommodation, adjustment, adaptation, articulation, negotiation, communication, tension, exchange, interaction, interplay, combination, intertwining, interweaving, transition, transposition, translation, reconciliation, syncretism, reinterpretation, reinvestment, pluralism, reappropriation, selection, manipulation, realignment, hybridization, etc. My suggestion is to gather all these attempts under a single category—that of multilateral transitivity.

## Modern Master Narratives of Nationalism

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Historians have pointed to the fundamental ambiguity that hinders the historiography of Indian nationalism: the paradigm of the Indian nationalist discourse in opposition to European rule is derived from the very urge for the modernization of liberal-rationalist European thought. It is the product of an alien imposition confronted with 'a problem of incommensurability ... which the new national culture must overcome.'<sup>52</sup> Nationalism sets out to assert its freedom from European domination. But in the very conception of its project, it remains a prisoner of the prevalent European fashions.<sup>53</sup> One may ask

Why is it that non-European colonial countries have no historical alternative but to try to approximate the given attributes of modernity when that very process of approximation means their continued subjection under a world order which only sets their tasks for them and over which they have no control?<sup>54</sup>

The answer is that the liberal, rationalist, scientific thought, which was but a part of the modern discourse of power, became a particular attribute of modern nationalist thought itself as justification for its claim to power. Nationalist thought simply internalized

the conception of knowledge established in the post-Enlightenment period of European intellectual history, as the moral and epistemic foundation for a supposedly universal framework of thought which perpetuates, in a real and not merely a metaphorical sense, a colonial domination. It is a framework of knowledge which proclaims its own universality; its validity, it pronounces, is independent of cultures. Nationalist thought, in agreeing to become 'modern', accepts the claim to universality of the 'modern' framework of knowledge.<sup>55</sup>

Despite such scholarly warnings, the simplistic and misleading dichotomy of modernity and tradition remains a quotidian perspective of many debates touching upon issues of national identity and nation-building.

Though post-colonial theorizing no longer construes tradition and modernity as dichotomies, yet, somewhere, post-colonial

discourse tends to assume some identities, like colonialism = Westernization, colonized = tradition, Westernization = dominance and traditionalism = emancipation. These identities of theory may not be true empirically.<sup>56</sup>

For instance, considering that despite industrialization, urbanization and the spread of educational institutions, modernization theory did not prove very successful. Moreover, in view of 'a rapidly growing religious activism in politics',<sup>57</sup> some anthropologists like Madan<sup>58</sup> would argue that 'India's religious traditions should be protected from "secularist" attacks and used for the construction of an Indian nation-state that would not be alienated from Indian culture.'<sup>59</sup> Irrespective of the question about which Indian traditions—among so many actually opposed to one another—ought to be protected and can be agreed upon by all citizens as entitled to endure, Veer finds Madan

right in suggesting that to understand the specific ways in which the idea of the nation is adopted in discourse about Indian society we have to get away from the tyranny of modernization theory. The secular nation-state as sign of modernity must be recognized as an ideological notion, which can be contested by other notions.<sup>60</sup>

The contemporary debate on 'communalism' and 'secularism' has nowadays reactivated the issue of tradition and modernity within the academic constituency of nationalism, where Orientalist or colonialist frameworks and Western paradigms have long prevailed.<sup>61</sup> 'The historical discipline, it is said, is complicit with communalism.'<sup>62</sup> Curiously enough, but not by accident,

communalism develops in a world that has been disenchanted for some time. This situation tells us either that primordial forms of enchantment are not swept away by modernity or that modernity produces its new forms of enchantment, ones that are more virulent and destructive because they ostensibly contradict modernity and yet function within it.<sup>63</sup>

Studying the construction of the historical claims of 'Hindutva', Chatterjee observes that

such claims become possible only within the modern forms of historiography, a historiography which is necessarily constructed

around the complex identity of a people-nation state. To the extent that the genealogy of modern historiography in India is deeply implicated in the encounter with British colonialism, these historical claims of political Hinduism are also a product of the contestation with the forms of colonial knowledge.<sup>64</sup>

Recent studies on ‘communalism’<sup>65</sup> and “‘religious” or “ethnic” or “Hindu” nationalism’<sup>66</sup> show how Modernity—secular nationalism, or simply, nationalism—and Tradition—communalism or eastern nationalism—have been raised against one another since the end of the 19th century<sup>67</sup> ‘when nationalism had emerged clearly as the discourse of the age and strong nationalist stirrings against colonialism were beginning to be felt in India’,<sup>68</sup> and other countries as well. ‘Although subsequent scholarship approach has moved some way from the classical colonialist approach to communalism,<sup>69</sup> a large part of the scholar’s analytical apparatus remains constituted by the dyad, ‘communalism’/‘nationalism’ or ‘communalism’/‘secularism’.

It is the growing awareness of the poverty of this formulation that has led to the repeated demand in recent years that students of Indian politics break out of this inherited problematic, challenge the imperialism of categories ... and question the givenness of ‘communalism’, ‘secularism’, and for that matter ‘nationalism’.<sup>70</sup>

Other identifications are sought. D.R. Nagaraj suggests that the various streams in the existing theories of Indian colonialism could be sorted into two groups, which he would define as the school of ‘total conquest’ and the school of ‘cultural soul’.<sup>71</sup> These types apparently compare with the distinction made by Davis,<sup>72</sup> as quoted by Chatterjee,<sup>73</sup> between ‘the nationalism of the Enlightenment which was by and large rational rather than emotional, and the other based on culture and tradition, developed by Germanic romantic writers.’ For the latter, ‘the nation was a natural community and therefore something sacred, eternal, organic, carrying a deeper justification than the works of men.’

But the European idea of the nation as eventually leading to the formation of the state has no relevance to the problem of newly-formed nations in the non-European world, as the national question here is historically fused with the colonial question. ‘The



assertion of national identity was, therefore, a form of the struggle against colonial exploitation'.<sup>74</sup> Yet, for Marxists and Liberals, the dilemma remained the same as 'an assertion of traditional cultural values would often be inconsistent with the conditions of historical progress,' and the methods adopted by both did not differ. Chatterjee defines them as sociologism or functionalism.<sup>75</sup> As a consequence, the nationalist discourse was contradictory. Against 'the colonial claim that the backward people were culturally incapable of ruling themselves in the conditions of the modern world,'

Nationalism denied the alleged inferiority of the colonised people; it also asserted that a backward nation could 'modernize' itself while retaining its cultural identity. It thus produced a discourse in which, even as it challenged the colonial claim to political domination, it also accepted the very intellectual premises of 'modernity' on which colonial domination was based.<sup>76</sup>

While referring to Anderson<sup>77</sup> and Hobsbawm,<sup>78</sup> Veer emphasizes the fact that 'the sharp opposition between tradition and modernity seems hard to avoid in theories of nationalism. This is not surprising given that these theories are often closely tied to a master narrative of modernity.'<sup>79</sup> As a consequence, a Western discourse of modernity, which constitutes the 'traditional' as its antithesis and interprets difference as backwardness, cannot conceive something like, for instance, 'religious nationalism', because the opposition of the 'religious' to the 'secular' is a crucial component of its discourse. Veer disqualifies this dichotomy and profusely shows how actually 'religious nationalism articulates discourse on the religious community and discourse on the nation'.<sup>80</sup> To understand this articulation one needs 'both an analysis of "tradition" that is not prejudiced by the discourse of modernity, and a theory of the impact of colonialism and Orientalism that does not deny agency to colonial subjects.'<sup>81</sup>

Pandey emphasizes and denounces the same crucial point: communalism, construed by the colonialists and the Orientalists as the 'irrationality of the East',

denies consciousness and agency to the subject peoples of the colonised world. 'History' happens to these people; it can hardly be a process in which they play a conscious and significant part.<sup>82</sup>

Actually, the colonial divide between the rational colonizer and irrational colonized outlines the natives' nationalist discourse from within. Pandey points to another related and analogous 'feature common to many current explanations of communal strife in colonial India', which is worth reminding in this context, and 'is not different from an earlier colonialist or nationalist historiography', namely, 'the drawing of a sharp line between elite and mass mentalities, manners and politics.' The people being assumed to be irrational, their agency and practices are not worth a detailed investigation. Most historians entertain a 'deep-rooted faith in the primacy of the elite in determining the character of all political articulation and the course of all political change.' As a result, 'no attempt is made to study the qualities of a specific historical consciousness in this specific time and place', 'large areas of the experience of the Indian people are simply wished away'.<sup>83</sup>

Chakravarti denounces 'the obsession with "colonial discourse" that is currently dominating historical scholarship', with the result that 'practitioners of discourse analysis are unwilling to explore pre-colonial structures or to dismantle colonialism itself into its constituent elements. In practice, therefore, such a view ties in with the agenda of Hindu nationalists both in the past and in the present'.<sup>84</sup> Referring to the limitations of Edward Said's *Orientalism*<sup>85</sup> effectively pointed out by Sarkar,<sup>86</sup> Chakravarti sees the defect of studies using Said's framework in that

they treat the colonised and colonisers as homogeneous entities. Such an approach ignores the power relations and hierarchies within the colonised, and is unwilling to concede the different histories of social groups and their relationship to each other in pre-colonial times as well as to their experience of colonialism.<sup>87</sup>

Quite opposite to Said, Jaffrelot observes the interplay of the processes of defensive stigmatization of the Others 'in reaction to external threats, real and/or imagined', and the strategic emulation of these Others. 'The invention of a tradition' or 'a process of cultural reorganisation' defines

Hindu identity in opposition to these 'threatening Others' while—under the pretext of drawing inspiration from a so-called Vedic

'Golden Age'—assimilating those cultural features of the Others which were regarded as prestigious and efficacious in order to regain self-esteem and resist the Others more effectively.<sup>88</sup>

This complex strategy of identity-building worked through the instrumentalization of ethno-religious symbols such as the 'birth-place' of Ram in Ayodhya. This 'instrumentalist strategy of ethno-religious mobilisation' alone could not be sufficient to forge a Hindu nationalist identity. But 'the manipulation of Hindu symbols' appeared to be the most efficient means of communicating to the masses the ideological Hindu identity evolved through the strategy of stigmatization and emulation, and closely associated with a tiny elite, since it was largely influenced by Brahminical values.<sup>89</sup>

## Negotiation, Symbolic Assets and Interstitial Strategies

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Opposing tradition to modernity is a sterile methodology. The alternative is what I like to call multilateral transitivity. One should focus on the native's voices and reasons debating and arguing with the modern West. 'The intricate interplay of Western and Indian discourses'<sup>90</sup> leaves its indelible mark on both sides. How could the 'historical' be denied to colonial subjects<sup>91</sup> negotiating 'modernity' when the negotiation is essentially impelled by a quest for identity<sup>92</sup> in the context of modern colonial challenges?

Negotiation means multifarious adjustments, compromises on the spaces of freedom and self-assertion, finding a middle course, and bargaining with reference to paradigms or terms more or less agreed upon, possibly to be accepted willingly—or, perhaps, unwillingly because of intractable power parameters. Negotiation presupposes some connivance between the opponents, some common ground, though of limited extent or, possibly, kept hidden, which explains the interest of both partners to reach a consensus of sorts that are eventually mutually gratifying compensations despite losses or partial surrenders. Nandy articulates these internally divergent and even hostile drifts in the concept of 'intimate enmity':

Ashis Nandy [...] has reached into the hidden spaces where the colonizer is deeply affected by his involvement with the colonized, where the subjugated and the defeated also have internal strategies sufficient to escape the transformative powers of their masters. In both instances, the emphasis is on the vulnerability of authority and the power and freedom of the human imagination of the defeated. The concept of intimate enmity as developed by Nandy retains the space for such playful interactions.<sup>93</sup>

I choose here the construction of a representation of Indian national identity as the actual horizon of my investigation, precisely because it is usually seen in reference to the antinomy of tradition and modernity. Actually, the authoritative paradigms of this construction are set up by the alien colonial power within the context of a relation of dominance and subordination, and a contest of that power by the colonized. The internalization of the social, cultural and political terms of references set up authoritatively by the colonizing rulers thwarts unambiguous contentions of the dominant and the subordinated. This creates complex internal scenarios of dissension that are misrepresented by a simplistic opposition of tradition and modernity. Instead of merely head-on opposition, the scenarios of negotiation are multifarious exercises of give and take, resulting in unpredictable and many-sided 'interstitial strategies'.<sup>94</sup> Processes become as heterogeneous as the social, cultural and political interests of the actors concerned.

These issues suggest that against these antithetic cognitive models—Essentialist, Orientalist, colonial—three crucial methodological perspectives ought to guide us to apprehend complex and subtle interstitial strategies: (a) the role of the indigenous actors is decisive and ought to be constructed within their own socio-political configuration according to their will to power; (b) these power contests can be best grasped correspondingly in terms of elaborate and commingled strategies; and (c) the cornerstone of these processes is in the forms of symbolic exchange which these strategies instrumentalize as a means of social communication in order to negotiate and achieve their socio-political agendas.

Once all the stories of hostility of 'the traditional' to modernity, 'the uncivilized' to enlightenment, 'the religious' to secularism, 'the communal' to nationalism, 'the primitive' to reason, etc., are

set aside, or even altogether dissolved, we shall be able to see clearly how and for what ends of theirs the various actors are actually trying to negotiate modernity differently from their various traditions, instrumentalizing age-long communicational, symbolic resources as assets and trump cards in the negotiation.

Regarding clashing strategies of subordination, nationalist assertion, mass mobilization and access to power on the part of competing actors, I suggest a further reading of the debates of historians,<sup>95</sup> political scientists,<sup>96</sup> sociologists<sup>97</sup> and anthropologists.<sup>98</sup> Within the context of communication studies, I will restrict the discussion to the ways and effectiveness of the symbolic resources of social and cultural assertions and claims to political dominance. My purpose is essentially methodological. The focus of my investigation is on the modalities of the symbolic dynamics that strategically negotiate modernity with reference to, and on the strength of, traditional resources. Nandy is right to state that

[...] to walk the razor's edge between makeshift adjustments and total surrender to its changing environment, a civilisation constantly needs to generate new concepts, symbols and structures of authority and to renegotiate terms with its older gods.<sup>99</sup>

Nevertheless, the cognitive process of such a collective renegotiation of 'symbols and structures of authority' remains to be identified.<sup>100</sup> The theoretical categorization of the social as the symbolic, outlined in the introduction, provides the epistemic framework adequate to a proper understanding of the process. Let me first recount the essential conceptual components of the model, and then proceed with the presentation of two significantly exemplary symbolic forms used by nationalist thinkers as a response to crucial modern challenges.

Three conceptual constructs are at the core of the model: first, an articulation of communication processes in terms of sharing of symbolic forms; second, an apprehension of the concepts of culture and communication as overlapping categories;<sup>101</sup> third, the conviction that a will to ascendancy pervades symbolic communication processes, altogether taking root in these processes. Eventually, it is a will to dominion, authority and power that presides over a many-sided confrontation in which discourses of tradition and modernity are staged as to provide the necessary symbolic idioms. Two key operational categories are crucial: one,

idioms of tradition and modernity as symbolic signifiers, and will to power, the overall horizon being one of hegemonic control over the entire nation; two, social confrontation is substantively embedded in symbolic contentions when adverse actors disseminate antagonistic symbols while attempting to shape according to their own image human concord and systems of social relations.

Two symbolic forms acquire a particular strategic significance among the many traditional resources instrumentalized by nationalist Indian thinkers to signify and create, socio-culturally and politically, the Indian nation: Hindu science as evidence of legitimacy; and Mother India—*Bharat Mata*—as a metaphor of origin and substance.

## Hindu Science and Modern Nationhood

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The British saw empirical sciences as universal knowledge, free from prejudice and passion and charged with the mission to disenchant the world of the 'superstitious' natives, dissolving and secularizing their religious world views and rationalizing their society.<sup>102</sup>

Gyan Prakash shows how colonialism was conscious of the paradox of achieving improvement through despotism.<sup>103</sup> Its 'civilizing mission' was a 'profoundly contradictory enterprise' as it meant 'to dominate in order to liberate'. The dislocation of Western culture resulted in its 'functioning as a form of alien power.' The will to enlighten the natives and free them from their civilizational shackles meant the extinction of 'their mythical thought with the power of reason.' This was achieved with the 'authority and application of science as universal reason'.<sup>104</sup> Science sanctioned the rule of Western modernity and overshadowed 'the deep internal rift' in the colonialist discourses.<sup>105</sup> Britain could do its work in India once the natives' heterogeneous live traditions, territories, authoritative texts and memories were forged into one modern nation by science. This unleashed two correlated processes, one of the translation of idioms, the second of the transfer of power.

Translation in the colonial context meant trafficking between the alien and the indigenous, forcing negotiations between

modernity and tradition, and rearranging power relations between the colonizer and the colonized. This is precisely what the Western-educated indigenous elite attempted as they sought to make their own what was associated with colonial rulers.<sup>106</sup>

'At the borderlines between cultures', 'on the interstices of Western science and Indian traditions', stood the Western-educated elite 'embodying and undertaking the reformulation of culture in their reach for hegemony'.<sup>107</sup> Though this elite might have failed 'to achieve hegemony in civil society because of its elitism', it dramatized 'the functioning of the language of reason' within the context of nationalist aspirations in colonial India so as to make it an idiom of their access to power. 'This idiom reached its fullest expression only in the state', at the hands of the Westernized middle-class and their movement for Independence. It started with the enchantment of the Western-educated intelligentsia by science and their 'biting critiques of "irrational" religious and social practices,' the reinterpretation of classical texts cast 'in the language of the Western discourse', 'the identification of a body of indigenous scientific tradition consistent with Western science'.<sup>108</sup>

Nationalism arose by laying its claim on revived traditions, by appropriating classical texts and traditions of science as the heritage of the nation. To be a nation was to be endowed with science, which had become the touchstone of rationality.<sup>109</sup>

The colonial idea of India as a nation was not denied but 'with great ideological imagination' re-inscribed 'under the authority of science' so as to reflect 'India's unique and universal scientific and technological heritage'. 'Thus, the Indian nation-state that came into being in 1947 was deeply connected to science's work as a metaphor'.<sup>110</sup>

The cultural authority of modern science, 'the legitimating sign of rationality and progress', justified the claim to modern nationhood. Ancient texts were read and classical tradition reinterpreted in its light 'to identify an original "Hindu science" upon which an Indian universality could stand, this also became the symbol for the modern nation'.<sup>111</sup> The claim was also implicitly made that this heritage belonged to all Indians. Science was not alien to India, ancient Hindus had originated scientific knowledge, ancient texts

embodied scientific truths, science was Hindu, the modern existence of Indians as a people was, therefore, justified.<sup>112</sup>

This was not because of fundamentalism and sectarian urges, but rather was a product of the historical imperative that positioned the nation as the dominant framework for pressing India's claim to cultural universality.<sup>113</sup>

The scenario is one of decay succeeding 'earlier times' for reasons 'difficult to unravel'. India 'fell behind in the march of technique, and Europe, which had long been backward in many matters, took the lead in technical progress. Behind this technical progress was the spirit of science.' But 'India was not lacking in mental alertness and technical skill. One senses a progressive deterioration during centuries, [...] the creative spirit fades away. A rational spirit of inquiry, so evident in earlier times, which might well have led to the further growth of science, is replaced by irrationalism and a blind idolatry of the past.'<sup>114</sup>

The artifice of an archaic Hindu science was that it composed an undivided origin for the contemporary nation, legitimizing it as the return of an original unity and purity. The definition of classical texts as scientific was crucial in this process because it permitted their representation as the embodiment of eternal and universal laws.<sup>115</sup>

Nehru observes that 'every people and every nation has some such belief or myth of national destiny .... Being an Indian, I am myself influenced by this reality or myth about India.' The reality of the myth had 'the power to mould hundreds of generations' because it drew 'its enduring vitality from some deep well of strength'.<sup>116</sup>

By the early 20th century, Indian scientists might have been the least expected to refer to the past their aims and achievements in medicine, mathematics, astronomy and chemistry. 'However, they repeatedly sought to situate their science in relation to a distant, explicitly "Hindu", past' more than to present tasks and future goals.<sup>117</sup> None of them were academic historians. 'Even when they aspired to secular nationalism and rationality', a search for indigenous roots and a conscious identification with a Hindu past guided them. Despite the difficulty of reconciling not always



compatible demands, frustration and, then, eventual disillusionment after 1920, with the discovery of India's most ancient civilization on the sites of Harappa and Mohenjodaro, they were prompted by more 'than a question of putting the historical record straight',<sup>118</sup> or an emulation of Western science presenting itself as heir to a long ancestry of discoveries and inventions. The idea of archaic Hindu science, which originated from a quest for knowledge in Orientalist research of the late 18th century,<sup>119</sup> was, a century later, nourishing the pursuit of a modern Indian nation. Beyond a complacent acceptance of the Orientalist construction of 'a precocious flowering of Indian science and civilization, followed by a long period of "degeneration" only arrested by the advent of British rule,' there was a will 'to create a discursive space for India's scientific past within the dominant narrative of Western science'.<sup>120</sup> Ancient medicine and mathematics were found to have

been cultivated by the Hindus from very remote times. But the history of the progress and civilisation of that nation closes with the end of the twelfth century. [...] Since then, the degenerated Hindus, who, for want of better occupation, employed, or rather wasted, their time in inventing an infinity of absurd, frivolous stories about gods and goddesses, demigods and avatars, forgot the principles of their sci-ences ....<sup>121</sup>

For the Bengali authors presented by Arnold,<sup>122</sup> the concern for ancient Hindu science carries a significant contradiction of rationality (Reason, as per the Enlightenment) and native nationalism (grounded in indigenous ancient history). The rationalist in Mahendra Lal Sircar, allopathic-turned-homoeopathic doctor, as in several other authors,

was fiercely dismissive of the modern practitioners of Hindu medicine and the rag-bag of ignorant and superstitious practices they seemed to represent. [...] But the nationalist in him also declared it a matter of great shame that [...] ancient Ayurvedic texts, which constituted 'the chief glory and greatness of our country', should languish in obscurity and neglect.<sup>123</sup>

The Hindu religion ... is ... a chaotic mass of crude and undigested and unfounded opinions on all subjects, enunciated and enforced in the most dogmatic way imaginable. The Hindu mind, thanks to this religion ... has ... lost much of its

original Aryan vigour and energy, and has become more of a speculative than of a practical character, singularly deficient in patient industry to observe and collect materials, too prone to hasty generalisations, depending more upon its own inspirations than upon outward facts.<sup>124</sup>

History is needed to demonstrate what the lost 'vigour and activity' of the Hindu mind had once been capable of, and 'how through the pursuit of science it could recover its intrinsic capabilities and use them to rebuild Indian civilization and lead India into enlightened nationhood'.<sup>125</sup> The 'regeneration of the once glorious Hindu nation' is the goal 'for the nation that has a past has also a future', writes Prafulla Chandra Ray, Professor of Chemistry, whose *History of Hindu Chemistry* (1902, 1908) is 'a deliberate attempt to gain national and international recognition for Indian science in its present, as much as its past, manifestations'.<sup>126</sup> 'The Hindu nation with its glorious past and vast latent potentialities may yet look forward to a still more glorious future.'<sup>127</sup> 'History is nothing but taking stock of a nation's assets and liabilities'.<sup>128</sup> On the strength of Ayurvedic and Tantric texts, Ray even demonstrated that 'Indian chemistry had a far older and more sophisticated history than had hitherto been recognized, a tradition that predated or outshone anything ancient Greece or medieval Europe had ever produced ....'<sup>129</sup> Jagadish Chandra Bose in 1901 considered that 'his work on plants demonstrated the validity of the message "proclaimed by my ancestors on the banks of the Ganges thirty centuries ago"'.<sup>130</sup> 'He claimed to have found in a Hindu cultural heritage the inspiration for his scientific work'.<sup>131</sup> Another use of the past emerged with increasing strength during the 1910s and early 1920s—claiming that Hindu science had anticipated many aspects of modern Western science, and that atoms and molecules lead to establish correspondences between the wisdom of the ancient sages and the discoveries of modern science. The ancients 'apparently understood the nature of atomic physics, and had insights into the properties of matter that modern scientists were only beginning to unravel'.<sup>132</sup>

Two features of the symbolic process of science as legitimating the claim to Indian nationhood should be stressed: a translation of the Western concept of science and the consolidation of the power status of the Western-educated middle-class elite, whose

social agents were consciously preoccupied of their mediating role of 'middle term'.<sup>133</sup>

To be imposed and accepted, Western modernity had itself to be translated 'into the idioms of those it sought to transform and appropriate'. Prakash shows how 'science had to be performed as magic if it was to establish its authority' upon the minds of the majority and not only the elite. Science was 'staged' in museums and dramatically displayed in exhibitions, the importance of visuality was enhanced as an instrument of education, 'performance mixed science with magical spectacle'.<sup>134</sup>

What began as representations of science staged to conquer ignorance and superstition became enmeshed in the very effects that were targeted for elimination.<sup>135</sup>

Still, with its magical efficacy, its miraculous power, the awe among visitors to the museums, the sense of marvel, bewilderment and amazement, etc., 'science aroused curiosity and wonder, not superstition: the "Wonder House" was [...] an interstitial space that accommodated a half-awake state of comprehension and incomprehension'.<sup>136</sup>

Signifying neither a superstitious eye not a scientific gaze, it was a vision re-formed by its encounter with science's representation as wondrous and useful Western knowledge.<sup>137</sup>

Endowed with the prestige and authority of modern science, Western-educated Indians acquired the means to separate themselves from the subaltern masses, agriculturists and artisans. The latter figure 'in the discourse of the colonisers and Indian elite as icons of the ignorance and darkness both wished to remove'.<sup>138</sup> They are those who are spoken to and spoken for; they are superstitious, irrational, ignorant, unknowable; their constant presence is intractable, disturbing and threatening; they are like barbarians, whose welfare and reform is the elite's responsibility.

To conclude, when the authority of modern science worked as a symbolic form of social communication and started mediating the construction of India as a national entity at the end of the 19th century, the modalities of that social process substantiated two constituent features. First, since '[t]ranslation involves the undoing of binaries and borders', Indian modernity was 'forged in the

interstitial spaces opened by the process of translation.’ It was a ‘process of cultural appropriation that bears the mark of a contestatory negotiation between unequal languages and subjects’.<sup>139</sup> Second, translation ‘locates the formation of a modern Indian elite as a counter-hegemonic force in those productive in-between strategies and spaces’.

Both features can be considered significant of multicultural encounters. They disprove dichotomic paradigms, starting with those at the root of the tyrannical modernization theory,<sup>140</sup> and its blueprint of the modern nation-state.<sup>141</sup>

## ‘Mother India’, Metaphor of Substance and Origin

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By the end of the 18th century, the mythical figure of ‘Mother India’ had become dear in the West—to German Romanticism, in particular, and to the Orientalists, in general. This originated in the discovery of Sanskrit as India’s mother tongue and the ‘mother’—the cradle—of all civilizations, unselfish and inexhaustible spring of the most ancient and purest, primeval and unadulterated, complete and unmixed truth, elsewhere lost on Earth. The Hindu culture of the Brahmins of the Origin was, simply put, perfect. In the history of cultures, India had borrowed from no other: she had invented everything by herself and given it to everybody—‘a consummate formula of ethnocentrism’.<sup>142</sup> This conceptualization fulfilled the mythical pursuit of the Origin, as opposed to History, which brings loss, admixture and degeneration. ‘The Germans who studied India indefatigably made it the *fons et origo* of everything.’ ‘Sanskrit and things Indian in general simply took the place of Hebrew and the Edenic fallacy’.<sup>143</sup> India alone was able to take humankind back to the font of a genuine identity, to give access to the Origin, the Lost Paradise, the Golden Age.<sup>144</sup>

By the late 19th century phase of Hindu revivalism, the representation of the nation as ‘Mother’ had acquired a comparable ‘utopian meaning, dream-like and yet passionately real, charged with a deeply religious semiotic’.<sup>145</sup> According to Chatterjee, for the nationalist intelligentsia in Bengal, for instance

Bankimchandra (1838–94), the first to introduce into Indian nationalism the theme of the Great Mother, or Rabindranath Tagore,<sup>146</sup> ‘the nation was the Mother, once resplendent in wealth and beauty, now in tatters. Relentlessly, she exhorts a small band of her sons [...] to vanquish the enemy and win back her honour’.<sup>147</sup> The theme conveyed

that sense of anguish of a small alienated middle class, daily insulted by the realities of political subjection and yet powerless to hit back, summoning up from the depths of its soul the will and the courage to deliver the ultimate sacrifice that would save the honour of the nation.<sup>148</sup>

Aurobindo (1872–1950) admired Bankimchandra, borrowed his imagery and shared his feelings, including his wish to drive the English language out of India. The profile of Aurobindo’s life<sup>149</sup> is well known. He was educated in totally alien surroundings. At home, his atheist father, a doctor trained in England, took ‘the greatest care that nothing Indian should touch this son of his’—food, dress, Bengali language or Hinduism. His mother, an orthodox Hindu, was seriously ill, with occasional bouts of violence towards her children. Biographers would explain signs of mutism and interpersonal withdrawal that the young Aurobindo displayed as a response to this or to the schizophrenic domestic environment; his admirers later saw in these signs an early sign of spirituality.

When he was sent to a convent school at five, an English governess served as a surrogate mother. At the age of seven, he was sent to England, with his guardians receiving strict instructions to not allow him to make the acquaintance of any Indian or to undergo any Indian influence. Actually, scholarly success proved ‘no protection against deep economic and nurtural anxieties’.<sup>150</sup> Loneliness, depression, a sense of exile, a paranormal experience of heavy darkness, led him ‘to defy the model of success associated with the Anglicism of his father’.<sup>151</sup> He broke with the West, delivered fiery nationalist speeches, and got himself disqualified from entering the Indian Civil Service at the end of his stay in England. Back in India, the touch of his motherland’s soil made him feel ‘enveloped by a deep calm and silence’.<sup>152</sup> He learnt his mother tongue, became a prominent nationalist leader, and worked out a political ideology with two

main themes—the proletariat as ‘the real key to the situation,’ and ‘the mythography of India as a powerful mother, *Sakti*, who was being oppressed by the West and had to be liberated through blood sacrifices made by her children’.<sup>153</sup>

I know my country as Mother. I offer her my devotion, my worship. If a monster sits upon her breast and prepares to suck her blood, what does her child do? Does he quietly sit down to his meal ... or rush to her rescue? I know I have in me the power to accomplish the deliverance of my fallen country .... It is the power of knowledge, *Brahmatej* found in *Jnana*. This feeling is not new to me ... with this feeling I was born ... God has sent me to earth to do this work ....<sup>154</sup>

Commenting upon this text, Nandy wonders whether it is the nation which is conceptualized as a mother or, rather, a primal image of the mother, which finds an expression in the nation. The second alternative seems more in consonance with the identification by Aurobindo of The Infinite Energy as Bhavani, Durga, Kali, Radha, Lakshmi, and its definition as ‘our mother and creatress of us all. In the present age the mother is manifested as the Mother of Strength’.<sup>155</sup>

Revolutionary politics led Aurobindo to jail. Prolonged solitary confinement led him to discover in 1908 the ‘silence’ and the ‘emptiness’. He then ‘withdrew from activity into the pure silent peace’, and started a life as a renunciate. *Brahmatej*, Brahmanic potency obtained through asceticism, took the place of *Kshatratej*, or martial potency. He became the supreme guru and final key to salvation, while his ashram at Pondicherry was managed by Mira Richard, to whom Aurobindo gave the title of Sri Ma, ‘the Mother’. He withdrew further into seclusion when he accepted Mira Richard as his *Bhakti* in 1926, discovering ‘the primal authority of the mother’. ‘There is one force only,’ he declared, ‘the Mother’s force—or, if you like to put it that way, the Mother is Sri Aurobindo’s Force.’ The final stage of total surrender is reached ‘when you are completely identified with the Divine Mother and feel yourself to be no longer another and separate being, instrument, servant or worker but truly a child and eternal portion of her consciousness and force,’ writes Aurobindo.<sup>156</sup>

If we follow the interpretation of Nandy,<sup>157</sup> Aurobindo found ‘a protection against the innermost separations and disjunctions’ the

West had induced in him. The West had deprived him from nearness, love and nurture. Now, 'a part of the West had returned to put him in touch with them'. For the 'quiet, unprotesting, long-suffering son, [...] the freed East had at last met the non-oppressive West symbolised by the Mother. And thenceforth his East was incomplete without the Mother's West and his West was partial without her East.' 'Gradually, discovering the East in oneself by losing oneself in the East-in-the-West became a transcendent goal and a practical possibility.'

A few decades later, in Maharashtra, a teacher, a writer and no less a prominent freedom-fighter, Sane Guruji (1899–1950), drew inspiration from the symbolic representation of Mother India. Born in a miserably poor family of Konkan, he pursued his studies under the most adverse conditions but with obstinate determination, begging as a *madhukari*, a convention among Brahmin families to offer free meals to poor and deserving students in return for domestic services and odd jobs around the house. He closeted himself in libraries and frequented local second-hand bookshops to satisfy his obsessive urge for books. All this made him an introvert who, moreover, wrote poetry. A graduate in the Marathi language and literature from S.P. College, Pune, the shy, retiring youth proved to be the most successful and committed teacher at Amalner High School (1924–30) in Khandesh. His simple outward appearance belied a tremendous moral authority and oratorical power.

The resolution at the Lahore Congress to fight for total self-rule, and the *Satyagraha* movement of Mahatma Gandhi, resulted in Sane losing interest in entertaining students with historical events: history was to be made. May 17, 1930 saw Sane's arrest—the first of many incarcerations—and 15 months of imprisonment for fiercely spreading in Khandesh the message of uncompromising Independence. His power of speech would henceforth be dedicated to fighting in the Quit India movement and the *Satyagraha*, raising national consciousness, mobilizing the impoverished peasantry, building up a youth organization, the *Rashtriya Seva Dal* (National Service Corps), advocating a democratically socialist nation, campaigning against communal disharmony, fasting unto death at *Pandharpur* for the priests to let Untouchables enter the temple, touring the country to bridge the gaps between its various cultural–linguistic areas, working for the *Antar Bharati*

programme, writing poems, books and a number of widely read novels (when in the Dhule jail, for instance, he copied verbatim the 18 discourses on the *Gita* by Vinoba Bhave, which became an immensely popular book; in Nashik jail, he wrote the famous novel *Shyam's Mother*, a saga of mother's love, etc. He later wrote *Indian Culture* in Pune), launching papers to facilitate people's awakening, and writing journals for social and political militants.

A womanly hypersensitivity is a characteristic feature of Sane's personality. As a child, he was carefully nurtured by his ever-watchful mother. She taught him to make no distinction between a man and a woman's work. 'He would sweep the house along with his mother, help her clean and wash the cooking utensils, sit with her at the grinding wheel and grind corn'.<sup>158</sup> Sane's attachment to his mother definitely shaped his personality, and he was gratefully conscious of this imprint. This explains, in particular, Sane's extremely emotional interest in the women's tradition of grindmill songs, of which he was the first enthusiastic and systematic collector in Maharashtra. He classified and edited a collection; of 2,593 of them, and published them in book form in 1940 under the title *Strī Jīvan* (Women-Life).

One can hear all the beauty of the Samaveda in the lullaby which the mother sings to her child. Her stories have the quality of great literature. The child's first contact with trees and flowers, with the birds and beasts, the moon and the stars, is through his mother. All knowledge, all the arts and sciences have their birth in mother's love. She is peace, she is happiness, she is prosperity, the single summation of what man lives for.<sup>159</sup>

When working on a biography of G.K. Gokhale, who started the Servants of India Society aiming to create a band of political *sanyasins* devoted to the service of the motherland, Sane wrote: 'The thought that he, too, should sacrifice everything in the service of the motherland took firm hold of his mind. Love of the motherland became now an extension of his love for his mother. No sacrifice was too great in the service of the two, he thought'.<sup>160</sup> For Sane, this dedication implied celibacy:

My mother, by inculcating in me the womanly virtues of love, compassion, service and hard work, left me without any need of marriage.<sup>161</sup>



Three levels weave and structure the metaphor of the 'Mother' in Sane's life. First, psychologically, a poetic sense is inherited from the mother in the form of a capacity to wonder at

the beauty of love which makes no distinction between man and man, the animate and the inanimate. He watched the nightly procession of the stars in the sky, listened to the music of the stream in his native village, watched in childlike wonder buds blossoming into flowers, trees putting on their mantle of green. Sparrows twittering in a garden, a cow tickling her calf, a cat lapping up milk, a crow calling to its mate were all things to be watched and admired.<sup>162</sup>

Second, ideologically, if Mother Nature gave birth to the glorious literature of the *Vedas*, the font of human civilization, Sane realized that this culture was alive in the unwritten treasures of women's oral tradition of stories and songs.

Sane had long been puzzled by the wisdom and lessons of the self-effacement of illiterate and uneducated women. For him, it was a mystery. Who taught these women 'to love all life, to feed the hungry and the poor, to spend a lifetime in the service of the family without hope of reward?'<sup>163</sup> Sane concluded that this knowledge of life

came from the traditional simple folk songs, the distichs handed down to them for generations, and which were their companions when they sat down to grind corn, or put their children to sleep or draw water from the well. He used every stratagem to remove the shyness of the simple women in order to learn their songs. He would help them in their daily chores, sit with them at the grinding wheel, clean or cut vegetables with them, draw water from the well. Soon he was accepted as a welcome guest wherever he went and songs began to pour from the lips of the women he met. He was all ears while they sang and he took care to note down every song he heard.<sup>164</sup>

Third, practically or ethically, dedication to the motherland means a maternal love for fellow men sunk in poverty and despair. He often shed tears for them. His own experience of suffering as a youth had made him hypersensitive to the hopes and aspirations of the hungry millions around him.

My mother died but she left me after making me ready for the service of the motherland. She left me because she did not want me to limit my affection to a single individual. Now I see my mother in all women. I received from my mother this vision of a great and all-inclusive love, and she removed herself from the scene so that the vision may not get clouded. I hope one day I shall also pass away after loving and serving my motherland in the manner my mother taught me, with a sense of fulfilment.<sup>165</sup>

Sane was not satisfied with only collecting songs: he enthusiastically lectured on them wherever he went, at the time of festivals such as the Ganesh *puja* and other functions. He showed his notebooks to women and girls who wondered where he had brought all these distichs from, and told them: 'This is your heritage. I am passing it on to you.'

By chance, a well known screen actor and director, Master Vinayak, read by chance a set of songs on *Mother-Children*, previously published in a periodical. He wrote to Sane a letter which reflected the reactions from audiences and readers:

While reading, I felt literally sent into raptures. Without my knowing, tears started flowing from my eyes! I told whomsoever I met: 'Read this article!' We read holy books—*pothis* and *Puranas*—with the faith that this will wash away even sins. But reading this, we actually experience that this auspicious recitation of the Veda-of-the-Child, *Balveda*, washes sins away. One feels overwhelmed. When we read these learned books and scriptures, *granthas*, we do not grasp the idea of the wealthy heart of Hindu Dharma. But this idea can be comprehended from this article. We have to hold it high up and dance and proclaim 'This is our culture! Our culture!' The wealth of our cultural heritage gets forgotten! You gather this heritage and you show it to us! Let us remain forever grateful!<sup>166</sup>

Sane comments:

Let us all remain grateful to our mothers and sisters. They created this literature with the intention of forgetting themselves, their name and being. I am only instrumental. Hearing these distichs, I forget myself, engrossed in them, as if in *samadhi*. Reading them I get mad. When I have time, I read this Veda. I read it time and again. This is to the honour of my mother and grandmothers who made me appreciate them in my childhood.

How to thank those sisters who told me the songs with pleasure? The children cry, the house chores are going on, the night is falling, still they continue telling me verses.<sup>167</sup>

During the very same years, Jawaharlal Nehru was wandering from meeting to meeting and talking of 'this great country for whose freedom we were struggling, [...] of the *Swaraj*, the self-rule that could only be for all and every part and not for some'.<sup>168</sup> He would speak to sophisticated city audiences of 'this India of ours'—or 'Hindustan'—but seldom of *Bharat*, 'the old Sanskrit name derived from the mythical founder of the race'. While he was speaking to the peasant, 'with his limited outlook', they would still sometimes greet him with 'a great roar of welcome': '*Bharat Mata ki Jay*—Victory to Mother India!' His unexpected question about 'what they meant by that cry' would

amuse and surprise them, and then, not knowing exactly what to answer, they would look at each other and at me. I persisted in my questioning. At last a vigorous Jat, wedded to the soil from immemorial generations, would say that it was the *dharti*, the good earth of India, that they meant. What earth?<sup>169</sup>

The earth of their village patch? Or all the patches in the district? Or in the province? Or in the whole of India? 'And so question and answer went on till they would ask me impatiently to tell them all about it'.<sup>170</sup> Then Nehru explained to them that it was much more than these patches:

The mountains and the rivers of India, and the forests and the broad fields, which gave us food, were all dear to us, but what counted ultimately were the people of India, people like them and me, who were spread out all over this vast land. *Bharat Mata*, Mother India, was essentially these millions of people, and victory to her meant victory to these people. You are parts of this *Bharat Mata*, I told them, you are in a manner yourselves *Bharat Mata*, and this idea slowly soaked into their brains, their eyes would light up as if they had made a great discovery.<sup>171</sup>

Nehru, the rationalist state-builder, negotiated his modern idea of a national state and his nationalist design by purposively using a linguistic sign which he discovered was shared by the peasants and was conveniently available to serve his ends. He was least

concerned with discovering what India's peasants might have in mind. *Bharat Mata* was no more than a symbol to be semantically interpreted. Nehru saw the peasant empty-minded in front of his question. He turned Mother India into a verbal form that he could then easily instrumentalize and load with his own rationalist construction. Nehru's aim was pragmatic—namely, to bring the peasant masses into the struggle of the Indian national movement. That was the strategic objective of the Congress at that particular moment. Since we have no written record of the peasants' perception of the explication by Jawaharlal Nehru of the idea of *Bharat Mata*, the peasants' alleged 'great discovery' will remain, for us, an assumption.

The nation as Mother comes to him (Nehru) as part of a political language he has taught himself to use; it is just another political slogan which had gained currency and established itself in the meeting-grounds of the Congress. It does not figure in his own 'scientific' vocabulary of politics. But he can use it, because it has become part of the language which the masses speak when they come to political meetings.<sup>172</sup>

To conclude, this second symbolic resource for the construction of an Indian identity in the context of colonialism shows, once again, the inanity of an antinomic approach to the phenomenon of social and cultural transactions. It shows mainly the amazing polysemy derived from basic symbols. I have even set aside the association of the symbol of the 'Mother' with the national anthem, the cow protection campaign, the Ganga, sacred texts and deities, etc., which allow the symbols to mediate simultaneously at different semantic and practical levels, expand tremendously their communicational effectiveness, and to increase their semantic import. Symbolic communication operates through processes of translation that make them traverse levels of social, mental and physical reality as well. Thus, they bind all these domains together and integrate them into a single configuration.

## Notes

1. Chatterjee (1986: 14, 16–17, 64, 73, 112–13, 134) and Thapar (2000: 7–8).

2. Said (1995) and Chatterjee (1986: 36–37).
3. Veer (1998: 21).
4. Affergan (1987, 1991: 17–90), Latour (1993: 97) and Tarot (1999: 373).
5. Said (1995: 7–8).
6. Jaffrelot (1999: 2–4, 16, 20, 25).
7. Chatterjee (1986: 11–15).
8. Tarot (1999: 359, 370–81).
9. Thapar (1984: 15) and Jaffrelot (1999: 11, 13, 16, 20–21).
10. Chatterjee (1986: 54–84), Kaviraj (1995) and Chakravarti (1998: vii–ix).
11. Basham (1967).
12. Thapar (1984: 12).
13. Chatterjee (1999: 192).
14. Dalmia (1999: 5).
15. Sarkar (1997: 103–104).
16. *Ibid.*: 107.
17. *Ibid.*: 108.
18. Dalmia (1999: 2–4, n. 5).
19. Kapur (1990: 3).
20. Dalmia (1999: 5).
21. Chatterjee (1999: 195).
22. Nehru (1998: 22–24, 36, 49–68).
23. Prakash (1999: 119).
24. Ali (1999: 1).
25. Nehru (1998: 53).
26. Prakash (1999: 90–91).
27. *Ibid.*
28. Inden (1990) and Anderson (1991).
29. Hobsbawm (1990a).
30. Prakash (1999: 118).
31. Dalmia and Stietenron (1995).
32. Dalmia (1995: 178).
33. Dalmia (1999: 10).
34. *Ibid.*: 13.
35. *Ibid.*: 6.
36. *Ibid.*: 6, n. 7.
37. Guha (1989).
38. Dalmia (1999: 14).
39. *Ibid.*: 15.
40. *Ibid.*: 433.
41. *Ibid.*: 437.
42. Champakalakshmi and Gopal (1996: 1).
43. *Ibid.*
44. Thapar (2000: 8).
45. Richman (1992) and Iyengar (1994).
46. Poitevin and Rairkar (1996, 2000).
47. Thapar (2000: 14–19).
48. Richman (1992: 7–9, 2000).
49. Singh (1993).

50. Thapar (2000: 25).
51. *Ibid.*: 23.
52. Chatterjee (1986: 6).
53. *Ibid.*: 9–10.
54. *Ibid.*: 10.
55. *Ibid.*: 11.
56. Dasgupta (2000: 2).
57. Juergensmeyer (1998).
58. Madan (1987).
59. Veer (1998: 12).
60. *Ibid.*: 13.
61. Chatterjee (1986: 40–43, 1993) and Mukhia (1993: 33–45).
62. Datta (1999: 1).
63. Fox (1996: 238).
64. Chatterjee (1995: 103–4).
65. Bayly (1985), Ludden (1996), Pandey (1997: 1–22, 233–61) and Panikkar (1999).
66. Smith (1971), Juergensmeyer (1998: 1–41) and Jaffrelot (1999: 1–79).
67. Dumont (1970).
68. Pandey (1997: 1–2).
69. Thapar (1999: 1–33).
70. Pandey (1997: 21–2).
71. Nandy (1998: xiii–xv).
72. Davis (1978).
73. Chatterjee (1986: 18).
74. *Ibid.*
75. *Ibid.*: 17–30.
76. *Ibid.*: 30.
77. Anderson (1991).
78. Hobsbawm (1990a).
79. Veer (1998: 197).
80. *Ibid.*: x.
81. *Ibid.*
82. Pandey (1997: 10).
83. *Ibid.*: 19–20.
84. Chakravarti (1998: x).
85. Said (1995).
86. Sarkar (1993).
87. *Ibid.*
88. Jaffrelot (1999: 6).
89. *Ibid.*: 6, 80–81.
90. Veer (1998: 21).
91. *Ibid.*: 18, 21.
92. Pandey (1993) and Raychaudhuri (1994).
93. Nandy (1998: xvi).
94. Prakash (1999).
95. Thapar (1989), Jones (1989), Hobsbawm (1990b), Chatterjee, P. (1999) and Datta (1999: 1–20).

96. Jaffrelot (1999).
97. Rudolph and Susanne Lloyd (1967) and Singh (1973).
98. Brass (1991) and Nandy (1983: 1–63).
99. Nandy (1990: 1).
100. *Ibid.*
101. Carey (1992).
102. Prakash (1999: 4–5).
103. *Ibid.*: 47.
104. *Ibid.*: 4–5.
105. *Ibid.*
106. *Ibid.*: 6.
107. *Ibid.*: 8.
108. *Ibid.*: 6.
109. *Ibid.*: 7.
110. *Ibid.*
111. *Ibid.*: 9.
112. *Ibid.*: 86–88.
113. *Ibid.*: 7.
114. Nehru (1998: 54).
115. Prakash (1999: 89).
116. Nehru (1998: 55).
117. Arnold (1999: 156).
118. *Ibid.*
119. Prakash (1999: 99, 256, n. 31).
120. Arnold (1999: 156–58).
121. Geologist Pramatha Nath Bose (1885), quoted by Arnold (1999: 160).
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123. Mahendra Lal Sircar (162).
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131. *Ibid.*
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138. *Ibid.*: 40–41.
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# 2

## SYMBOLIC FACETS OF MEDICAL POWER

BERNARD BEL

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In correspondence with changing civilizational contexts and their cultural representations, medical power operates, in its own way, to enforce established social orders through varying symbolic forms carved into health care practices. For instance, the extreme medicalization of the natural biological processes of birthing and dying has become an effective symbolic form that embody delusions of victory over hazards in life, the suffering and fear of death, thereby legitimating the rights over human bodies claimed by professional practitioners.

Another instance, particularly detrimental in the developing nations, is that of the erstwhile colonizing powers and their present heirs turning their medical 'expertise' into signs of their *uber*-superiority, their right to rule, and their sole authority to define legitimate health practices, thus privileging themselves to disregard indigenous systems and autonomous practices verified by centuries of successful exercise.

The many symbolic facets of medical power can be analysed at different levels of social communication processes: The most obvious level is that of the scientific and industrial 'achievements' credited to medical knowledge; these achievements, particularly in their primary field of application—allopathic medicine—fend off any questioning of the symbolic values that sanction their undue power, cover up their iatrogenic effects, and ultimately strengthen

established social orders. The media convey, in particular, an enlightened image of medicine which they claim to be politically neutral ‘by nature’. Modern medicine is depicted as a unified and coherent system of scientific and technical procedures dedicated to alleviate human suffering, replacing a myriad of local, empirical and obscurantist practices.

The power of mystification assigned to pre-scientific medicine—from witches of the Middle Ages to the pedantic characters ridiculed by Molière in *Le Malade imaginaire*—is presented by the dominant media as pure mystification in contrast with the accountability of its modern counterpart. Medical doctors have become indisputable referees of public opinion. Cosmopolitan medicine belongs to a world whose citizens are supposed to make informed choices about their health, in compliance with universal bio-ethical concepts and regulations of health care systems. Whenever medicine would appear to fail, the whole blame is put on economic factors, communication gaps between the providers of health care and their clients, or bad management in implementing public health policies.

Benjamin Rush, a physician and signatory to the Declaration of Independence of the USA (1776), had foreseen encroachments of medical interests on ‘the unalienable rights of humans’:

Unless we put medical freedom into the constitution, the time will come when medicine will organize itself into an undercover dictatorship ... denying equal privileges. All such laws are unAmerican and despotic ....

Rush’s view anticipated ‘medical power’ as an agglomeration of vested interests, and contending ‘conspiracy theories’ that would create controversies on health policies. The aim of this paper is to reconsider medical power from a broader perspective—that is, through its symbolic functions in the modern world with respect to systems of economic exchanges and political relations.

## Visible Power (1): Market-driven Health Policies

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The critics of institutionalized medicine deplore the fact that the pharmaceutical industry, being a fundamental player in free-

market economies, takes advantage of its hold on the media and lawmakers. A typical example is the mid-1999 controversy on hepatitis-B immunization. The US Food and Drug Administration was under attack for having underestimated the dangers of hepatitis-B immunization due to the marginal reporting of adverse reactions (admittedly, 90 per cent of the cases went unreported to the Vaccine Adverse Events Reporting System [see NVIC 1999]), whereas the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention multiplied the number of reported hepatitis-B cases by 20, using the argument that most go undiagnosed (Bethell 1999) and backed up a campaign for the routine immunization of infants.

The fact is that there is no 'forcible vaccination' in the US, and this campaign led to 36 states restricting access to public schools to children not immunized, thus making it mandatory. On 18 May 1999, Rep. John Mica, chairperson of the House Subcommittee on Drug Policy and Human Resources, asked: 'Is it possible the preventative measure for this disease is riskier than the disease itself?' (Hanchette 1999). Mica (*ibid.*) cited a study showing that serious reactions to the vaccine—which led to 11 deaths—were 16 times greater than incidents of the disease.

The conspiracy version draws evidence from facts such as 'Merck and Co. derives \$900 million per annum from vaccine sales' and raises concerns about the independence of medical and pharmacological research, as well as preventive health measures:

'Scientists are increasingly supported by for-profit companies,' [as] the *Wall Street Journal* recently reported, 'but a new study shows that critical fact is seldom revealed in published research.' [...]

According to Barbara Fisher of the National Vaccine Information Center in Vienna, Virginia, amendments to the Childhood Immunization Act of 1993 gave states financial incentives to set up tracking registries, and a 'performance-based grant program,' offered up to \$100 a head depending on the number of shots delivered. 'A bounty is put on children's heads,' Fisher said. 'Our children now get 33 doses of ten different vaccines by kindergarten; our grandparents got only one—smallpox. The CDC hasn't yet done the studies showing whether all these shots are safe.' (Bethell 1999)

The Association of American Physicians and Surgeons to the Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy, and Human

Resources of the Committee on Government Reform US House of Representatives concluded (14 June 1999):

Public policy regarding vaccines is fundamentally flawed. It is permeated by conflicts of interest. It is based on poor scientific methodology (including studies that are too small, too short, and too limited in populations represented), which is, moreover, insulated from independent criticism. The evidence is far too poor to warrant overriding the independent judgments of patients, parents, and attending physicians, even if this were ethically or legally acceptable.

AAPS opposes federal mandates for vaccines, on principle, on the grounds that they are:

1. An unconstitutional expansion of the power of the federal government.
2. An unconstitutional delegation of power to a public–private partnership.
3. An unconstitutional and destructive intrusion into the patient–physician and parent–child relationships.
4. A violation of the Nuremberg Code in that they force individuals to have medical treatment against their will, or to participate in the functional equivalent of a vast experiment without fully informed consent.
5. A violation of rights to free speech and to the practice of one’s religion (which may require one to keep oaths).

## Visible Power (2): Miscommunication

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In the 1960s–70s, counterculture in Western countries nurtured a resistance to the ‘medical establishment’, favouring a spirit of ‘do your own thing’. This prompted an ambience of preventive health, with particular attention paid to nutrition and industrial malfeasance. Yet, this movement did not live up to its expected impact on ‘the system’, in spite of attempts by Illich (1976, 1999a, 1999b) and others to reconfigure the political battlefield of ‘alternative’ culture.

The following decade witnessed a setback of ideologies, resulting in stronger assertions of individual freedom, and a restatement of consumerism, whereby citizens regulate private and public service providers by exerting their free will as consumers.



Individual freedom often conflicts with the collective interest, as illustrated by the freedom to be vaccinated or not clashing with the 'herd immunity' argument that when a large fraction of the population is immunized (e.g., 80–90%), all are protected.

Controversies on bioethical issues highlight a miscommunication process depicting citizens as victims of an oppressive system, meaning here a complex set of decision-making mechanisms beyond the reach of direct democratic control: the State, multinational corporations, international health agencies, and, by extension, alleged conspiracies involving the armed forces, the US Central Intelligence Agency, the erstwhile Soviet KGB, etc., depending on the emotional appeal of the 'evidence'.

This pattern of miscommunication reveals itself in the striking difference between the pro- and anti-vaccination advocacies. The former, being furnished by public agencies such as the FDA and its VAERS (Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System) (See Stehlin 1999) is targeting a general audience, providing generalized statements with very few—if any—references to scientific data.

Adverse reactions following immunization are generally mild; severe events resulting in permanent sequelae are extremely rare. The benefits of preventing disease far outweigh the risks of immunization. Even when adverse events occur following immunization, they may not have been caused by the immunization or the vaccine components. (Sheifele and Pless 1998)

Conversely, advocacy for freedom from vaccinations is replete with references to scientific literature. The problem lies in inaccuracies in the interpretation of highly technical material, and the absence of professional reviewing of references, which might lead to a proliferation of questionable statements. For example, Phillips (1998) writes

A more recent study found that measles vaccination 'produces immune suppression which contributes to an increased susceptibility to other infections.'

Phillips provides an incomplete reference to *Clinical Immunology and Immunopathology*. Unfortunately, the actual argument of this paper by Auwaerter et al. (1996) has nothing to do with the alleged dangers of vaccinations:

Measles produces immune suppression which contributes to an increased susceptibility to other infections.[...]

In short, a clinical statement on measles has been distorted to reinforce an—otherwise weighty (see Scheibner 1993)—objection that, globally speaking, vaccinations mess up the immune system.

The World Wide Web, currently a battlefield of many debates, makes it possible to access the full texts or abstracts of a great deal of scientific literature published in recent years. A careful look at dynamic links (URLs) suggests that medical lobbies may be pulling the strings of certain types of health activism. In North America, many anti-vaccination campaigns are orchestrated by homoeopaths, chiropractors and manufacturers of vitamins, with an evident interest in hardselling their own skills and products as preventive measures against infectious diseases.

### Visible Power (3): The Story of a Conquest

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In many studies by social scientists, the power of the technological medical establishment is gauged from a historical-political perspective.

American medicine is historically reactive. It rebounds, at times slowly and often selectively, to social and cultural upheavals, to scientific innovations, and to the changing needs of different populations of patients and practitioners. At present the trend seems almost textbook Weber, with capitalism overtaking both science and medicine and subverting their rational aims to its own. (Guillemin 1998: 65)

In India, epidemiologist and health activist C. Sathyamala attracted attention on the development of cosmopolitan medicine within the framework, and at the service, of 19th century capitalism:

During this period, bacteriology, human physiology, pathology, and medical technology were developing as separate fields of medicine. The germ theory of disease was also beginning to gain popularity at this time. All these new advances in medicine were making it possible to identify the specific cause of disease

and to also develop specific remedies. Since factory owners were interested in any knowledge that could help control disease, reduce the duration of illness and show how human energy could be most efficiently utilised, they poured large sums of money into research and development of modern medicine. This money, spent on the development and provision of health care was seen by them as a good investment.

An added advantage in helping in the development of modern medicine was that the new theories shifted the focus of disease causation from the social conditions that bred disease to the immediate cause which was the germ. The germ theory helped to divert attention from the fundamentally exploitative nature of the commercial society. Instead of saying that disease was primarily caused by poor nutrition, bad working and living conditions, people could now be told that disease was caused by germs. Instead of focusing on the responsibility of factory owners in creating unhealthy conditions for workers, people could be told that it was their own fault that they fell sick as they were ignorant, and lived in an unhygienic way.

Thus, although medical science on the one hand, found out the immediate cause of disease, it took away the responsibility of ill health from society and placed it on the individuals themselves. This new theory of disease was actively promoted and publicized through health education, schools and mass media. Disease came to be accepted as an individual's responsibility and individual hospital based health care became the norm. Health care now became a neutral subject, something that was unrelated to the commercial way of life and the problems this way of life created. As already stated, the health of workers had become important to factory owners. They therefore pressurized the government to set up hospitals and themselves funded research that could improve the health of the workers. (Sathyamala et al. 1986: 94–95)

Colonialism took advantage of the achievements of contemporary medical science as a 'secular' justification for imposing the Western model on the 'underdeveloped'. In turn, local medical systems sought a compromise with cosmopolitan medicine. Leslie (1989: 45) reports that, in the 19th century, *Vaidis* and *Hakims* occasionally used 'English medicines' to enhance their practice. This practice is still commonplace in many rural areas of India (Rao 1996). An Ayurvedic doctor posted in the primary health centre may resort to using allopathic medicine in response

to the 'market trend', as patients prefer injections to herbal preparations.

The controversial story of the eradication of yellow fever in Brazil (Löwy 1996) illustrates the magnitude of medical power when it comes to the evaluation of health programmes in developing countries engineered by foreign development agencies. In 1941, a report of the Rockefeller Foundation was strongly criticized by the remarkable Dr Fred Lowe Soper (1893–1977), who was then heading the Brazilian office of its International Health Division. In a letter to the director of the Foundation, Soper pointed out that, in its zeal to glorify advanced laboratory research and immunization campaigns, the report had completely ignored the intensive and successful programme for the complete eradication of *Aedes aegypti*, the vector of the epidemics, which, in his view, had been the most determining factor in the elimination of yellow fever.

This controversy illustrates a clash between two logics: a humanitarian (some would say 'neo-colonialist') one, dignifying science, high-tech and the crusaders of developed countries coming to the rescue of the poor; the other, a grass-roots approach based on people's participation, indigenous technology and monitoring by the concerned states.

It is important to stress that these events occurred in democratic states in which a significant fraction of the population is given access to high-standard education and free access to information. But there are some bioethical limitations in Hippocrates' oath (Carpentier and Mangin-Lazarus 1996: 33). For instance, when Nazi physicians appeared in the Nuremberg court trials in 1947, arguing that their criminal experiments on prisoners had been performed for the sake of the advancement of medical science, the prosecution was forced to draft new rules of ethics according to which these physicians could be convicted.

It is not unrealistic to consider that Nazi madness remains a potential prolongation for a science erecting itself as an absolute end.

After all, it was a mere caricature of that we can observe on all continents: what should we think about an American doctor doing a lethal injection to a condemned person, an Iranian surgeon performing a very clean amputation of a thief's hand, or a Soviet psychiatrist labelling political opposition as 'mad-

ness'? None of all this is foreign to us.<sup>1</sup> (Carpentier and Mangin-Lazarus 1996: 33)

## Visible Power (4): The Drift to Bioeconomics

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With its endemic growth in poor countries, the AIDS epidemic reminds humanity that the eradication of the most dreadful diseases requires efforts far beyond the current investment on North-South cooperation. The perspective of 'health for all' in a discernible future, which was the motto of a worldwide implementation of medical facilities 50 years ago, has now faded—even though the public is occasionally given a ride to the dreamland of sophisticated genetic therapies.<sup>2</sup> '(G)overnments must provide cost effective services to prevent and treat their nation's most pressing health problems, and so reduce the disproportionate burden of disease on the poor and help economic growth' (The World Health Report 1999). However,

[...] it marks a significant shift in the WHO's stance from its declaration in 1978 that health was 'a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease' towards a realistic acceptance of the need to set priorities to make the best use of resources for all within society. 'Choices have to be made, and they must be made in a way that involves the people,' said David Nabarro, head of the WHO's roll back malaria project, at a launch of the report in London. (Brown 1999: 1305)

In pointing out the 'new apartheid' created by a selective access to high-cost biotechnologies, Papart et al. (1999) share Illich's (1999b) concern about health becoming the new consumer's good for fuelling the economics of affluent societies in which most basic material needs have been fulfilled.

This could be a way of interpreting the new paradigm of health as hoped and prayed for by former Director-General of the World Health Organization, Dr Hirochi Nakajima: health should be repositioned, not at the peripheral, but at the very core of economics.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it should quit the maintenance factory of the human production device, in which it had been confined for thirty

years, and enter by right the business sphere to become the new privileged consumption object.<sup>4</sup> (Papart et al. 1999: 29)

In developing countries, realistic measures entail the revitalization of indigenous health systems through a beneficial collaboration with cosmopolitan medicine. In ethno-pharmacological research, for instance, a partnership is sought between local healers and experts trained in modern medicine. Behind the scenes, however, there might operate a less humanitarian pressure of industrial laboratories with vested interests. The preparations of indigenous healers may suddenly become 'illicit' when new products based on synthesized molecules that have been identified by pharmaceutical companies as active elements of medicinal herbs are patented and marketed at prices most patients cannot afford. This appropriation of medical knowledge by multinational companies, or 'bio-piracy' (ibid.) occurred in several developing countries. It came to the notice of the Indian media when there was an explicit apprehension regarding the patenting of *neem* products under the 1947 General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) agreement, leading to an amendment of the existing Patents Act in early 1995 (Namgyal 1995: 31).

Today, economic studies provide quantitative data to support political decisions, while less and less attention is paid to qualitative factors such as the fulfilment of the primary needs of all citizens, irrespective of their social status. Understandably, this shift from ethics, and from political to economic decision-making procedures, raises concerns about the ethical values left behind. As a consequence, bioethics emerged as the underpinning for decision-makers for policies that could have long-term dramatic effects, particularly when faced with people better informed by the media coverage of biotechnologies and medical research. The management of HIV blood contamination during the 1980s in France (Steffen 1999) epitomizes a power game involving the filtering of information and the denial of responsibilities for the sake of an economic logic in which the losers were the 'beneficiaries' of medical facilities.

Recent and dramatic changes in the organization of health care—the rapid proliferation of managed care and the growth of for-profit medicine—have shattered the illusion that clinical interaction is unaffected by the organization and financing of

medical services. It is now plain that non-clinical variables affect what goes on in the clinic and that there is a need to extend the ethical gaze to larger questions about the structure of care delivery. (DeVries 1999)

## Invisible Power (1): Bioethics as an Outgrowth of Dominant Values

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The above examples serve to illustrate medical power as an array of political and economic coercions established by an elite under the banner of Science in an ostensibly pluralistic power-model, but according to which social order is perpetuated as an equilibrium of forces—in other words, all forms of power are ‘visible’ and subject to social control. Following this model, social interventions based on ‘the universalism of autonomy, rationality and rights’ (Jennings 1998: 258; Wolpe 1998) should regulate the system or empower citizens to modify it. In reality, this pluralistic approach is reduced in scope to an examination and legitimization of the dominant social system.

This notion of autonomy in bioethics carries with a corresponding understanding of culture and society as an external environment of use values, epiphenomena as it were, ontologically and morally secondary to the rational individual. (Jennings 1998: 258)

What more interpretive analytic methods allow us to observe, instead, is a consensus-building process comprising multiple, invisible layers of repression against cultural traits competing with dominant world views. Wolf (1996: 86) calls the dominant ideology ‘an ethics of the universal’—*de facto* Christian ethics in the industrialized world ‘... glorifying maxims and moral values as a matter of rule, firmly rooted in the order of power, in the proper logics of master-slave dialectics’.<sup>5</sup> What prevails in this vision is the status of patients as isolated, hence autonomous, subjects (Beauchamp and Childress 1994). The isolation of patients is an underlying bias of all modern psychotherapies, according to which:

- (a) madness is a sort of ‘disease’;
- (b) like all diseases it resides in the ‘subject’—her psyche (psychoanalysis and its innumerable by-products), her bio-

logy (psycho-pharmacology), sediments of her individual story ('existentialism'), side-effects of her education ('bio-energy', 'Gestalt-therapy', 'transactional analysis').<sup>6</sup> (Nathan 1995: 10)

Integrating the 'ethics of the universal' into a secular framework gave way to bioethics, here meaning a process of regulation between the medical establishment and citizens concerned with the encroachment of medicine on their civil rights. From this angle, American bioethics (by extension, bioethics in the globalized world) appears to be an ideological enterprise whose aim is 'the normative reconciliation of corporate and technological power with individual, personal freedom' (Jennings 1998: 258). For instance, bioethics is expected to address the divergence between the logics of massive immunization (protecting a population) and individual perceptions of what is the safest:

There is a tendency for governments to decide whether or not to offer routine vaccination on the basis of arguments of financial cost, whereas individuals decide whether or not to accept vaccination on the basis of their perception of the risks involved. Furthermore, some vaccines impart, or appear to impart, a degree of indirect protection to non-vaccinated individuals in the community. For both of these reasons, public motives concerning vaccination differ from those of the individual. [...] It is found that, under a broad range of conditions, rational informed individuals would 'choose' a lower vaccine uptake than would the community if it acted as a whole. (Fine and Clarkson 1986: 1012)

This concept of bioethics '[came] along with the kind of agenda that was wholly compatible with that of liberalism' (Callahan 1993).

The absolute (as in the absolute authority of the Church) was rejected in favor of the pragmatic. The transcendental (as in explanations of the meaning of life or of ultimate good and evil) was put aside in favor of rational processes as the means of ameliorating human circumstances. Reason was equated with virtue, impulse with the root of evil, and the individual was prized over the community. As Niebuhr<sup>7</sup> argued, American ethics developed in close conformity with the dominant bourgeois culture so that the Christian ideal of love, for example, was transformed into 'the counsel of prudent mutuality so dear and necessary to a complex commercial civilization' [...] (ibid.: S8)



Thus, the political and economic dimensions of bioethics may be directly linked with the ideology that propelled North American culture towards its domineering position. American bioethics consolidated its social market

[...] by conceptualizing individual autonomy, and an autonomy-centered ethic, in such a way that social and cultural realities should be seen (from a moral point of view) as resources of the self, as the means of realizing individual will and purpose. (Jennings 1998: 258)

In sum, bioethics conveys its own understanding of society and the self—its own *sociology*. It is the task of social scientists to shift the focus from the sociology *in* bioethics to the sociology *of* bioethics, which requires a critical assessment of the discipline itself:

When a sociologist reads bioethics, watches a bioethicist at work, or looks at the place of bioethics in the health care system, two questions keep presenting themselves, questions that, despite their importance, seem of little interest to bioethicists: (a) How does an issue get defined as ‘bioethical’? (b) Who speaks for bioethics? (DeVries and Conrad 1998: 234–35)

## Invisible Power (2): Surreptitious Violence

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As a consensus-building process, bioethics is deeply rooted in an insidious dimension of power, ‘the unlimited power of the majority’ envisioned by Tocqueville (1835) in his analysis of American society:

Thought is an invisible and subtle power that mocks all the efforts of tyranny. At the present time the most absolute monarchs in Europe cannot prevent certain opinions hostile to their authority from circulating in secret through their dominions, and even in their courts. It is not so in America, as long as the majority is still undecided, discussion is carried on; but as soon as its decision is irrevocably pronounced, everyone is silent, and the friends as well as the opponents of the measure unite in assenting to its propriety.

Evading conflicts is an aspect of the 'hidden violence' exerted today on citizens to make them believe that any political or social problem can be settled in consensus. Another aspect of hidden violence is the denial of exploitation that has been instrumental in the construction of industrial/colonial societies.<sup>8</sup> There is striking evidence of it in the way industrialists promoted technomedicine in response to the contradiction of 'Health and Wealth' postulated by 19th century hygienists.

The conflict between health and wealth reached such a breaking point in the mid-century that wealth was threatened by bad health. 'The consumption of human life as a combustible for the production of wealth'<sup>9</sup> led first in the English cities, then in the continental ones, to a veritable 'energy crisis.' The men, as everyone said constantly, were of poor quality. It could not go on like that. The cities could not go on being death chambers and cesspools, the poor being wretched, ignorant, bug-ridden, contagious vagabonds. The revival and extension of exploitation (or prosperity, if you prefer) required a better-educated population and clean, airy, rebuilt cities, with drains, fountains, schools, parks, gymnasiums, dispensaries, day nurseries. (Latour 1988: 18)

The humanitarian discourse of the hygienists was used as a smokescreen to cover the gloomy reality of class domination:

[...] factory owners and businessmen began to fund mass campaigns against disease as and when it was in their economic interests to do so. [...] By providing health services, which were in the immediate interest of both workers and owners, businessmen succeeded in diverting attention from the exploitative processes which were a constant source of conflict between the two groups. Health care thus became a service which could be used by those in power to suppress unrest among the workers. (Sathyamala et al. 1986: 95)

The authors cite the example of industrialist John D. Rockefeller, who developed public health measures in the southern states of America whose economy had stagnated following the abolition of slave labour. The same strategy of domination under the pretext of social welfare, moral elevation and public health (which I would call the three main ingredients of 'civilization') was put in action when Western countries needed to expand their colonial empires:

Western countries conquered other countries so that they could exploit them for their raw materials and labour. In country after country colonizers created health problems by changing cropping patterns, cutting jungles, building dams and used medicine whenever disease threatened to slow down or halt their economic activity. In country after country they exploited the local population and simultaneously created a kind-hearted image for themselves by providing health care for the very problems they had created. (Sathyamala et al. 1986: 96)

In the post-colonial era and the New World Order, the concept of 'humanitarian aid' is becoming predominant in the collective representation of the underdeveloped world.

A simple idea—a humiliated and exploited Third World—has given the way to another, equally simplistic, idea, that of a lost and hopeless Third World. [...] Thus, emergency has become a founding principle replacing, and even devaluating, cooperation and assistance to development.<sup>10</sup> (Grandbesançon 1996: 116)

Grandbesançon further deplores that these Western sanitary 'strike forces', ethnocentric in essence, do not tackle the roots of problems such as poverty, social injustice and political violence. Humanitarian aid, therefore, works to limit social/economical violence without disturbing the system that generates the discontent.

## Invisible Power (3): Informed Consent

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Community-based management of health is quickly disappearing in urban areas, being replaced with an anonymous, distant linkage between health practitioners and institutions, on the one hand, and patients and their communities, on the other (Rothman 1991).

The overall transition of the locus of health care from the community-based primary care practitioner to institutional management [...] has shifted the patient–physician interaction from a generalized exchange in an organic setting (the community) to a restricted (market) exchange in a bureaucratic setting [...] Where 'organic' trust is scarce, rituals of trust naturally emerge.

Informed consent is the modern clinical ritual of trust. (Wolpe 1998: 50)

In this set-up, the physician informs the patient about the nature of the problem, standard procedures and associated risks, and the patient responds trustingly by 'allowing the physician to invade his or her bodily integrity despite the knowledge of risks' (ibid.). The intention is to hand over responsibility for the treatment to the therapist in exchange for a 'certificate' of non-maleficence with regard to the patient's case.

Nonetheless, 'physicians remain the medical experts we turn to as a society for definitions of disease' (Wolpe 1998: 52). Information is filtered and presented in a manner that will prompt the response that the medical practitioner already expects. For instance, a birthing woman may be proposed an epidural with the explanation that 'it will speed up labour': the missing piece of information is that analgesia actually slows down labour and, at the same time, facilitates the use of induction drugs, provoking unbearably painful contractions for which analgesia is almost unavoidable.

Informed consent may in fact 'shift the sense of responsibility for bad outcomes partially onto the shoulders of the patient, a desirable shift in an age of malpractice suits' (ibid.: 53). This stratagem is illustrated by the 'hygienist' approach:

For example: stress + bad nutrition + tobacco + high blood pressure = infarctus. The patient is incited to stop smoking in order to reduce the probability of an infarctus. However, if s/he gets an infarctus we will tell her/him that s/he should have changed nutrition, whereas if s/he does not get an infarctus we will consider that s/he was saved by quitting smoking.<sup>11</sup> (Dikeakos et al. 1996: 92)

Informed consent reduces autonomy to a 'negative right': patients may *refuse* treatments but they cannot demand specific ones.

Give someone the right not to sign something, and then signing it becomes a clear symbol of autonomous choice. Autonomy can thus be upheld and dispensed in a ritual that reinforces the freedom of medical decision making without disturbing its underlying structural impediments. (Wolpe 1998: 51)

This particular way of viewing the patient's autonomy is consistent with the 'less State the better' slogan of liberalism—

their point being that when patients are granted this type of freedom, the government itself can restrict its role to monitoring and regulating the content of care.

Bioethics, established medicine, and the government all conspire to speak in economic terms about patient responsibility and the patient as 'consumer' and thereby avoid their responsibility for reform or critique of the assumptions underlying health care. (Fox 1994, cited by Wolpe 1998: 53)

In recent years, physicians have used patient autonomy as an argument against the erosion of their (physicians') authority over the content of care in the face of State or managed care companies (Wolpe 1998: 53). In France, a petition in support of 'therapeutic freedom' was circulated by homoeopaths opposing the ban of 500 preparations based on animal matter. The signatories did not realize that the ban is on with a potency lower than 4CH which very few of them, if any, would ever use.

## Invisible Power (4): Holism

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Many middle-class consumers in rich countries feel attracted to 'alternative' medical systems because these systems claim to follow a 'holistic' approach to health and healing. However, 'holism', in this context, relates to a symbolic system of sentimental, *individual* values, very remote from the holistic approach—advocated by the World Health Organization's International Conference on Primary Health Care at Alma-Ata on 12 September 1978—which encompassed psychological, social and economic factors as multiple indicators of the 'health' of individuals, in particular, and of entire populations, in general. Low correlations between expenditure and results even in affluent nations with rigorous public health policies support the argument that health may not exclusively rely on economic and technical factors.<sup>12</sup>

A world of optimal and widespread health is obviously a world of minimal and only occasional medical intervention. Healthy people are those who live in healthy homes on a healthy diet in an environment equally fit for birth, growth, work, healing, and

dying; they are sustained by a culture that enhances the conscious acceptance of limits to population, of ageing, of incomplete recovery and ever-imminent death. (Illich 1999a)

The need for 'holistic therapies' is fuelled by the belief that medical power is dependent entirely on the subjugation of conventional medical practice by positivist, universal, 'inhuman' sciences. Holistic treatment, on the other hand, is seen as emblematic of a pragmatic, customized medical practice based on the satisfaction of the individual, irrespective of whether or not that practice has been scientifically validated. Urban social elites can afford this 'soft' medicine, given that, should the holistic approach fail in their eyes, they are free to ring the allopath's bell. This dichotomy between 'holistic' and 'scientific' is entirely foreign to the notion of holism that had emerged from the Alma-Ata Declaration (WHO 1978). It is the cornerstone of the power game between 'cosmopolitan' and 'alternative' medical systems as providers of health care in competition with each other. A proper articulation of medical practice and medical science requires a better awareness of the political dimensions of medical discourse.

[...] the absence of a political dimension replaces the project of medicine with *an ideal of the Good which is quite problematic*. Not only because it is an ideal, but also because it is based on values of selection and well-being grounded in biological norms, with no relation whatsoever with the 'speaking human body,' i.e. the thinking subject.<sup>13</sup> (Mangin-Lazarus 1996: 103–4)

## Invisible Power (5): Cultivating Submission

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Generally speaking, medicine demands submission. Otherwise, how could we explain that, in a hospital, patients are almost continually kept in bed, and at least they must be in bed during the visit of the head physician, although in more than three quarter of the cases their health state does not require full-time rest in bed?<sup>14</sup> (Lemoine 1996: 102)

A psychiatrist posted in Tahiti complained about the lack of collaboration of patients:

As it faces this daily hassle, these repeated failures, medicine sometimes finds no other way to treat patients than taking legal action. [...] But what can we say about a medicine which is imposed by force? What about the therapeutic alliance and all these (indeed a bit outdated) theories which state that healing is to a great extent based on the patient's confidence in his/her physician?<sup>15</sup> (Benoist 1996: 437)

In a critical study of long-term psychiatric rehabilitation and social integration programmes, Dikeakos et al. (1996: 91) raise the problem of patients being confronted by a normative code of conduct that dictates their ability, or otherwise, to be freed from psychiatric confinement:

What is expected from patients *on the way to rehabilitation* is more severe than what is expected from *normal* people. Innocent or slightly deviating behaviour, such as intoxication or excessive curiosity, or even vital reactions such as anger or sorrow, are often symptomized and castigated.<sup>16</sup>

The rehabilitation process reflects an epistemological shift

[... which] amounts to replacing the ordinary semiology of madness (psychotic symptom, low IQ, deficient inhibition, instability of feelings etc.) with another system of criteria (obedience, collaboration, personal care, social behaviour) belonging to the domain of aesthetics and in the same time referring to the lunatic asylum.<sup>17</sup> (ibid.: 92)

Thus, the categorization system behind rehabilitation is based on 'a representation of all different parts of the split-up subject projected on a single one, that of social aptness'.<sup>18</sup>

Rehabilitation is a response to confinement, not to madness. In reality, the incurable exorcised by theory comes back through the window of practice, and a set of procedures borrowed from traditional psychiatry follows the patient with the aim of safeguarding his/her sickness in a corner of his/her existence. (ibid.)

[...] The power of the therapist does not disappear during the patient's *liberation* process; it becomes diffused in the latter's interactions with preventive care institutions.<sup>19</sup> (ibid.: 95–96)

## Invisible Power (6): Rationality in Medical Science

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Several contributors (notably Benoist 1996; Gallali 1996) to an issue of the *Médecine Tropicale* journal dedicated to ethnopsychiatry, share concerns about the dominance of a uniform conceptual framework that is unable to grasp the real-world diversity of social and psychological situations. Ethnopsychiatry (*psychiatrie transculturelle* in former French colonies and among the immigrant population of metropolitan France) played a significant role in rethinking the relations between patients, therapists, healing practices or prescriptions, and a changing social environment in which modern belief systems were integrated into, or subverted by, local ones. In his remarkable essay 'What it is to be Human,' Wolff (1994) pointed out typical cases of miscommunication that he had encountered during his career as an American psychologist during his stint with tribal populations in Malaysia and other culturally remote places.

The difficulty in dealing with contradicting and inconsistent cultural models lies in the compulsive search for a secure webbing of rationality—the major legitimization process of scientific medicine:

[...] the individual [...] being in an incessant confrontation with the Other, the Alien, our close neighbour, must get over naive and dangerous ethnocentricity, the one that would consist of pushing one's own model of rationality as an absolute.<sup>20</sup> (Boussat et al. 1996: 460)

Rationality in the natural sciences is the search for causative links. However, the observation of complex living systems in a complex environment often provides nothing more than correlations with respect to time precedence, for instance, between heavy smoking and lung cancer. As Harris (1995) puts it in an imaginary dialogue, there is no proved causal link, and an obstinate smoker might as well argue:

I have a hunch that stress causes cancer, and stressed-out people take up smoking to try to relieve the stress, and that's why there is more cancer in smokers, not because of smoking.



[...] Smoking is just a marker for stress—what you scientists call a ‘proxy variable.’

Harris (1995) comments:

In the medical sciences, assembling an irrefutable argument for causation is sometimes an impossible task for the same reason it is in astronomy or paleontology: the direct and definitive experiment cannot be done. Scientists cannot travel back in time to watch dinosaurs, nor can they influence the behavior of planets or stars. In medicine, a common difficulty is that the necessary human interventive experiments to perfectly assess ‘risk factors’ for harm may be unethical, and so these risks cannot be studied directly by experiment either. [...] How, then, do we come to ‘know’ what things cause lung cancer or AIDS? For that matter, how do we come to know with any confidence that tyrannosaurs ate meat, or what generates the sun’s energy? In other words: how do we ever infer causation from looking at events (or records of events) which we cannot influence?

## The Power of Dominant Paradigms

In the absence of indisputable causal links, the power of explanatory theories lies in their compliance with dominant paradigms. In 1847, Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis (1818–65) established that, in the obstetrical rooms visited by professors and students immediately after working on anatomies, the percentage of mortality (often through post-natal or post-abortion puerperal fever) among women having delivered would come down from 12.2% to 2.3% if attendants washed their hands with chlorinated lime water (Wikipedia 2006). These recommendations provoked a hue and cry. Vienna’s medical society turned so hostile to his findings that Semmelweis was forced out of the Maternity Hospital and eventually out of Austria itself. He finished his career in a provincial hospital in Hungary (*ibid.*).

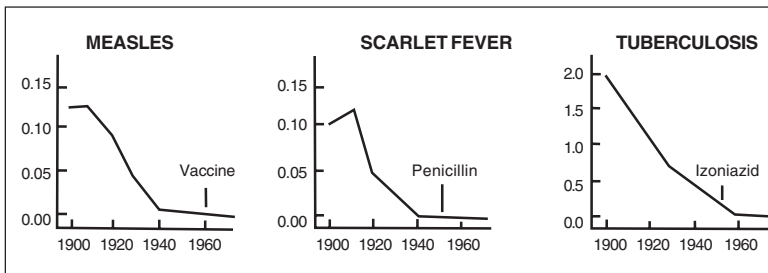
Commenting on Semmelweis, whom he calls the first historical rigorous, clinical experimentalist, epidemiologist Berrino (1996: 76) writes:

Unfortunately, the greatest empirical evidence cannot overcome the inertia of a dominating paradigm unless it is supported

by efficient mediatic manoeuvres [...] Still today, down-to-earth analogies are often more efficient than rigorous trials in instigating clinical practice; the use of many basic medicines is justified by deterministic considerations on their mechanism of activity and on planned observations of their efficiency.<sup>21</sup>

As another example of methodological bias, Berrino (*ibid.*) emphasizes that the decline in infectious diseases had started long before vaccination and chemotherapy. Sathyamala et al. comments on the evolution of the mortality rates of nine common diseases.

**Figure 2.1**  
**Decrease in Mortality Rates due to Infectious Diseases in relation to Specific Medical Measures for the USA, 1900–1973.**



**Source:** Sathyamala et al. 1986: 110, quoted from Conrad and Kern 1981: 19–25.

These findings invalidate the dominant belief that it is pharmacology that has eradicated infectious diseases. Similarly, publications by Delbet (1964, original 1915), a member of the Academy of Medicine in Paris, and his student, Neveu (1932), were withdrawn from the libraries. Both of them had reported the positive effects of magnesium chloride/hydroxide on poliomyelitis, diphtheria and tetanus, apprehending that they would have preventive effects on cancer. Their idea of enhancing the vitality of cells and increasing organic resistance to infections was in conflict with the dominant virological approach and its implementation in massive vaccination campaigns.

Berrino (1996: 79) deplores the prevalence of bacteriological studies—that sought a single cause for a single effect—on

statistical studies that correlated pathologies with the behaviours of individuals and their social-biological environments. In recent years, the focus on virological research (plus, arguably, corporate lobbying) has discouraged studies of environmental issues to such an extent that the study of a correlation between lung cancer and addiction to tobacco arrived very belatedly on the research agenda. Berrino (1996: 79) outlines two mutually exclusive paradigms—one of molecular biology, the other of epidemiology:

The first one asserts that the discovery of molecular mechanisms will simultaneously solve therapeutic problems and prevention problems. The second one brings to front the knowledge of causes of cancer in the environment and politically supports efforts towards the eradication of risk factors; it pays little attention to the lack of an accurate explanation of mechanisms involved in the process. [...]

Market-driven economical forces involved in the business of prevention fight for the first option; on the other side, we find a movement for people's participation in health policies which refuses to delegate its power.<sup>22</sup> [...]

## Is Causality an Indisputable Basis for Rationality?

Scientific medicine staged its 'inaugurative show' in 1784, when a committee nominated by the French king, Louis XVI, discussed Franz Anton Mesmer's theory of 'vital fluid'. The rebuttal of Mesmerian magnetism was based on the 'negative power of experimentation' whereby the assessment of a practitioner's qualification depends upon apprehending a negative response in an experimental set-up aimed at disqualifying him/her as a quack (Stengers 1995: 118ff). For instance, the committee that rejected his thesis objected that no scientific instrument had ever detected anything resembling 'vital fluid'. Therefore, the committee said, the phenomenon at work with the patients of Deslon (Mesmer's colleague) should not be called vital fluid, but an identified cause, external to the procedure, called 'imagination'. Botanist Antoine Laurent de Jussieu was the only member who raised strong objections to the value of this conclusion, arguing that it amounted to swapping two concepts—'imagination' vs. 'vital fluid'—both out of the reach of empirical procedures (ibid.: 121). In effect, a scientific investigation was diverted into a semantic debate.

Techno-scientific medicine regularly needs to enact ritualistic denunciations of 'quacks'. The distinction between a quack and an orthodox doctor does not lie in the former's inability to cure people. (Indeed, a number of patients had effectively been cured by Mesmer—the problem lay in the absence of an explanatory theory.)

Medical discourse talks about *sickness* with a determination to stay with objective facts, measure them, prevent them and never get beyond them, which is characteristic of positivism. It ties up with scientism in the belief that 'it can explain everything' as well as in its enrollment at the service of a political vision that makes it closer to religion.<sup>23</sup> (Wolf 1996: 84)

Proving the efficacy of a clinical procedure amounts to demonstrating that it is more effective than the administration of an 'inactive substance'—a placebo. Quacks and placebos are the indispensable referrals against which medical rationality ascertains itself.

Both Pasteur and Koch were successful in rationalizing clinical procedures on infectious diseases after shifting their focus from human immune mechanisms (the 'terrain') to microbial activity (Stengers 1995: 131). Microbes can be cultivated *in vitro* and manipulated in reproducible experiments that often lead to irrefutable explanations. Human processes (such as 'imagination'), on the other hand, are invalidated for causal chains because they lack identifiable variables that can be altered to determine their correlations with the effects. (Stengers 1995: 139)

Causality in modern medicine is still based on a pattern inherited from physics and chemistry: the dissipative activity of a system *close to equilibrium* is entirely determined by its exchanges with the environment. For instance, to describe the activity of a mixture of gases in a container, all we need to know is its temperature, volume and pressure, plus the exchange of heat and mechanical energy with the environment of the container. What happens inside is a set of collisions between molecules whose average speed can be calculated from the global parameters. When Ilya Prigogine (1961) studied the thermodynamics of systems remote from equilibrium (dissipative structures), he pointed out that these systems could display 'self-organization' (a temporary decrease of entropy) that are not exclusively deter-

mined by the usual variables of their environment. For instance, Bénard cells, which are convection cells that appear spontaneously in a liquid following the application of heat from below, is dependent on gravitation, which could be neglected when the system is close to equilibrium.

The sensitivity of a system remote from equilibrium to factors which were insignificant or negligible at the point of equilibrium is conceptually a very important discovery. It means in fact that the status of 'cause' is not stated once forever when we try to describe or predict the behaviour [of a system]. It is the very activity of the system which decides what [variable] should be granted the status of a cause, and how it will have an effect on the system ('how this cause will cause').<sup>24</sup> (Stengers 1995: 144)

Thus, the study of systems far from equilibrium has shown that experimental causal proofs may be challenged without invoking a 'power of initiative' that is specific of living subjects. Unstable systems are in no manner the prerogative of biological systems alone, and their dynamic behaviour is also subject to unpredictability. Stengers writes (1997: 29):

Prigogine's approach has been criticized by physicists who prefer to think that a chaotic system is deterministic, even if this determinism must appeal directly to divine knowledge. But chaotic systems mark the point where the ideal of sufficient reason *can* be abandoned without arbitrariness, where this abandonment does not signify a renunciation of a 'better knowledge that is in principle possible'.

This is why the sciences must not only be seen as expressing reason as authority and judge, but also be understood as expressing reason as adventure. (Stengers 1997: 30)

Causality provides a new conceptual basis for alternative medical practices to walk into either trap—feuding with cosmopolitan medicine, or anti-scientific obscurantism.

Healing, as well as social or educational assistance, is a confrontation with real things in people's lives. Here, the outcomes of a scientific approach are reductionist, if not unproductive: for life is also speech, movement, modifications beyond any attempt to master it.<sup>25</sup> (Carpentier and Mangin-Lazarus 1996: 14)

At both the microscopic and macroscopic levels, the sciences of nature are thus liberated from a narrow conception of objective reality, which believes that it must in principle deny novelty and diversity in the name of an unchanging universal law. They are freed from a fascination that represented rationality as closed, and knowledge as in the process of completion. They are from now on open to unpredictability, no longer viewed in terms of an imperfect knowledge, or of insufficient control. Thus, they are open to a dialogue with a nature that cannot be dominated by a theoretical gaze, but must be explored, with an open world to which we belong, in whose construction we participate. (Stengers and Prigogine 1997: 40)

## The Power of 'Inactive' Substances

In a provocative disclosure of the 'mysteries of placebo', psychiatrist Lemoine (1996) reported experiments measuring the active effects of placebos—neutral substances or therapeutic procedures, including surgery and psychological techniques. Improvement after the administration of placebos was observed in 6–18% cases (Parkinson's disease), 30% (anxiety), 4–86% (pain), 51–60% (blood pressure), up to 80% (chronic arthritis) (Stengers and Prigogine 1997: 47).

The 'placebo effect' is not dependent on beliefs or intellectual acceptance, since it is observed among medical doctors and patients involved in the preparation and randomization of test material, and among uneducated people, infants, and even pet animals. Generally speaking, physicians, nurses and hospitals, and patients with a 'positive' orientation to drugs, are more likely to respond favourably to placebos than patients with a 'negative' orientation. The latter may deny any benefit or complain of untoward effects—which, in effect, turns a 'placebo' into a 'nocebo'.

In their experiment with dental surgery, Levine et al. (1978) observed that a placebo used as a painkiller could be rendered ineffective if administered along with naloxone, an alkaloid antagonist of morphine and opiates. This proved that, in such a situation, the placebo substance had triggered the production of endorphins—opioid biochemical compounds produced by the pituitary gland and the hypothalamus, working as 'painkillers' in vertebrates. Administering naloxone annihilated their effect. However,

since naloxone does not inhibit hypnotic analgesia (Goldstein and Hilgard 1975), the endorphin explanation may not stand as a generalized theory. Lemoine suggests (1996: 88),

None the less, alternative hypotheses could be imagined, notably the ones based on the physiology of natural defense mechanisms, since the placebo effect represents, by definition, the direct consequence of a natural defense mechanism enhanced, or at least undisturbed, by medicine.<sup>26</sup>

Placebos play a central role in clinical research, being used as the neutral reference in double-masked tests to prove the activeness, or otherwise, of a substance. In a double-masked protocol, neither the patient nor the therapist must be told whether it is the active substance or the placebo that has been administered. However, Ederer (1975) and many others (e.g. White et al. 1992) question the validity of this procedure, on the grounds that in many situations both the subject and the therapist are able to make a correct guess and lift up the veil covering the procedure. This is notably the case with patients who have been informed that they *might* be administered a placebo. Not surprisingly, then, many trials end up overstating the ‘positive’ effects of medications.

Ederer’s persuasive statement is that research rests on its laurels with this type of protocol, so the double-masked test procedure might end up as one of the greatest scientific disappointments of this century.<sup>27</sup> (Lemoine 1996: 189)

## Self-reliance vs Dependency on Curative Systems

Observations on placebo highlight the great significance of unarticulated communication in a therapist-patient interaction—rituals of prescription, the magic of words, the influence of the colours, the shapes of pills, etc (Lemoine 1996: 49) However, there is a tendency for each specialist to understate placebo relevance to his/her own discipline.

The placebo effect is an unpopular topic. In complementary medicine, the ‘aura of quackery’, linked to any discussion of the

placebo effect is, for many, too close for comfort. At a recent conference titled 'Placebo: Probing the Self-Healing Brain' Lawrence Sullivan, a historian of religion at Harvard Divinity School, noted: 'Nobody wants to own it. Even shamans and witch doctors would be offended by the idea that their healing powers depended on the placebo effect.' Harvard Medical School anthropologist Arthur Kleinman asked: 'Why is the placebo regarded as pejorative? Is it threatening to medicine?' (Thomson 1995).

This bias is even stronger with disciplines such as homoeopathy, which could be a candidate for the most sophisticated and successful placebo-therapy (ibid.: 175ff) or, alternatively, 'a branch of psychology' (Pignarre 2000).

Lemoine's conclusions are rather subversive and consistent with his commitment to reducing prescriptions of psychotropic drugs in France (second in the global list of psychotropic drugs consumers).

If sickness is an alienation, a loss of autonomy and freedom, then the placebo effect must be a liberation as it represents the capacity for anybody to activate one's own healing resources. Isn't facilitating natural healing processes one of the missions of medicine?<sup>28</sup> (Lemoine 1996: 98)

However, the implications of putting self-healing processes at centre stage still need to be investigated. What is advocated instead by the counter-powers of 'alternative' medicines (homoeopathy, phytotherapy, osteopathy and the battalion of indigenous practices) is the concept of 'soft medicine', whereby 'natural' remedies display no side effects—a dubious statement since even placebos are known to produce side effects.

'Soft medicines' in the West, and indigenous health systems in developing countries, work as mere substitutes to allopathy in that they do not question (and, in some cases, actually reinforce) patient-therapist dependency, which nurtures relations of power under the camouflage of physician 'responsibility'. The encroachment of medication (both hard and soft) on the daily lives of 'civilized' humans is so misleading that, in recent decades, therapeutic interference appropriated space with regard to non-pathological situations: birthing, dying, nutrition and



reproduction—typically those involving natural resources and prompting responses genetically encoded in human behaviour. (See Odent 1986; Tew 1998; and the discussion in Bel et al. 1999)

The battlefield of ‘naturopathy’ versus allopathy is a veritable map of human experience, with (disputed) demarcations between physiological and pathological processes, the latter comprising instances in which the human body is unable to accomplish its regenerative process. These demarcations determine rituals and procedures that legitimize a particular medical system in the eyes of its service providers and consumers. But what if there were no lines at all? If our dependency on curative systems and the increasing demand of ‘perfect health’ (Illich 1999b) were nothing other than the by-products of ‘development’?

## Conclusion

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The purpose of this essay was not to be exhaustive on the multifarious facets of the medical appropriation of power by individuals and institutions in health and health care. Only a few of them have been exposed in this paper, the aim being to illustrate the method propounded by this book in the domain of communication studies. It has hopefully become clear that this method rests upon three categories defined in the general introduction as specific to the constitution of humankind.

In the **FIRST CATEGORY**, we consider with Lévi-Strauss (1960: xlvii) that the symbolic function of the human mind, the agency of symbolization, inserts itself as a distinct order of reality interpolating itself between humans as biological entities in Nature and the rest of Nature. Symbolization creates the paradigm of humankind by designing the rapports between humans and Nature—and between humans and humans by binding them into collectives and societies.

In this regard, the reader may have caught sight of a restatement of the problematic relation between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. A critical approach to bioethics relocates the significance of these concepts: while cultural processes appear to be partly determined by biological exigencies, ‘nature’ is envisaged as a social construct—the existence of an immutable and universal phenomenological world.

The **SECOND CATEGORY** is that of symbolic forms. The essay shows how the symbolic function of the human mind draws upon varying cultural representations and values of a given civilizational context to turn practices relating to the maintenance of human life into symbolic contingencies with a double outcome.

**Outcome I:** The symbolic markers are forms that incorporate meanings and ideologies of various sorts. What matters to social scientists is the manner in which this opposition between 'nature' and 'culture' operates in the prevailing ideologies of health care. A few hints have been provided—along with the assertion that patients are autonomous agents in a medical system that is at the service of a liberal economic framework.

**Outcome II:** The symbolic markers are operators of systems of social communication, binding all sorts of individuals and collective agents, from patients to pharmaceutical corporations and research institutes. The second half of this paper was an attempt to focus on viewpoints on 'natural' processes, with the purpose of highlighting their instrumentalization by techno-scientific medicine: commonsensical notions of health and healing, and the use of rationality to legitimize medical practice as a scientifically-dependable technology.

[...] a new humanism should address the dynamic tensions between individuals and communities; between critical reason and the search for meanings; between the transformation of nature and the respect of the biosphere; between technical progress and the awareness of its potential destructive effects. In order to resist the fantasy of post-humanity,<sup>29</sup> any restatement [of humanism] should fully take into account the mutation of information (...) and the revolution of [biotechnology] that, in their systemic relation, deeply affect the points of reference of our human 'habitat'. Indeed, both the way we live in the world and the way we live in our bodies are being transformed, hitting our innermost intimacy, at the time an imperceptible drift is taking place from assisted procreation towards the fabrication of human beings.<sup>30</sup> (Viveret 2000: 27)

But once the instrumentalization of symbolic forms has been perceived as serving vested interests, the established orders of

social communication can be exposed to criticism and subjected to renegotiation.

The **THIRD CATEGORY** at the heart of communication processes is power. Eventually, the invention of health care symbolic markers, and the habitus of social systems of communication based on health representations and medical practices, is subject to parameters of social authority for the authentication of knowledge, economic clout for the enforcing of medical goods and services, and, ultimately, political strength for the framing and implementing of health care public policies and the control of the entire health constituency. In this regard, bioethics does not actually empower individuals—it just betrays them with ersatz autonomy. The possibility of choice for the few cannot really be construed as a potential for innovation for the many.

The recovery from society-wide iatrogenic [doctor-made] disease is a political task, not a professional one. It must be based on a grassroots consensus about the balance between the civil liberty to heal and the civil right to equitable health care. [...] Society has transferred to physicians the exclusive right to determine what constitutes sickness, who is or might become sick, and what shall be done to such people. Deviance is now 'legitimate' only when it merits and ultimately justifies medical interpretation and intervention. The social commitment to provide all citizens with almost unlimited outputs from the medical system threatens to destroy the environmental and cultural conditions needed by people to live a life of constant autonomous healing. This trend must be recognized and eventually be reversed. (Illich 1976: 6)

Ultimately, we believe that positive changes in the understanding of health and healing processes cannot be found in the refurbishment of 'traditional', 'alternative' or 'holistic' medicines, which fail to critically address the concept of disease and the dependency of patients on providers of healthcare. As suggested by Pignarre (1999), the potential for a change might reside in overlapping areas of the medical and the social sciences. Practically speaking, this means research communities with a broad perspective, such as *primal health* (Odent 1986, 1999) and *evolutionary medicine* (Trevathan et al. 1999), and communities of practitioners in search for insights through their own patterns

of communication (Carpentier and Mangin-Lazarus 1996: 181ff). Psychiatrist Michael Gross (ibid.: 214), a member of the *Open School of Medical Health*<sup>31</sup> (EDSE), proclaimed:

The suffering of human beings which exposes itself through sickness is the suffering of life in this world. We do not want to silence suffering, and the longing for life concealed in it, behind the walls of institutions. We want to support patients who express themselves with their diseases.<sup>32</sup>

While humans linger on the image of Nature as a lost paradise, wild animals in captivity are quick to learn behavioural patterns of dependency. It has been observed that a female monkey living in a cage may not know how to give milk to her newborn. Her instinct is inhibited by the fact that she expects someone else—an elder monkey—to show her what to do. This summarizes the predicament of the civilized primates—a restless search for educated monkeys to arbitrate their existence.

## Notes

1. *Il n'est pas déraisonnable de considérer que la folie nazie reste un prolongement possible pour une science qui se pose comme fin absolue. Elle n'est jamais qu'une caricature de ce qu'on peut observer sur tous les continents: que penser du médecin américain injectant la mort à un condamné, que penser du chirurgien iranien coupant très proprement la main d'un voleur, que penser du psychiatre soviétique nommant 'folie', une contestation politique? Rien de tout cela ne nous est étranger.*
2. For a critique of the deterministic bias in genetics, see Kupiec and Sonigo 2000.
3. Hirochi Nakajima, *A Paradigm for Health*. Introduction by the Director-General, 21 January 1992 (unpublished WHO document).
4. *On pourrait interpréter ainsi le nouveau paradigme de la santé, tel que l'a appelé de ses vœux l'ancien directeur général de l'Organisation mondiale de la santé (OMS), le docteur Hirochi Nakajima: il s'agit de situer la santé, non plus en périphérie, mais au centre même de l'économie (1). Elle devrait donc quitter l'atelier de réparation de l'appareil humain de production, dans lequel elle était confinée depuis trente ans, pour entrer de plein droit dans la sphère marchande et devenir le nouvel objet privilégié de consommation.*
5. *... qui prône les maximes, les valeurs morales en général, enracinées dans l'ordre du pouvoir, dans la logique propre de la dialectique du maître et de l'esclave.*

6. 1) *la folie est une sorte de 'maladie'; 2) comme toutes les maladies, elle réside dans le 'sujet'—sa psyché (psychanalyse et ses innombrables dérivés), sa biologie (psycho-pharmacologie), les sédiments de son histoire singulière ('existentialisme'), les répercussions de son éducation ('bio-énergie', 'gestalt-thérapie', 'analyse transactionnelle').*
7. Niebuhr (1935).
8. The denial is a recent move. In the mid-19th century, the European 'liberal' intelligentsia openly supported the brutality of colonial wars. Tocqueville's apology of the Algerian colonization is a striking example (Tocqueville 1991; *Le Cour Grandmaison* 2001).
9. Quoted from Frazer 1950
10. *A une idée simple, celle d'un Tiers-Monde humilié et exploité, succède aujourd'hui une autre idée tout aussi simpliste, celle d'un Tiers-Monde perdu et sans espoir. [...] L'urgence est ainsi devenue un principe fondateur prenant le pas sur la coopération et l'aide au développement, voire les discréditant.*
11. *Par exemple: stress + mauvaise nutrition + cigarette + hypertension = infarctus. La personne est invitée à arrêter de fumer pour affaiblir la probabilité de l'infarctus. Mais si elle a un infarctus on lui dira qu'elle aurait du corriger sa nutrition, tandis que si elle n'a pas d'infarctus nous considérons que c'est le fait d'avoir arrêté de fumer qui l'a sauvée.*
12. WHO 2000 recently introduced a new indicator measuring 'the burden of disease', according to which (in 1997) the USA, with its highest per capita expenditure on health, occupied the 24th position on the *disability-adjusted life expectancy* (DALE) estimate, and 37th for its overall health system performance. Japan, on the other hand, had the best DALE and was 10th for its overall performance, despite being placed 13th on its per capita health expenditure.
13. *[...] l'absence de projet politique substitue au projet de la médecine celui d'un idéal du bien tout à fait problématique. Non seulement parce qu'il s'agit d'un idéal, mais parce qu'il s'agit de valeurs de sélection et de bien-être fondées sur des normes biologiques, qui n'ont rien à voir avec le 'corps humain parlant', dit sujet pensant.*
14. *De façon générale, la médecine exige la soumission. Comment expliquer autrement qu'à l'hôpital, les malades sont presque perpétuellement couchés, en tout cas doivent l'être au moment de la visite du patron, alors que dans les trois quarts des cas au moins, leur état n'exige nullement l'alitement à temps complet?*
15. *Devant cet agacement quotidien, ces échecs répétés, la médecine est parfois amenée à appeler l'aide de la justice pour faire exécuter des soins. [...] Mais que dire d'une médecine qui veut s'imposer par la force? Que fait-on de l'alliance thérapeutique et de toutes les théories, certes un peu surannées, qui basent pour moitié la guérison sur la confiance du patient en son médecin?*
16. *Ce qu'on exige des patients en voie de réhabilitation est plus sévère que ce qui est attendu des gens normaux. Des comportements innocents*

*ou légèrement déviants, comme l'ivresse ou la curiosité manifeste, ou encore des réactions nécessaires, comme la colère ou le chagrin, sont souvent symptomatisés et châtiés.*

17. *[...] qui] revient à remplacer la sémiologie ordinaire de la folie (symptôme psychotique, QI bas, retrait de l'inhibition, instabilité du sentiment, etc) par un autre système de critères (obéissance, collaboration, soins personnels, aptitudes sociales) d'ordre esthétique, mais de principe asilaire.*
18. *[...] une représentation de toutes les parties différentes du sujet morcelé projetée sur une seule: celle des aptitudes sociales.*
19. *On répond à l'internement, pas à la folie. En vérité, l'incurable exorcisé par la théorie rentre par la fenêtre dans la pratique, et un ensemble de méthodes de la psychiatrie traditionnelle suit le patient avec, pour objectif, de sauvegarder sa maladie dans un coin de son existence. [...] le pouvoir du thérapeute ne disparaît pas pendant le processus de libération du patient; il se diffuse dans les rapports que ce dernier entretient avec des institutions de prévention.*
20. *[...] l'individu [...] sans arrêt en confrontation avec l'Autre, l'Etranger, notre proche voisin, doit dépasser son ethnocentrisme naïf et dangereux, celui qui consisterait à définir son modèle de rationalité comme un absolu.*
21. *Malheureusement, la plus grande évidence empirique ne peut vaincre l'inertie du paradigme dominant si elle n'est pas épaulée par des manœuvres publicitaires efficaces [...] Aujourd'hui encore, des analogies banales sont souvent plus efficaces pour influencer la pratique clinique que des essais rigoureux; l'emploi de nombreux médicaments de base fonctionne à partir de considérations déterministes sur leur mécanisme d'action et à partir d'observations planifiées de leur efficacité.*
22. *La première soutient que la découverte des mécanismes moléculaires pourra résoudre en même temps les problèmes de thérapie et les problèmes de prévention. La deuxième met au premier plan la connaissance des causes de cancer dans l'environnement et soutient politiquement les efforts pour l'élimination des facteurs de risque; peu importe s'il manque la compréhension exacte des mécanismes d'action. [...] Les forces économiques du marché intéressées au business de la prévention se battent pour la première option; de l'autre côté se place le mouvement pour la participation populaire au choix des politiques sanitaires qui se refuse à déléguer ce pouvoir [...].*
23. *Le discours médical parle de la maladie avec une volonté de s'en tenir aux faits objectifs, de les mesurer, de les prévenir, de ne jamais les dépasser, ce qui est propre au positivisme. Il rejoint le scientisme par la croyance qu'il "peut tout expliquer", mais aussi par son enrôlement au service d'une vision politique qui le rapproche de la religion.*
24. *La sensibilité d'un système loin de l'équilibre à des facteurs qui étaient insignifiants, négligeables, à l'équilibre, est une découverte conceptuellement très importante. Elle signifie en effet que ce qui a le*

- statut de cause, devant intervenir dans la description et la prédiction d'un comportement, n'est pas donné une fois pour toutes. C'est l'activité même du système qui, ici, détermine ce qui, pour lui, aura statut de cause, et comment cette cause causera.*
25. *La fonction soignante, comme l'accompagnement social ou éducatif, est une confrontation avec le réel de la vie des gens. Ici les résultats de l'approche scientifique, s'ils ne sont pas inopérants, sont pour le moins réducteurs: car la vie est aussi parole, mouvement, modifications, impossible maîtrise.*
  26. *Néanmoins, d'autres hypothèses pourraient être imaginées, faisant appel à la physiologie des mécanismes naturels de défense, puisque l'effet placebo représente, par définition, la conséquence directe d'un mécanisme naturel de défense favorisé ou, du moins, non entravé par la médecine.*
  27. *Ederer montre bien que la recherche se repose sur ses lauriers avec ce type de protocole et que la procédure double aveugle sera peut-être une des plus fortes déconvenues scientifiques du siècle.*
  28. *Si la maladie est une aliénation, une perte d'autonomie et de liberté, l'effet placebo est, dans ce cas, une libération puisqu'il représente la capacité, pour chacun, de mettre en œuvre ses propres ressources de guérison. Favoriser les processus naturels de guérison ne fait-il pas partie des missions de la médecine?*
  29. *Viveret refers to Francis Fukuyama's thesis "The End of History" published in *The National Interest* (1989), and to Peter Sloterdijk's statement of humanism, as an obsolete grounding of philosophy in the face of the prospects of bio- and communication technologies.*
  30. *[...] un nouvel humanisme doit penser les tensions dynamiques entre individu et communauté; entre raison critique et recherche de sens; entre transformation de la nature et respect de la biosphère; entre progrès technique et scientifique et vigilance sur ses potentiels effets destructeurs. Afin de résister aux fantasmes de la post-humanité, toute refondation doit prendre pleinement en compte la mutation informationnelle (...) et la révolution du vivant qui, dans leur rapport systématique, bouleversent en profondeur les repères de l' "habitat" humain. C'est, en effet, notre façon à la fois d'habiter le monde et d'habiter notre propre corps qui se trouve transformée, jusqu'à toucher le plus intime en nous, à partir du moment où l'on passe insensiblement de l'aide à la procréation à la fabrication du vivant humain.*
  31. *See the founding document of the *Ecole Dispersée de Santé Européenne*, and its Cos Declaration (1992): <http://www.bioethics.ws/edse/cos-en.htm>*
  32. *La souffrance des hommes, qui s'exprime à travers la maladie, est la souffrance de la vie dans ce monde. Nous ne voulons pas faire taire la souffrance, et le désir de vie qui s'y cache, derrière les murs des institutions. Nous voulons soutenir les malades qui s'expriment par leurs maladies.*

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Part 1

FONTS OF

SELF-IDENTITY

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# INTRODUCTION: Modes of Self-Presentation

EDITORS

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The four chapters in this section focus on the processes of imaginative creation and social communication of the symbols of identity. The symbolic is the milieu *par excellence* in which collectives, when they feel the want, find the fonts of their identities. People's memory, whether 'historical' or 'mythical', is quick to draw upon the resources of its own heritage and invent the forms to be exchanged and consensually agreed upon as symbols of identification. For a community, the sharing of symbolic resources is the most appropriate way towards self-assertion, social distinction, and making of history. Social identity is the main issue at stake in communicational interplays.

The four essays actually deal with cognitive processes of negotiation initiated by members of subaltern collectives when they resist dominant worldviews and try to reappropriate oral narratives as sources of social energies, claim to political recognition, nuances of community differentiation, and asset for a life with dignity. The attempts display four modes of symbolic reconstruction of identity made against a context dominated by hegemonic systems of symbolic exchange. Narratives, language, myths, poetry and songs provide symbolic frameworks of communication which are appropriated and reinterpreted as to forge a renewed self-memory, and fulfil wishes of inner cohesion and outer distinction.

The studies are distinct to the extent they apparently encroach upon different areas and disciplines of knowledge: history, culture



studies, language formation, mythology, psychology and science of religions. In the matter of fact, they display, across such boundaries, logical homologies distinctively characteristic of processes of symbolic communication. In this respect, they do not intend to compete with any disciplinary competence but naturally cut across all of them. Our theoretical concern is with rational or logical structures which formally explain for the constitution of the social through symbolic communication. The first sub-part 'Avenue of Expression' concentrates on ways, means and forms of expression of identity.

In chapter 3, 'The Minas: Seeking a Place in History' by Nandini Sinha Kapur, the context, from the early nineteenth century throughout the twentieth century, is the feudal/colonial state apparatus of the Rajput State formation and a Brahminical social and cultural dispensation. Both of them deprive the Minas, the largest tribal community of Rajasthan, of territoriality, resources and status. The state administration maligns the community, placing it at the lowest rank as a Criminal Tribe of anti-social elements.

The complete heterogeneity of historical settings, populations and social events leaves no alternative but to 'transcend the empirical observation and reach more profound realities' of a rational or logical nature beyond phenomenological and descriptive comparisons. The directive principle is that what those concerned do believe and achieve, consciously or subjectively, 'is always far away from what they actually think or perform' (Lévi-Strauss 1960: xxxix). What is precisely striking is the possibility of discovering in widely different types of societal agglomerations intrinsic characters which point to a small number of similar operations and comparable adjustments, and ultimately prove reducible to 'more fundamental forms, which are general' (*ibid.*: xxxiii). In this case:

1. The modality of exchange, through language as means, is a discursive appropriation by the subordinated and marginalized, of symbolic forms specific to the dominant and hegemonic societies.
2. The appropriation results in a mixture of forms, a switching of semantic units. The Minas invent (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983) a glorious past with oral traditions and myths of their

imagination in which they incorporate symbolic elements and concepts of the feudal and colonial order. Subordinated Minas tribalize the modern nation-state.

3. Mixing by appropriation is operationally expressive in a process of resistance to an imposed situation of subalternity. By finding signs proving links with royal families and ritual prominence, the Minas legitimize claims of higher status and distinction in the social stratification.
4. Ultimately, the process fails as the subalterns do not actually reach to a recognized position of significant ascendancy.

The main reason of the total failure is that defiance articulates itself in terms of expressive symbolic forms at the level of discourse only, and never in attempts to invert the hierarchical ordering of the systems of relation. The paradox is mainly that the purpose of defiance expresses itself in terms of the established hierarchies and within the given power parameters. The Minas do not try to see themselves and their identity through other parameters of their own, significantly different from those of the feudal and brahminical discursive configurations in the case of the Minas, or the market-bound identities in an era of globalization and supremacy of the mass media in the case of middle-class youth. The new paradigms are actually created by the market. The marginalized emulate the given hierarchical social orders out of a wish to find place in them far from contesting them. No wonder if the modalities are conceptualized by analysts in terms of adaptation, adjustment, acculturation and the like.

Ultimately, this study points towards the issue that we have raised at the outset, that of the relation obtaining between symbolic forms and systems of power. The question may be differently articulated here by focusing on the stand and attitude of the actors: are they capable of or concerned with, properly locating the sources and assessing the legitimacy of the prevailing symbolic configuration in which they seek a place. Such concepts as submissive integration and domination through cooptation of the defiant seem the most appropriate to qualify the fundamental and general forms of the processes of symbolic communication illustrated by chapter 3 on the Minas.

At this juncture, we like to frame the central question of Part 1 in operational terms: Discursive appropriation to adjust or to contest? To incorporate or to denounce? To conform or to deny? With the first of the alternatives, we have a process of semantic acquiescence resulting in integration or cooptation into the social system of dominance. The second alternative would be a process of defiance starting with a semantic inversion of the appropriated discourses and resulting in contention and subversion. This is what the first two essays of the second set 'Quests for Assertion' display. They obviously reveal logically different cognitive operations and lead to different forms of symbolic communication.

Both these essays of the second set 'Quests for Assertion' similarly consist in discursive modes of self-presentation on the part of individuals from deprived social sections. Their purpose is equally one of redefinition of identity and status. But actually the logic of the process differs qualitatively from a usual exercise of image building. It is a subjective attestation prompted by a quest of public affirmation and claim for proper recognition of one's genuine self. The concept suggests the elements appropriate to figure out those quest and assertion of self that the next two chapters display. Greisch (Kearney 1996 ed.:81–98) further interpreted Ricœur's concept by saying that narrative, as the key to the establishment of self, is effectively attestation. It is this dynamics of genuine attestation through defiance of the prevalent symbolic systems the validity of which is denied, which significantly differentiates the next two studies from the previous one.

In the two examples of Chapter 4, 'Vaḍār Narratives: Dramatic Reappropriation of a Myth' by Datta Shinde, and Chapter 5 'Māṅg Narratives: Semantic Reappropriation of a Myth' by Sanjay Jogdanda, the context is the collective symbolic environment of communities and their social history as encapsulated in mythical narratives which are parts of their particular oral intangible heritage. The myths are worked out as stepping-stones of community symbolic assertion. The modality is a discursive reappropriation of the mythical narratives. The first myth belongs to Vaḍār communities (stone breakers and road workers, agricultural labourers) in Maharashtra. Impressed by the way Vaḍār recall their history through narratives, Datta Shinde, a high-school teacher, born himself in the untouchable Cambhār caste, shows the relevance of such narratives for the Vaḍār while commenting

upon his experience of collection of such narratives, and then by directing his schoolchildren to enact one of the forty myths that he collected. The second myth belongs to the untouchable Māṅg caste traditionally dedicated to remove carcasses and manufacture ropes. The narrative is widely known in Western India. It is analysed and commented upon by a social science student from the same Māṅg community, who collected it from his people. He critically reappropriates the narrative as a subversive emblem of collective identity and turns it into a discursive strategy of social restructuring.

It should be stressed that these myths belong exclusively to communities ranking low in the social hierarchy, and that they are collected and owned by social activists from equally low social sections taking side with them. The purpose of the exercise is not academic writing but practical communication, namely, the utilization of the narratives in programmes of social and cultural awakening by social-action groups. The process consists accordingly in reinterpreting the narratives against the challenges of social and cultural discrimination that these communities have experienced.

The disciplines challenged are those of modern hermeneutics with their various schools of mythological studies. The interpretation is indeed action-oriented and not directed towards deciphering hidden anthropological structures behind the code of the text with a theoretical purpose. It is still not a diffuse 'rambling phenomenology,' diluted mixing of activist indignation and native or indigenous reading in which Lévi-Strauss (1960: xlvi) sees the dissolution of ethnography as social knowledge when the ethnographer, for lack of theoretical capacity just repeats with emotion the allegedly confuse insight of the natives. It is a reflection which looks for and discovers some totality hidden behind the discrete elements of the narrative. The totality is articulated and denounced. But the totality and its main logical components are rather intuitively or immediately perceived without the elaborate conceptual means and mediating expertise of professional social scientists. The rational régime of the exercise is not academic or theoretically deductive.

It is in the matter of fact for good reasons of practical communication that the exercise develops intuitively in reference to the personal experience of those concerned. When they wish

to properly acquaint themselves with the traditions, history, rituals and systems of representations of marginalized or tribal communities, cultural activists and social communicators in India inevitably come across a number of tales, stories and elaborate mythical narratives. The capacity of social actors to relate to, own and act upon, that intangible heritage depends upon their capacity to understand the world-view enshrined in those myths, rituals and representations. Sometimes insuperable difficulties prevent them from grasping the logic and the mode of thinking of the communities in question. Then they may hastily bypass and consign those 'primitive' people and their 'nonsensical' stories into exotic, esoteric, archaic and whimsical cultural spheres, or religious superstitions of a bygone age. The educated class in India and even youth from the same communities, especially those with formal education—including social activists—often turn their back to myths as fanciful tales. They see them as absolutely irrelevant to a quest of knowledge and consequently still worsely bearing upon objectives of social transformation let alone attempts of organization of the subaltern.

The two short accounts of attempts at owning Vaḍār and Māṅg myths are presented here to show on the contrary how activists from social-action groups can train themselves and throw a reflexive gaze at traditional narratives in order to eventually reappropriate them for practical communication purposes. Social workers can and ought to be able to achieve twin tasks without having to wait for experts in social anthropology to suggest them professionally constructed theories before acting with proper knowledge of the case. The first task is an operation of re-contextualization. This operation consists in reactivating the vision displayed in the narrative by referring it to the context of the present reader or recipient. The latter have to search for semantically homologous historical referents in their everyday social and cultural environment. Actually this amounts to understanding oneself through a confrontation of one's condition with the vision and intention of the text. This re-contextualization gives a new lease of life to a text otherwise doomed to die out of want of reference in a new age and alien environment.

These examples show moreover how the communication gaps which widen between youth with a formal education and population of oral tradition can be bridged. This is the second task that social

communicators should be capable of achieving in practices of cultural action to be undertaken with members of the same subordinated communities to whom the narrative belongs, or other similar groups of people who are likely to find correspondences as well in their own context with the discursive strategy of the old text. Actually, both the write-ups on Vaḍārs and Māṅgs are the result of such cultural practices attempting to reassess critically old narratives with the sole elementary tools of social analysis that no social worker can dispense with.

The second experience of 'Quests for Assertion' in Chapter 6, 'Bhakti: A Faith for Rehabilitation' by Guy Poitevin and Hema Rairkar, is the intimate life story of a lonely woman left to fend for herself alone with her faith and her God. The form of her personal attestation is actually emblematic of the path of *bhakti* followed by generations of simple devotees for centuries. The study deals with Bhakti as a modality of self-assertion. Bhakti offers a space of personal relation and profound mutual attachment—a privileged rapport of affective intimacy—with a beneficent transcendent entity, to a lonely woman devotee cut off by repressive social constraints from any belonging. The process is an inversion from a state of human non-entity to an assurance of recognition and a sense of existential sanctity despite a context of deprivation and estrangement socially enforced by society. Seen in this perspective, bhakti may even functionally appear as a mode of defiant communicative move, an indirect attempt at present oneself 'as oneself' through the mediation of religious representations. The support of that process of revelation and possibly inversion is the wealth of musical and poetic resources of the bhakti tradition—*abhaṅga*, *bhajans*, *ovī*, *gavḷaṇ*, *āraṭī* songs, and narratives. The disciplines at stake are psychology and cultural anthropology to the extent the analysis means not to explain away with reference to a context but to understand from within the intentionality of the faith of a peasant, leprous and illiterate woman, as an initiative from within against one's immediate environment.

Methodologically, the studies in this sub-section, 'Quests for Assertion', experiment with ways attempting to give the research exercise itself the shape of a communicative process. This character is equally determinant in other contributions of the book, particularly in Part 3. Such endeavours are appropriate while

dealing with forms and contents of popular communication. The more the cultural discrepancy between the informant's and observer's cultures, the greater the danger of ethnocentric misrepresentation of the 'other' by an overpowering alien framework of interpretation. A relation of dominance and subjection may easily, though unknowingly, characterize forms and procedures of production of knowledge in the field of cultural studies.

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*1.1*

*Avenue*

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# 3

## THE MINAS: Seeking a Place in History

NANDINI SINHA KAPUR

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### Narration of History: Reconstruction of the Past

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The short essay is based on the oral traditions of the Minas of Jaipur locality (the largest tribal community of Rajasthan) recorded in the early 19th century, and is confined to that part that narrates their history. The chief contribution of this essay is in projecting the importance of 'history' for a tribal community in its attempts at reconstructing its own identity: attempts that began in the early 19th century continued to be reaffirmed through the 20th century. The Minas try to furnish themselves a respectable present by giving themselves a *glorious past*.

Jan Vansina (1985: xii) rightly points out that oral traditions are a representation of the past in the present. To attribute their whole content of oral traditions to the evanescent present, as some sociologists do, is rendering it an exercise in reductionism.

Nonetheless, to ignore the impact of the present on oral traditions, as some historians have done, is also shortsighted. Traditions must always be understood as reflecting both past and present in a single form (ibid.). Hence, existing situations prompt explanations as to why they exist. Such explanations arise retroactively and are, therefore, newly created messages (ibid.).

The importance of oral traditions in reconstructing images has been highlighted by both historians and sociologists. One of the chief functions of oral traditions is social protest against injustices, exploitation and oppression, a *raison d'être* that helps to retrieve the image of a community (Srivastava 1974: 280–82). Since social protests always have to be placed in context, oral traditions have mostly been conceived as 'invented' (Fischer 1963: 241; Dorson 1963). Alan Dundes (1990: 38), explaining his theory of 'Nationalistic Inferiority Complexes and the Fabrication of Folklore', quotes the instances of Scotland, Germany, Finland and 20th century America, all of whom found it necessary to invent tradition. These countries were ostensibly suffering from a severe inferiority complex, particularly since folklore apparently fills the needs of a nation's psyche—namely, to assert national identity, especially in times of crises, and to install a sense of pride in that identity (*ibid.*).

The Indian experience, particularly in the context of resurgent nationalism, questions such a perspective and, therefore, calls for a critique of such generalizations. Moreover, the issue of authenticity has been questioned when it comes to folklore. In the context of the making of identity, Madan Sarup (1996: 14) observes:

The more recent view is that identity is fabricated, constructed, in process, and that we have to consider both psychological and sociological factors. It cannot fully explain what most people experience.

David Hardiman, in his work on the Dangs of Southern Gujarat (Hardiman 1987) rightly opines that it is wrong to believe that the Adivasis lack a history because it has hardly been recorded.

Similarly, the history of the Minas has not only remained unrecorded, but they have also been maligned both in the medieval Persian sources and in colonial records. For instance, in his *Tarikh-i-Firozshahi*, Zia-ud-din Barni reports on the crimes committed by the Minas around Delhi. At night, they came prowling into the city, creating all manner of trouble and depriving people of their rest, and plundered the country houses in the neighbourhood of the city. They carried their daring to such an extent that the western *ghats* of the city were shut during the afternoon prayers

and no one dared leave it after that hour. In retaliation, the Minas were treated by the Mohammedan rulers with the most merciless cruelty. (Elliot and Dowson 1973: 103; Haig 1958: 72, 88)

In *Amarakavyam*, a 17th century Sanskrit text from the court of Mewar in southern Rajasthan, the Minas are clubbed together with the Bhils as a violent social group (Kothari 1985: 142). In short, the Minas were portrayed not only as an ethnic community along with the rest of the tribal population, but also as antisocial. Their image remained intact till the 19th century. What Major [P. W.] Powlett records about the Minas is nothing but their acts of vandalism, arson and pillage in the state of Mewar, the city of Firozpur and adjacent villages in the British territory (Russell and Lal 1969: 239). Sir Denzil Charles Jelf Ibbetson in his Census Report of India 1881 (paragraph 582) observes:

The Minas are the boldest of our criminal classes. Their headquarters so far as the Punjab is concerned are in the village of Shahajahanpur, attached to the Gurgaon District but surrounded on all sides by Rajputana territory. There they until lately defied our police and even resisted them with armed force. Their enterprises are on a large scale, and they are armed with small bows which do considerable execution. They travel great distances in gangs of from twelve to twenty men, practising robbery and dacoity even as far as the Deccan. (Ibbetson 1881)<sup>1</sup>

The Minas had already been declared a Criminal Tribe and covered under the Criminal Tribe Act of 1871 (Shimoga 1979: 27–29; Bhargava 1949: 31). What we see is the colonial classification strategy that reworked the commonsensical inherited perception of the Minas while branding them as a ‘Criminal Tribe’. In fact, as late as 1911, the Minas were being categorized as animists and a hill tribe along with the Bhils, the Bauries and the Girasias (Sharma 1923: 95–96) as well as cultivators-cum-freebooters. (see ‘Meo’ or ‘Mina’—Risley 1969: 308)

The Minas of the state of Jaipur were no exception to the above portrayal, and the narration of their history at the turn of the 19th century can be seen as part of their attempts to reconstruct themselves and their previous mobility.

Almost all of the major Adivasi *jatis* of the middle Indian region, stretching from Bengal in the East to Gujarat in the West, [have]

during the past century made such collective efforts to change their established way of life. (Hardiman 1987: 5–6)

Hence, it would be inappropriate to refer to Dundes' theory of 'Nationalistic Inferiority Complex' and, instead, apply Eric Hobsbawn's concept of 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983) to the history claimed by the Minas in the early 19th century without castigating their claims as entirely invented. The context in which their claims to a history of their own should be analysed is more specific than the Minas in general. The context was the Rajput State formation in Jaipur locality (anciently known as Dhundhar) as well as the acquaintance with the colonial representatives. Therefore, many claims that the Minas made in the early 19th century were definitely the results of their long experience of living within the state-society<sup>2</sup> as well as being confronted with the intruding state apparatus. It is obvious that their experience was that of loss, deprivation and humiliation. But what is interesting to note is their appropriation of a number of symbols, motifs and the structure of the state-system<sup>3</sup> in the narration of their history. Besides appropriation, their attempts also highlight a process of adaptation. Adaptations refer to the continuous adjustments or changes that a person makes during the span of a lifetime (Freeman 1979: 386). David G. Mandelbaum rightly observes that 'adaptation is a built-in process, because every person must, in the course of his life, alter some of his established patterns of behaviour to cope with new conditions. Each person changes his ways in order to maintain continuity, whether of group participation or social expectation or self-image or simply survival (Mandelbaum 1973: 193). Therefore, part of their history is tinged with myths. I shall attempt to analyse some of these myths in the history of the Minas, under the theme of 'territoriality' and 'power'.

## Rajput Treachery and Mina Foster-father

Their foremost myth is that of the Rajput treachery and the Mina foster-father. The story not only asserts the Minas' jurisdiction over the territory of Jaipur state but also links their past with the Kachhawaha ruling family. Dhola Rao, the founder of the

Kachhawaha state, was brought up by the Mina king of Khogmow (5 km from modern Jaipur). The king had adopted a stranded Rajput mother and her child who sought refuge in his realm and served as a cook. Being pleased with the superior food cooked by her, the Ulema king asked about her and discovered the rank of the illustrious fugitive. The Mina king adopted her as his sister, and Dhola Rao as his nephew.

When Dhola Rao attained the age of 14, he was sent to the court of Delhi as the Mina representative, carrying Khogmow's tribute. The young Kachhawaha prince remained in Delhi for five years, where he conceived the idea of usurping his benefactor's authority. On the night of Diwali, Dhola Rao, along with his Rajput allies from Delhi, butchered some Minas and took over the Mina country (Dhundhar) (Tod 1971: 1329–30). Dhola Rao's son Moidal Rao captured Amber (the capital of the Kachhawaha state of Jaipur) from the Susawat Minas (Amber being the capital of their chief Rao Bhato, the head of the Mina Confederation (*ibid.*: ii).

Unfortunately, sociologists working on the Minas do not analyse the above story in terms of 'myth and history'. For instance, Balwant Singh (Singh 1977: 197) accepts this claim as true history when he designates the Minas as descendants of the valiant Matayas (the ancient inhabitants of eastern Rajasthan). The painful transformation from a community of proud lawmakers to that of professional lawbreakers (even if the about-face involved only a segment of the racial group) created a devastatingly unfavourable situation in which their glorious past was forgotten and their stigmatized present maliciously magnified (*ibid.*: ii).

In fact, the story of Rajput treachery and the tribal foster-father has been popular throughout those tribal parts of Rajasthan where state formation crystallized over a very long time in pre-colonial times. A similar plotline can also be seen in the traditions of the Bhils of Mewar in southern Rajasthan. (Sinha 1993)

The historical plotline clearly reveals the process of the loss of the territorial rights, the natural habitat and the deprivation of resources that the tribal communities underwent in the wake of state formation. The Kachhawaha state had to integrate the Mina settlements and the Mina chiefs in its territorial and political units.<sup>4</sup> They compensated their humiliation at the loss of territory and their military defeat by reminding themselves of their pre-Kachhawaha supremacy. Thus was born the idea of the Mina

foster-father of the Rajput prince, implying Kachhawaha superseding the Mina chiefs. A popularly sympathetic sense of struggle, and of military defeat, can be clearly discerned in the treacherous killing of the Mina foster-father. Reminders of the Kachhawaha success—because of their Mughal connections—are also disguised in the story of Dhola Rao conspiring against the Minas with his Rajput allies at Delhi.

On the other hand, their predominance that shaped their consciousness that prolonged the difficulties of the Rajput state in controlling the Mina country also emerge from the legend of Mina foster-father. In spite of the politico-matrimonial alliances with the local Rajput chiefs such as Bargujars of Dausa (about 45 km east of Jaipur), the Kachhawahas do not emerge into the history of eastern Rajasthan before the Mughal Emperor Akbar's reign (Tod 1971: 1331). What cannot be denied, though, is the overwhelming presence of the Mina tribal population in the heart of Jaipur state, particularly in Nain, Jamua Ramgarh, Machhi, Kalikoh and Khognow. The Jaipur state has not denied this fact: an acknowledgement of the Mina predominance is evident in one of the important rituals at the royal coronation ceremony, in which the Mina chief of Kalikoh puts the *tika* of sovereignty on the forehead of the succeeding Kacchawaha prince (ibid.: 1429).

Such rituals confirm that the Mina chiefs were vital components in the process of state formation. Equally important is the fact that the family deity of the Kachhawaha royal family, the goddess Jamwahimata, is the local deity of Jamua Ramgarh (ibid.: 1331) where many of the Mina chiefs were concentrated (see list of the 12 estates of the Mina chiefs). Even the goddess Amba, the presiding deity of Amber, is worshipped by the Minas as the Ghata Rani (Queen of the Pass) (ibid.: 1332).

The other important aspect of the myth of Rajput treachery is the historical projection of their close links with the local royal house (the result of mutual interaction over a long period of state formation). It is clearly an attempt to raise the status of the community in the local social stratification. In a society where the Rajputs dominated the socio-political scenario, old connections with the royal house would undoubtedly enhance their prestige in the present. Jan Vansina (1985) observes a similar phenomenon in the kingdom of Kazembe (Zambia), where, apart from their stories of origin and foundation, the historical tradition of local

groups all featured kings coexisting with a forebear of any group in question.

Thus, the larger historical perspective was shaped by the existing political structure, obviously flowing from the dynamics of social stratification. Any connection with royalty is a reflection of the status of descent or local groups, especially if anecdotes recall services rendered to the dynasty, a status that escalates when descent from a king is claimed. Such anecdotes went beyond these flattering memories (Vansina 1985: 107). For the Minas, the standard of reference of the social significance of their history was measured in terms of the Kachhawaha royal family.

I next examine the myth of Mina 'kingdoms' and symbols of 'royalty'. Following their claims of connection with the royal family, the Minas obviously assert linkages to pre-Kachhawaha kingdoms of Mina sovereigns—and to their forts in the Jaipur locality. Colonel James Tod recorded the following legend popular amongst the Minas of Nain:

*Bawan kote, chapan durwara  
Myna murd, Naen ke Raja  
Booroo raj Naen ko  
Jul bhoom men bhutto mango.*  
(Tod 1971:107)

General A. Cunningham of the Archaeological Survey of India translated this as saying:

There were 52 forts and 56 gates,  
To the Mina man, who was a Nain's Raja.  
It was a sorry time for the realm of Nain,  
when they were glad to beg their share of chaff.  
(Cunningham 1966: 112)

When Cunningham visited the ancient temple at the deserted township of Nain, the priest repeated a similar stanza, implicitly averring to the Mina claim that they had controlled 56 forts.

*Chappan kote, bawan darware,  
Ja men rahe Nai ka Raje.*  
There were 56 forts and 52 gates,  
where the Raja of Nai did hold his state.  
(Cunningham 1966: 111)



Thus, by demurring to control of the forts, the Minas' claim aimed to establish their proprietorship over a kingdom. To this, the Minas have added the demand for the restoration of the symbols of 'royalty'. They claim that in the beginnings of the Kachhawaha state formation, followed by their total defeat, the Minas presented the Rajput state with a charter of demands, including the restoration of courtly symbols such as *nakaras* (drums), *chhatras* (royal umbrella), *pataka* (flag), *palki* (silver item), *Chhari* (holy mace), *chamar*, etc, which had been seized by the Kachhawahas (Rizvi 1987: 28). This charter also demanded that neither should the Mina kingdoms (Raje) be done away without their permission nor the *Jagirs* (estates created by the state and distributed to the Rajput chiefs) be distributed without their consent (*ibid.*: 28).

The above account clearly shows that the Minas adopted the concept of the 'kingdom', and their courtly standards from the local Rajput state, while the concept of *Jagirs* may have been influenced by the intruding colonial state. It could also be a colonial construction that desired a much more direct colonial-tribal interaction, accelerating the creation of many more Mina chiefs to facilitate the extraction of tributes and bring land under colonial control.

Some of the themes of the tribal folk songs are known to have been influenced by the advent of the British in Rajasthan. For instance, the Bhils of Mewar invoke the deities and pray for the victory of the Maharanas (the Rajput rulers of Mewar), against the Purbia rajas (the kings of the east), by implication speaking of the British onslaught in Rajasthan (Sharma 1956: 115–20). In terms of the popular sayings, archaeological and historical sources point only towards Mina chiefdoms (which were not only less organized than the extant kingdoms, but were not formally-organized kingdoms on the pattern of a 'state-system').

The specific number of 52 forts with 56 gates must actually mean the strongholds or the fortified places along the hill-passes controlled by the Mina chiefs. Cunningham's report testifies to the above fact for Nain was evidently situated within the deep ravine of a mountain torrent in the Aravallis, near the bed of a partly dry river, with broken hillocks and ravines at the mouth of the gorge (Cunningham 1996: 109–10). What remained at the archaeological site of Nain at the time of Cunningham's visit, parts of the

dilapidated roofless walls and fortifications, the so-called palace of the Mina 'Kings' of Nain (*ibid.*: 111). Nor do the medieval records of the Kachhawaha state ever recognize the Mina chiefs as equivalent to rest of the Rajput chiefs who constituted the primary political components of the medieval state (Sarkar 1984; Bhargava 1979; Prasad 1966). The fact that the Minas were always organized into chiefdoms is evident from the 12 estates of the Mina chiefs that were claimed to be Mina kingdoms by their famous bard, Govind Ram Rana of village Bhoniawala (Jaipur district) (Singh 1977: 208–9).

Twelve *Barapalas* of the 12 Mina states of Bhundhar:

1. Bilot (Tod)—Bedajia: Khoda Mina.
2. Chapradi—Lawaji: Benara Mina.
3. Beelpur.
4. Bichlanolates, known as Manota in Jamua Ramgarh *tehsil*—Bikuji: Dewarwal Mina.
5. Sogan (Boojh), Jamua Ramgarh *tehsil*—Tewaji of Sogan caste.
6. Seehra or Manch—Rao Bhanotji: Seera Mina.
7. Nareth (near Thana Ghazi)—Salohji: Mewal Mina.
8. Dhyawan: Jamua Ramgarh *tehsil*, Bhim, son of Dehla: Dhiyawan Mina.
9. Anthli, near Thana Ghazi—Salohji: Mewal Mina.
10. Mandor (later Sarjoli), Jamua Ramgarh *tehsil*—Ahrhaji: Mandor Mina.
11. Khuntalgarh, later known as Seesawash in Ambar *tehsil*, was under Rao Bhatti: Soosawat Mina.
12. Ghatwari, near Jamua Ramgarh—Sanga: Marg Mina.

The problem has been discussed by the author in the case of the Bhils of southern Rajasthan, where Bhil settlers in the medieval villages, although recognized as witnesses to the royal land transactions, were being merely referred to as Bhil Nadol or Bhil Ralhua, unlike the Rajput residents, who were recorded as Raos and Rawats (Sinha 1993: 65). The Rajput states, thus, acknowledged the majority of the tribal population as an ethnic entity and not as individual chiefdoms.

Hence, the magnification of small chieftainships into ancient kingdoms was a way of reappropriating the state-system and

making it the official historical reference. It is well known that the state settled some Mina chiefs as zamindars (they conferred dominions on those who had been resisting) much after they were suppressed militarily (Rizvi 1987: 30).

The final aspect that I would consider is again a demand listed in the Minas' famous charter of the 12th century. They are stated to have asked for their monopoly in the army, treasury, armoury, and accounts of income and expenditure. It is evident from the *Annals of Dhundhar* (Tod 1971: 1430) that Mina chiefs had been employed by the Kachhawaha state in the treasury, guarding the royal jewellers, and as palace guards. Interestingly, references to accounts of income and expenditure (as reported by Tod 1971) again seem to be of 'recent' origin—perhaps even colonial. Their importance in the control of strategic routes and passes is also evident from the fact that Ghatarani (Queen of the Passes) was one of their chief deities. Thus, the Minas appropriated those areas of state administration for themselves in which they had been utilized: the Chaukidari (guard) Mina are known to have been collated and organized from the Mina guerrillas who had been routed by the Rajput chiefs (Singh 1977: 85–86; Rizvi 1987: 29–30).

## Myths of Origin

The final section highlights the process of acculturation<sup>5</sup> amongst the Minas but restricts itself to aspects of origin, caste and religion. There is no denying that some sections of the tribal population have been involved in the process 'Rajputization', or 'Kshatriyization', since the early medieval times (Sinha 1962: 36–80).

First, the entire community claims descent from the Matsya (fish) incarnation of Vishnu (Rizvi 1987: 9). The claim continued to be supported in the post-Independence era with the organization of some of the eastern Rajasthan principalities—Alwar, Bharatpur, Dholpur, Karauli and the chiefship of Neemrana—into the 'Matsya Union' on 18 March 1948 (Sinha 1962: 36–80). Their famous social reformer, Muni Magan Sagar, is known to have compiled, in the fourth decade of the 20th century, the *Meena Purana* (The Fish Chronicles: Meena is a synonym of Matsya) (ibid.: 15), lending further credence to their ancestral claim to the ancient Matsyas.

The Minas' claim to a Matsya avatar has an interesting dimension: its recent origin is evidenced from the fact that the Minas do not eat fish but cannot explain its ritual importance (Sinha 1962: 16). Their claim to a Matsya avatar reminds us of their attempt to compare their origin-myth with that of the local royal dynasty. The Kachhawahas claim origin from the Kurma (tortoise) avatar of Vishnu (Bhatnagar 1974: 1–4). Another version of their history, which dates back to 500 BC claims that the Minas were the subjects of a Mauryan king, Mauryadhvaj of Dausa (*ibid.*: 28), who had his capital at Moreda. This version, too, is a myth that supports the Minas' claim to antiquity and a 'civilized past'.

The process of 'Rajputization' seems to have been more significant amongst the Minas than the Bhils—claims to Rajput castehood are more widespread amongst the Olinas. Origin stories of most of these castes are concocted.

1. Mer Panwar: Like the Chauhans, some Panwar (Paramar) Rajputs settled in the Olina villages and the children of such marriages came to be known as Mer Panwars.
2. Mev Gehlots: With sub-castes Godhat, Bhondak, Bhilat and Bhailot, the Mev descended from Gehlot Rajputs and Mer/Mina woman in ancient times.
3. Joharwals: They came from marriage between Nahrawat Rajputs and Mina women.
4. Bodwals: They originated from one Sopal Rajput and a woman named Rama Dai, daughter of Bhodia Mina of the Narwal caste.
5. Gelnawats: They descended from Rajput ruler Neemana's son, Gehrawat, and daughter of Tula Ram Mina of the Mehad sub-caste. (Singh 1977: 57–60)
6. Bargujar Minas: Bargujars came from Iksvaku Prince Ramachandra's son Lav Kumar. His descendants were later known as Bargujars—one of his 17 sons was Nadob (Lohiya 1954: 28).
7. Kachhawaha Minas: The descendants of Kush (one of Rama's sons) were known as the Kachhawahas, with sub-castes Mandal, Singhal and Gobinga Minas. It is significant that they appropriate the origin claims of the Kachhawaha dynasty of Amber (Singh 1977: 60).

8. Sangats: Nihar Rawat, the son of Laku, Raja Neemarana's 17th son, married a Mina woman, who went on to found the Eva, Balji, Goya and Bishna Mina Dewatwals, Baljiwat, Soosia and Banswat Minas (Singh 1977: 60–61).
9. Parihars (Pratihars): They trace their origin from a Rajput ruler of Mundore (Jodhpur). They are spread throughout Jalore, Jodhpur, Bundi, northeast of Mewar, and the sub-castes of Taj, Motus, Murgal and Marwat reside in Jaipur district.<sup>6</sup> The skill with which their bards, Jaega/Dholi/Dhom (Tod 1971: 282–83) have compiled the genealogies in the 19th and the 20th centuries, also point to the influence of the caste society. Their social reformer, Muni Magan Sagar, has compiled a list of 5,700 Mina sub-castes.<sup>7</sup>

## Religion

The Minas worship Shakti and Shiva (Singh 1977: 144; Rizvi 1987: 94–95). Khagong, for instance, has two Shiva and one Shakti temples. They are said to be ancient temples (*ibid.*). It seems that, in the medieval period, the Puranic deities had been well-received by the Minas. The religious outreach may have occurred in the 19th century. The fact is evident from the list of some of the goddesses worshipped by the different castes of the Minas in the early 20th century (*ibid.*).

| <b>Caste</b> | <b>Deity</b> |
|--------------|--------------|
| Memrot       | Ahrahi Devi  |
| Nai Mina     | Pancha Mata  |
| Dhingar      | Jamua Devi   |
| Jagarwal     | Ahrahi Devi  |
| Denkara      | Ahrahi Devi  |
| Kankarwal    | Ahrahi Devi  |
| Goonga       | Gandol Devi  |
| Nongal       | Gandol Devi  |
| Mandol       | Gandol Devi  |
| Ranot        | Gandol Devi  |
| Jagera       | Gandol Devi  |
| Nakwal       | Gandol Devi  |

I began my inquiry by observing that 'historification' has remained popular amongst the tribal population in their bid to attain upward social mobility and construct a new identity. Our assumption is proved by the fact that the biggest conference of the Minas, the Matsya Sammelan of April 1944 in Jaipur (attended by the Minas from Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh) openly condemned the Criminal Tribe Act (Rizvi 1987: 89). It resulted in the meeting of the Minas of Jhar (Jaipur district) in 1961, which passed the resolution that a serious project be undertaken to compile the ancient and contemporary history of the Minas (ibid.: 90), and that the compilation be done at the earliest. It was a tough call: the paradox of the situation lies in the fact that despite acculturation and the appropriation of the mores and values of the caste system, the Minas continue to preserve some essential tribal elements such as 'egalitarianism' and communal authority (ibid.: 67, 87, 94).

The study also highlights the triumph of Hindu religion in so far as integrating and hierarchizing the Minas is concerned. Coupled with this is the attempt at self-assertion by the Minas, for whom Rajputization/Kshatriyaization appears to be based on contention and questioning, which saw them struggling to make themselves appear to be equal to the ruling class.

Thus, a social historian should, perhaps, give cognizance to the active role of the Minas to 'invent' a history for themselves instead of living with a passive acceptance of the powerful colonial/feudal ideological onslaughts on them. Was this also precipitated by the colonial/feudal rulers to integrate them? Were these attempts by the Minas to assert themselves when they found themselves caught in this process? We could speculate.

## Notes

1. Also see (Sherring 1975: 78, Lohiya 1954: 242–43)
2. I borrow the term from Prof B.D. Chattopadhyay who has used it in the context of early medieval India, see (Chattopadhyay 1994: 16).
3. I borrow this term from Prof Romila Thapar (1980).
4. The process has described for Mewar by the author (Sinha 1993).
5. The process was first defined and described as 'Sanskritization' by M.N. Srinivas (1966: 6).
6. *Jaipur State Judicial File No. 087, 1904, S.A.J.*

7. (Singh 1977). Appendix A lists 5451 sub-castes compiled by Muni Magan Sagar.

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*Quests*

*for*

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# 4

## VADĀR NARRATIVES: Dramatic Reappropriation of a Myth

DATTA SHINDE

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### How Vaḍārs Recall their History

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When I go from village to village to study the Vaḍār community, people give me information about their community, recount stories and relate narratives, talk about events, and remember songs and happenings. They are keen to narrate what they have heard, seen and suffered, the memories that they preserve in their minds and carry as heritage.

I noticed that the Vaḍārs feel particularly happy when they recall their narratives, their *kathā*. I once asked them the reason for this satisfaction. An old Vaḍār said, 'Today, our Vaḍār community is living a life of hardship, misery and hunger. But the era in which our ancestors lived was an era of plenty and prosperity.' They naturally feel pride in narrating the stories of those better, ancient times, a pride that makes them equals with their past. A narration helps them enact, in their imaginations, the past deeds of those whom they remember and cherish as their glorious ancestors.

Once they enter into the realm of their narratives, they articulate the life story of the community with a language of their own making, finding place for the soil, stones, gods, demons, jungles, mountains, brothers and sisters, kings and palaces, and so on. Sometimes, a casual word unfolds before the listener the whole

history of the Vaḍār community and its ancestors. In particular, the purport and impact of story-telling are all the more significant when they speak of small events.

A narration is both an event and a testimony. All the listeners, the auditors, stand witness to the feelings expressed by the narrative. The narrator might even mention fitting local and social contexts, eventually confirming that the ‘story’ is authentic.

When the narrator is immersed in the style of narration, he begins to speak emphatically and loudly. We then realize how the narratives enhance the imaginary strength of the audience: they both display and boost the courage of the community. In story-form, they speak of its successes, its failures—and its progress.

When Vaḍār narrators speak about their community, they speak about themselves: they do not borrow affirmations or denials from any other source. This is why their stories sound so lively.

‘We were not poor earlier’: When they assert this, they retrieve their ability, and their validation, to narrate that they once were prosperous—and this is why their stories and narratives continue to exist. Although the narratives might seemingly have no relevance in the present context, they are still an effective means for the Vaḍār people to project themselves into a different future.

The stories might appear disjointed and contradictory. But their content in reality points to communication patterns and processes which broke the ground for the formation of the community. Moreover, they provide the community a means to display symbolic signs of identity and traditional values that govern its lifestyle. For instance, financial transactions are carried out among the Vaḍār on the basis of spoken covenants that are never broken, come what may. The spoken word is an absolute guarantee and promise of reliability. There is no need for written records or ‘authenticated’ documents. So also the spoken words of the narratives—they are preserved and act as a symbolic plinth of the community. They set in motion communication processes within and outside the community.

## A Narrative Reenacted

This is the text of a narrative collected on 5 December 1996 from Sukhadev Ram Dhotre, 55, from the *Gāḍī* Vaḍār community

(stone-breakers, stoneworkers) of Tembhurni, taluka Indapur, Solapur district, Maharashtra.

The plot of the story is simple: after a trial in the court of the king, a Vaḍār is declared the best partner in heaven and earth for the king's single daughter, who is a tremendously radiant princess. As a consequence, the king gives her in marriage to the Vaḍār. The narrative is obviously meant to project the Vaḍārs as 1) the worthiest of beings in heaven and on earth, without parallel among humans; 2) so competent as to make the gods redundant on earth; 3) and to affiliate themselves somehow to monarchs.

As a result of a collective study of the narrative subsequently made during a meeting of our team of collectors, I turned it into a dramatic form. The enactment was conceived as a means of dramatic reappropriation and reinterpretation of the folk narrative within the context of programmes of socio-cultural awakenings of the Vaḍār and other similar communities. In any case, the re-enacted narrative itself is supposed to be perceived in this manner as just an elementary step towards further self-investigation and a deeper critical social understanding that is to be reached through discussions among the members of the audience.

The said drama was first performed by children of my class from the Karmavir Mahavidyalaya, a high school at Redni, taluka Indapur, during the seminar—on the theme of *Popular Cultures And Cultural Action*—held in Pune in January 1998. The aim in submitting the performance for the consideration of the participants was to open up a debate on the mode and nature of such a process of reappropriation in the current Indian context.

This is the text of the narrative, the main analytic elements that the study-group arrived at, and the gist of the dialogue of the dramatic attempt at reappropriation.

### **Text of the narrative**

1) King Saśārāvād had a daughter. She was so beautiful that there was no need for lamp or candle whatsoever in the whole palace.

The king was concerned, and wondered in whose hands he should give such a girl in the full bloom of youth. But this is what the girl said: 'I shall put the garland around the neck of whoever is the best one in the whole world.' The announcement was made in heaven and on earth.

2) People from heaven and earth appeared in the royal hall of audience. The court was full. The god Āgnī (god of fire) stood up first. The minister of the king pointed out the shortcoming of the god Āgnī. Fire can be extinguished by water. Then the god Vayu (god of the winds) stood up: But a simple man can swallow air, too. Afterwards, Megharāj (god of the clouds) stood up: But a small breeze can push away a cloud. This is how all the gods came forward, but none of them were capable of being declared the best.

Eventually, the god Rāḷoḷḍ (the rock) appeared—and nothing can move a rock, neither fire nor wind nor rain. A rock stays immortal in its place. The princess resolved to put the garland around the the god Rāḷoḷḍ's neck.

3) At that very moment, from among the people on earth, a Vaḍār entered the hallowed hall of audience. He declared, 'The rock is not immortal. Wherever he may stand, a Vaḍār can remove it from its place.'

So, eventually, the Vaḍār was declared the best among the lot, superior to all the gods. The princess put the garland around the Vaḍār's neck and went on to live happily in his house. Thus was it decided that among all beings, the Vaḍār was the best.

4) Surya, the Sun god granted the Vaḍār seven lives and fallow land with seven boundaries (*śiva*).

### *Elements of Analysis*

The discursive structure of the narrative is exceedingly simple, and it may be reduced as four related sequences.

**1) A *kṣātriya* horizon:** The setting stages a context within a horizon that is far from unusual. The king has one nubile daughter. There is no mention of whether he also has a male heir to succeed him. The focus of the narrative is not on descent, continuity of lineage and permanence of the kingdom, but on the princess alone. She is the crucial actor, at the core of the entire dynamic of the story. At the outset, three significant attributes qualify the princess.

First, she is radiant, spreading in the palace a light that is compared to the most powerful radiance all over the world—that of Surya, the Sun, or solar, god, the progenitor of the solar dynasty of the *kṣātriya* king, who appears again at the end to put the final

seal of recognition upon the denouement. The symbolic association of the princess and the Sun god might be a reflection of the basic mythic pattern prevailing in all the systems of symbolic communication in the Indian subcontinent in which the Earth—embodied in Śrī, Sītā, Lakṣmi, Draupadī, etc.—has been, since the Vedic period, the female cosmic counterpart of the male figure of the king—embodied in Indra, Rāma,<sup>1</sup> and, here, the solar *kṣatriya* lineage. The king's anxiety about who could be found worthy of being given the hand of such a prestigious princess is, therefore, in perfect consonance with that overall semiotic and symbolic context. In matter of fact, even though our narrative seems unaware of that idiomatic age-old background, we cannot fail to observe that the *kṣatriya* context of the semantic horizon in which the narrative is staged places the figure of the princess in very prominent relief. This is the most significant feature of her personage.

Second, the narrative component of *swayaṃvar*—that of the princess setting the criteria for the choice of partner—is the crucial rhetoric element of the story. This is equally common in the genre of the Hindu epics, where the princess selects her partner through the process of an exacting trial, the criteria of which she may have previously chalked out. Here, too, the princess plays a leading role.

Third, within a *kṣatriya* context where the *swayaṃvar* is a common practice, a specific difference is here highly significant and measures the creative innovation of 'the narrative as discourse'. The condition defined by the princess is not a particular heroic deed but a straightforward question of unambiguous excellence among all existing beings. The whole semantic horizon is one of supreme ascendancy, not in terms of an abstract hierarchy of values and ideological status to be argued, nor in terms of a superior physical or magical strength to be proved, but in concrete terms of actual natural excellence.

**2) First trial and assessment:** The king's minister presides over the trial in presence of the king himself. All gods and men are called to appear in the royal hall of audience for the contest. Initially, only the gods appear. Each forcefully makes a show of superior strength, with implacable self-confidence and calculated boasting. The three first candidates, the gods Āgnī, Vāyu and Megharāj are disqualified: Rāḷoḷ is the only one left standing and is on the verge of being declared the winner. The sequence



displays a successive and progressive reversal of situations. The most widespread and impressive powers of the world are shown their weakness, while the most static, apparently inert and lifeless Rāḷoḷḍ, the god of rocks, proves the most enduring.

**3) Overall upturn:** This sequence effectuates another sudden and dramatic reversal. A Vaḍār, an earthworker, the commonest of labourers, appears and challenges the selection with incontrovertible verisimilitude. The decision to honour the god of rocks is revoked. It is an absolute reversal: a common man, a stonebreaker, is proven superior to all the gods and wins the hand of the princess, who goes and lives in his house. Indirectly, the discourse places the Vaḍār within the *kśatriya* horizon. Or, more pertinently, the excellence of the Vaḍār is such that the *kśatriya* status of the princess is somehow overshadowed, if not absorbed by the Vaḍārs.

**4) Acknowledgment and recognition:** The Vaḍār is granted seven lives and land with seven boundaries by the Sun god, Surya. This god, known to be the father of the *kśatriya* lineage, is himself definitely sanctioning the Vaḍār supremacy.

The semantic import of the story can be articulated in terms of the construction of one's identity. The narrative as discourse is meant to raise one's self-image to a firmer ground. The concern is with questions of social identification, self-assertion, and a direct and clear projection of one's personal worth and superiority.

The particularity of the claim is that it takes utilizes as the fundamentals of its argument the everyday occupational activities of the Vaḍārs—earthworkers and stonebreakers: in short, manual labourers. The argument rests upon their qualification as workers, and the physical strength characteristic of the Vaḍārs as stonebreakers—Śudras, from the so-called servile caste. The narrative is a complete upending of the established social order and value systems: according to it, subalterns turn their manual occupational strength and skill into assets of excellence and overall ascendancy over gods, kings and other humans.

The claim in this regard is a deed of self-assertion that also challenges the natural order of things—the rock, for one, is budged by no natural forces such as fire, wind or water—and the statuses of the godly entities ascribed to the same forces deified as Āgnī, Vāyu, Megharāj and Rāḷoḷḍ are put into question. A common

manual worker with only his bare physical strength and work expertise can do what no forces of nature, whether left to themselves or to the forces of deification, can ever achieve. Human workers are superior to the gods.

Moreover, the authority to make suggestions and assessments normally invested in the king shifts twice, first from the king to his minister, who is presiding over the royal council, and then from the minister to the judgement of a commoner. The challenge takes place at the level of representations and symbolic systems of communication, through the sheer power of loaded words and statements. The Vaḍār neither performs a feat of strength nor enacts a heroic deed to prove his superiority. There is no competitive show of exceptional and/or hidden powers. The entire proceedings are transparent. The Vaḍār only articulates his personal vision of his everyday life of a manual worker.

We could, if we wanted to, possibly read further, beyond and within the immediate and conscious move of self-assertion in this narrative another more profound—though unconscious and inexplicit—wish for ascendancy and superiority over gods and kings—all those invested with ascribed power—on the part of commoners and subordinates.

## Dramatic Re-enactment: Summary of the Dialogue

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### Scene I—Vaḍārs at work

Yankoba: Durgababa, it is getting very hot now. Come, let's sit in the shade and drink a glass of water.

Durga: Listen, you are all young and hearty, I am old. But I work because I cannot sit quiet at home. Come, let's sit under that tree.

Yankoba: Rama, Shiva, Bayada, come on, keep your tools down over there and come here.

*(They all keep their tools down and sit together.)*

Yankoba

*(drinking water):* Durgababa, breaking stones like this with black bodies, digging the earth—what kind of work

- have our ancestors given us? Were they living like this, our Vaḍārs of former times?
- Durga: Yankoba, our ancestors were very famous, our community had progressed a lot. It had earned fame for itself in the world.
- Bayada: My grandfather had told me a story of our ancestors. I don't remember it now. But the King of Atpadi had built a samadhi, a tomb in the memory of Madanya Vaḍār and had looked after his children.
- Rama: A samadhi for our Vaḍār!
- Durga: Yes. What Bayada says is true. Our community was really renowned. Let me tell you a whole story about our community and then you will understand.
- All together: Please, Durgababa, please tell us!
- Durga: Listen, everybody, listen carefully. A king was reigning in the city of Sasharavad. The king had a daughter. She was so beautiful that there was no need to light the lamps in the palace. So much light she would radiate like the sun. The king was worried as to whom he could give such a beautiful girl in marriage.

## Scene II—The King's court

- King: Prime Minister!
- Prime Minister: Yes, Your Highness.
- King: I do not know what to do about the princess' marriage. Let us ask the princess herself. Call the princess here, in the court.
- Prime Minister: Yes, Your Highness. (*Turning around*) Her Royal Highness is requested to come here.
- Princess (*enters*): I offer you my respects, father.
- King: Dear daughter, I am worried about your marriage.
- Princess: Your Highness, I am ready to get married—but I have a condition.
- King: Go ahead. Tell me what your condition is.
- Princess: I will marry the one who is the most superior in this world.

- Prime Minister: How to decide who is the most superior in this world?
- King: This condition is very difficult.
- Princess: Your Highness, if you don't agree to this condition, I will not marry.
- King: I agree to your condition. Prime minister, proclaim on the earth and in paradise, declare that whoever proves his superiority in the whole world, the princess of Sasharavad will marry him.
- Prime Minister: Yes, Your Highness.

*(The court clown comes and makes the proclamation.)*

- Clown: Listen, listen, listen. Everybody on the earth is informed that the princess of Sasharavad will marry whoever will prove his superiority in the whole world. Come on, I still have to go and proclaim in the land of gods. *(Takes three rounds in the same place.)*

### **Scene III—Reactions of the Vaḍār to the princess' demand**

- Bayada: Durgababa, does it mean that in those times women themselves decided what type of a husband they wanted?
- Chandi: This means that the princess was lucky. She had the right to choose her life partner.
- Bayada: Was it really like this in those days?
- Yankoba: Why are you praising the princess? That princess was arrogantly talking back to her father.
- Rama: Fortunately, our girls are under our control today. So, at least there is discipline.
- Bayada: Do men ever ask a girl what she thinks when they decide her marriage? Whether she wants a fair husband, an educated husband? They tie her to anybody, whatever he may be. The poor girl then has to spend her married life with him.
- Chandi: But if the girl is dark, the boy deserts her and marries a second time. The poor girl has to suffer her whole life alone.

- Durga: You, ladies, why are you fighting? It is like this in the story of our community. I am not telling you anything from my mind. A girl can also think about her likes and dislikes. She can also make her decisions. You may think what you feel.
- Yankoba: The princess' condition is proclaimed.
- Durga: You know, when once a proclamation was given, everybody was allowed to be present in the king's court—he may be poor, a rich sardar, a labourer. All had an equal opportunity.
- Chandi: Durgababa, what happened in the king's court?
- Bayada: Who proved to be superior?
- Durga: Wait, I will tell you. Listen to what happened next. The king's court assembled. The 33 crore gods and princes from several countries came to the court. Each one of them began to prove his superiority.

#### **Scene IV—Gods fail to prove their superiority**

- King: Prime Minister, start the proceedings.
- Prime Minister  
(to the Fire God): Oh God, please introduce yourself.
- Fire God: I am the Fire God. I can burn the whole world in a second. Do you want me to show it? Do you? Nobody is superior to me.
- Prime Minister: Oh supreme God, there is a mistake in what you said.
- Fire God: Mistake? A mistake in what I said?
- Prime Minister: Yes, ordinary water can finish fire. King, the Fire God has failed the test. Now, who is next?
- Prime Minister  
(to the Wind God): Please introduce yourself, oh God, to the people in the court.
- Wind God: I am the Wind God. If it comes to my mind, I can stall the whole world where it is. I will not let it move. And fire and water cannot finish me.
- Prime Minister: What you say is worthless. Doesn't wind mean air? Even an ordinary human being can swallow you.

- Clown: Wind God, shall I swallow you? I will swallow if it is good: anyway, there was no air pollution at that time. (*Swallows air*)
- King: How sad! Even the Wind God has failed. Who is next, Prime Minister?
- Prime Minister (*to the Cloud God*): Gently, gently, I beg of you to introduce yourself in a gentle voice. (*The Cloud God laughs*) Gently, gently.
- Cloud God (*laughs*): I am the Cloud God. If I thunder, the whole world will be inundated. I shall turn into water, water everywhere. Nobody can finish me. Nobody dare do it!
- Prime Minister: Easy, easy, take it a little easy. Empty vessels make more noise. Oh, Cloud God, an ordinary wind blowing harasses you. How can you be superior?
- King: The Cloud God has fallen with a bang.
- Prime Minister: Your Highness, now the last god is remaining. (*To the Mountain God*) Please introduce yourself.
- Mountain God (*in a firm voice*): I am the Mountain God, firm like a mountain ridge. Nobody can move me. Wind, rain, sunshine, none can offend me. If they try to do it, they will bang against me and be finished. Now, tell me, who is superior to me?
- King: Prime Minister, why are you keeping quiet?
- Prime Minister: Your Highness, think well before giving the decision.
- King: Okay. Please take your seats. I will give the decision after some time.

(*The King and the Prime Minister think. The Mountain God laughs.*)

### Scene V—Comments of the labourers

- Yankoba: This means that the Mountain God will be proved superior.

- Rama: The Mountain God will take the princess away.  
Durga: Wait, wait. The King and the Prime Minister are still to think about it. No decision is given yet.
- Yankoba: Durgababa, you said that this story is about our community. But it does not appear so.
- Durga: All the gods have lost. Only the Mountain God is remaining. The Mountain God also loses. All the gods have been defeated.
- Bayada: Then who proves to be the most superior?  
Yankoba: Bayada, they are all gods over there. There is no one from our earth. Then, how can the decision be taken? Who will go among the gods?

*(The clown comes to proclaim.)*

- Clown: I had proclaimed everywhere. But nobody from the earth came. So His Highness has sent me again. Listen, listen, listen ... Everybody on earth is informed that the princess of Sasharavad will marry the person who will prove his superiority in the whole world. *(Exits)*
- Durga: Now, see what happens in the story next. One of our Vaḍār hears the proclamation and does something very interesting.
- Rama *(surprised)*: A Vaḍār, in a king's court!

### **Scene VI—A Vaḍār is declared the best in court**

- Mountain God: I am immortal. The whole world is standing on me. If I become angry and move slightly, everything will be destroyed. I have destroyed so many kingdoms so far. Not even their names remain.
- Prime Minister: This god is bulky, like a stone. Your Highness, I think the superiority of the Mountain God is proved.

*(The Vaḍār enters.)*

- Vaḍār: Wait, Your Highness.  
Mountain God: Who is this dirty man?

- King: Mountain God, do not use words that will offend anybody. This court is for all. Gentleman, introduce yourself to the court.
- Vaḍār: Your Highness, I am an ordinary Vaḍār, a Vaḍār who breaks stones. This palace of yours—it is we who built it. We also shape gods from stones. However big a stone may be, we can break it into pieces.
- Prime Minister: Your Highness, the Mountain God is broken into pieces. The Vaḍār has proved to be the most superior. Your Highness should give the decision. The Vaḍār has fulfilled the princess's condition. The Vaḍār has proved himself superior on earth and in paradise. Hence, the Vaḍār should be married to the princess. What do you have to say, princess?
- Princess: Your Highness, your decision is just and I accept it.
- Prime Minister: Princess, come, the person who fulfilled your condition was found only on the earth. (*The princess garlands the Vaḍār.*)

### Scene VII—Comments of the labourers

- All: The Vaḍār has won, the Vaḍār has won!
- Durga: The Vaḍār won and the 33 crore gods were defeated.
- Rama: Durgababa, tell me one thing. The 33 crore gods had come to win the hand of the princess. Then why was our man also called?
- Durga: Our King is clever. The King thinks about each individual. He thinks about all the subjects—gods and men alike. The King sees the quality of a person. He does not go by talk.
- Yankoba: The King must have given a lot of wealth to the Vaḍār. May be a kingdom or at least a job in the court?
- Durga: The King didn't give anything. But the Sun God did.
- Bayada: What things did the Sun God give?



**Scene VIII—King’s proclamation**

Sun God: The Vaḍār has been proved the most superior on earth and in paradise. That is why the Vaḍār is being given fields in seven villages for seven births.

Vaḍār: I and my seven generations will break stones in this field. We will dig the earth and work very hard. I will build wells, lakes for the people in our city. I will build houses for them. I will take more care of this field than my own self and I will keep the princess happy.

King: That is now your right.

*(Shouts of ‘Long Live the King!’)*

**Scene IX—Vaḍārs back at work**

Yankoba: The Sun God has given this field for us as our livelihood for seven births.

Durga: This stone and earth is our life. Our hard work with this stone and earth will never go waste. Some day, some time, we will also get our place in the court of today’s democracy.

Bayada: When we will get it, we will see. But, just now, we have to work for our immediate living.

Yankoba: The Sun God has given us this field for our livelihood. We must work hard on it. Otherwise, how will our community improve?

Durga: Come, come, get back to work. The sun has gone down.

*(All pick up the tools and get back to work.)*

**Note**

1. The couple, Sitā-Rāma, is then to be considered as an epic transposition of the theological couple, Sitā-Indra.

# 5

## MĀṄG NARRATIVES: Semantic Reappropriation of a Myth

SANJAY JOGDANDA

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### Bhāḍaḷābāī and the 33-Crore Gods

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The narrative was collected by Sanjay Jogdanda on 25 September 1994 from Namdeo Hari Pagare, Post Office Shingwe, *taluka* Kopargaon, Ahmednagar District, Maharashtra. The narrative belongs to the Māṅg community as a self-recognition of self-assertion and an emblem of caste identity, since its central hero, Bhāḍaḷābāī, is a Māṅg woman. A number of popular religious booklets are regularly published in Marathi, at Mumbai, Pune, Sangli, Delhi, etc., and constantly re-edited under the title ‘Śāhādev Bhāḍaḷī Jyotiṣa Śāṣtra’ (in Gujarati, ‘Bhāḍaḷī Vākya’, in Hindi, ‘Bhāḍaḷī Meghamālā’) with entirely differing purposes and perspectives. They intend to circulate astrological and magical knowledge ‘to the benefit of peasants, traders, common men and women’. Some books have a short introduction that presents that knowledge as imparted by Śāhādev, son legitimately born to Mārtaṅḍa Joṣī, a Brahman from Phaltan, and Bhāḍaḷī, a daughter born to the same from a *Budra* woman, the word *śudra* being apparently used to cover up the fact that Bhāḍaḷī belonged to the Māṅg community. What matters here is the reading and re-appropriation of the narrative within the Māṅg community, intending to counter its use by upper caste propagandists.

Let us first take cognizance of the text of the narrative.

Bhāḍāḷābāī was a Māṅg. She was the most superior among the 33-crore deities.

1) When came the time to take a bath, the 33-crore deities left to do so. Śāhādev lagged behind all of them, hobbling along with a book under his arm. Bhāḍāḷābāī had buffaloes with her. There was a pool of water in which the buffaloes were wallowing. At the side of the pool, Bhāḍāḷābāī was guarding them. Śāhādev was walking past the path bordering the pool. Bhāḍāḷābāī asked, 'Where are you going?' Śāhādev said, 'Thirty-three-crore gods have gone for their bath. I am also going there.' Bhāḍāḷābāī said, 'That is also water and this is also water.' Śāhādev said, 'This water has become dirty.' He meant that the water in the pool had become dirty because of the buffaloes. Bhāḍāḷābāī said, 'If your mind is clean, the water will become clean.'

Śāhādev listened to what Bhāḍāḷābāī had told him. He first removed his clothes and entered the pool of water. When he took his first handful of water, he found diamonds, pebbles, and rubies in his hands. In the next five handfuls, he got gold, a full heap of it.

Now, Śāhādev was reading the sacred book while having his bath. When the gods returned from their bath, they saw him and said, 'Śāhādev, you are having a bath in a dirty pool and reading the sacred book.' Śāhādev replied, 'You went for a bath: did you find anything?' The gods said, 'No.' Then Śāhādev showed them the heap of gold. The gods were bewildered and began quivering when they saw his wealth. They asked him, 'Who gave you this?' Śāhādev said, 'Bhāḍāḷābāī'. The gods asked, 'Where is Bhāḍāḷābāī?' But she had disappeared.

2) The 33-crore gods started searching for her everywhere. But she had gone beyond the seven seas. All the gods were in a fix. Nobody could eat. They did not know what to do. With whom should they send a message to her?

First, they sent Gaddheśvar, who found a heap of garbage where there were corn stems. Sitting down, he started eating a corn stem. In time, the 33-crore gods got tired waiting for Gaddheśvar.

Then they sent Kāgaleśvar, hoping that he would return soon. Kāgaleśvar went near Bhāḍāḷābāī and prostrated himself at her

feet. He said, 'Bhāḍāḷābāī, you came here, and all the 33-crore gods are in a critical condition. You have come here, but I request you to return and bring them back to life. It is doubtful whether they will ever live.' She gave a vial of nectar to Kāgaleśvar. 'Sprinkle this vial on the gods,' she told him. 'They shall all come back to life. I will follow you. You go ahead.' Kāgaleśvar departed. On the way, however, he changed his mind. If 33-crore gods come back to life, he thought, I shall not die if I myself have the nectar. Then, he sat on a *sher* tree,<sup>1</sup> opened the vial, and drank all the nectar. He wiped his beak on the *hāraḷī* grass.<sup>2</sup> He excreted on the *kuṇḍā* grass.<sup>3</sup> That is why, the *sher* tree, *kuṇḍā* and *hāraḷī* grass do not die out.

3) Bhāḍāḷābāī arrived later. She found the dead bodies of the gods and sprinkled nectar on them, following which they all came back to life. The gods said to her, 'You went and we died.' She replied: 'Why didn't you send somebody to me?' The gods said, 'We had sent Gaddheśvar. But you didn't come. What did Gaddheśvar tell you?' She said, 'I didn't meet him.'

Bhāḍāḷābāī called Gaddheśvar and asked him why he hadn't come. Gaddheśvar started blubbering, '*Māī*, Mother, I found the corn stems, I ate them and idled there.' Bhāḍāḷābāī cursed Gaddheśvar, 'You will eat corn stems, and you will roll about on garbage heaps only.'

About Kāgaleśvar, Bhāḍāḷābāī said, 'He came. I gave him the vial of nectar. Didn't he sprinkle it on your faces?' 'No,' said the gods. Then, they called Kāgaleśvar. Bhāḍāḷābāī said, 'What did you do with the vial of nectar that I gave you?' '*Māī*, Mother, I changed my mind,' he said. 'I drank it myself. I opened the vial on the *sher* tree, wiped my beak on the *hāraḷī*, and excreted on the *kuṇḍā* grass. They will not die.' Bhāḍāḷābāī cursed him, 'Go away, you will turn around crowing all the time.'

## Interpretation

A close look at the discursive structure of the narrative will unearth the sets of symbolic oppositions and the processes of inversion that construct its overall logic, in a series of three sequences that logically link up one with the other.

*The Pond and the Bath*

The first part of the first sequence displays two spheres of reality that are clearly differentiated from one another: the 'woman' sphere projects a degraded world, which is discriminated against; the 'gods' sphere projects the true world, which alone makes sense. This is articulated through several pairs of opposites that structure the background setting at various levels so as to construct a binary opposition of two worlds set apart from each other. At one extreme, the Woman World is located down on earth in the dirty mud of a pond; opposite it stands the World of All the Gods, located somewhere else, at a distance, in an unseen and unknown place, where the gods live on their own, totally self-sufficient and unmindful of the other World. They just pass it by.

| Level     | The Woman                                   | The Gods, <i>devas</i>                                    |
|-----------|---|---|
| Number    | One single woman                            | 33-crore gods   |
| Gender    | One female being                            | All male beings   |
| Status    | Common being on earth                       | All deities   |
| Knowledge | Illiterate peasant                          | Sacred books  |
| Behaviour | Keeping of buffaloes                        | Performance of rituals                                    |
| Space     | Around a pond, a place down on earth        | Gods pass along towards a distant, unseen place           |
| Focus     | Daily work scene, livelihood is the concern | Daily ritualistic compulsion, concern for symbolic values |
| Value     | Dirty water                                 | Pure water  |

This clear-cut mutual opposition is initially projected in order to be challenged and subverted by inversion. The validity of the static display of opposing values happens to be upended by Bhāḍāḷābāī herself, the crucial actor. The initiative to question the status quo comes from Bhāḍāḷābāī. Her question goes to the very root of the system that gives her and what she represents a degraded and valueless status, in so far as she challenges Śāhādev's vision of 'the reality'. The questioning could not have been more radical: were Śāhādev's mind clean, the water of the pond would be clean. The questioning invalidates the given order

altogether by uprooting its very foundation. The world of the gods becomes a mere imaginary and ideological construct.

The second part of the sequence is a total reversal of the norm. First, Śāhādev surrenders forthwith. He listens to the woman and makes a complete turnaround. His move and mental focus bring him towards the pond and its visible water, into which he enters. He turns his back on the ritualistic, invisible world of the gods.

Second, the water of the pond proves itself to be the most fertile source of non-perishable wealth. The overall symbolic–semantic import is clear: fecundity and richness are on the side of Woman and Water, while the gods return empty-handed from their distant place and sterile rituals.

### *The Disappearance and the Search*

The moves, attitudes and condition of the gods at the beginning of the second sequence are categorically the reverse of their fettle at the start of the first sequence, when they are passing along the pond absolutely indifferent to Bhāḍāḷābāī's presence, keen only to keep themselves apart, at a remove. Now, they desperately look for her, but she is no longer available. The anxiety her absence provokes is a measure of the extent to which they feel themselves at her mercy. They starve and die. Their initial arrogance and complacency is superseded by a state of utmost dependency. The present state of total impotence and helplessness of the entire world of 33-crore gods stands out in sharp relief against their initial grandiosity—but it hardly comes as a surprise after the preceding episode of their sterile bath.

The second significant element of the sequence is the selfish attitude of the two gods sent as messengers. These gods are not of the extant population of 33-crore *devas*. They are local, personal gods, *iśvars*, apparently inferior to the *devas* who use them as their servants and messengers. The inferior position of the *iśvars* is reflected in the fact that they are animal-gods. The first one, Gaddheśvar, the donkey-god, does not even bother to search for and meet Bhāḍāḷābāī. As soon as he finds a garbage stoop with corn stems, he stops, gobbles to his heart's content, and promptly forgets the mission that he was entrusted with. The second one is still more selfish: he keeps all the nectar for himself.

What is again striking is the state of impotency and utter dependency of the *devas* on the 'vulgar' local gods. Moreover, the latter might cheat them and actually have contempt for them, but the *devas* do not realise it, standing virtually helpless in front of the whimsical and unconsciously irresponsible local deities. The second sequence is a logical replica of the first: Bhāḍāḷābāī is the only one who can give the nectar of life to the dead, as she is the only one who can grant wealth to the living. Both the sequences end in the same manner, with the absence of Bhāḍāḷābāī and the consequent helplessness of the gods: previously, she had simply disappeared; here, her nectar was misappropriated.

The absence of Bhāḍāḷābāī stresses the fact that she belongs in reality to a world of power of her own 'beyond the seven oceans', a world in which the *devas* do not belong. Confronted by this secret and magical power, they are reduced to nonentities.

### *The Manifestation and the Authority*

Two events are significant in this conclusive sequence. First, Bhāḍāḷābāī appears at her own time and according to her own will. She brings back to life the gods, who confess, 'You went and we died.' This is the central message of the myth as discourse. This supremacy is, moreover, proclaimed by Bhāḍāḷābāī herself in her bemused question, 'Why did you not send somebody for me?', which implies that she knows herself and wants to be recognized as the single source of life. She obtains from the gods the *de facto* confession of total subjection that she expects. 'We have sent Gaddheśvar...Kāgaleśvar...', they tell her. The myth as discourse intends to upstage the whole population of 33-crore gods into a state of total helplessness and dependency on Bhāḍāḷābāī.

The second significant element is the dominance of Bhāḍāḷābāī over local *īśvars* on earth. They are apparently treated as beings of an inferior grade. As attrition for their senseless behaviour, they are only worth a curse that gives them the status of animals as a reward adequate to conduct that was clearly devoid of normal reasoning. Bhāḍāḷābāī treats each one, and assigns to everyone, a status and a mode of life in accordance with his mental nature and behavioural pattern. Her final intervention shows her competence and authority to decide the overarching anthropological dispensation.

### *The Gender Divide*

A simple observation may give us a hint of the internal structural intention of the narrative: from beginning to the end, Bhāḍāḷābāī—the Woman—is opposed to solely Male actors. Female power is pitted against male impotence, female fertility against male sterility, female authority against male subjection, female water against male drought, female life-substance against male inertia-ritualism.

### *Eponyme as Emblem*

I collected the story of Bhāḍāḷābāī while circulating among the Māṅg people to study their history and apprehend the self-representations that they possess. To me, as a Māṅg, the story suggests messages of māṅg identity and self-respect. To the narrator and his community, Bhāḍāḷābāī is an eminently powerful eponyme for the Māṅg community to recognize itself and project its own image. We can, for certain, achieve something through giving due importance in society to this story in this perspective.

Bhāḍāḷābāī is a Māṅg woman who retains some ‘mysterious power’ (*adbhūt śaktī*). She alone can bring back to life the 33-crore deities. The message for the Māṅgs is this: ‘We are different from others. We definitely have a position (status, *sthān*) of our own. We are not inferior beings. We are also capable of achieving something. The evidence of this is that one woman can give life to 33-crore gods.’ This is the social motivation that I see prompting the story.

Furthermore, Bhāḍāḷābāī displays no pride. Nonetheless, she is determined to do something for others. With this purpose in mind, she goes beyond the seven seas and fetches the nectar that she then sprinkles on the 33-crore deities. The life she gives them is a gift. The selfishness and greed of the gods, whether *devas* or *śivas*, stands in sharp contrast to her magnanimity. The gods are mean beings: this, for the Māṅgs, is sufficient for self-respect.

Bhāḍāḷābāī is a commoner woman looking after buffaloes, or draft animals, when they bathe in the pond. Nevertheless, she is powerful beyond her station. She is skilled and capable. ‘We have our own capabilities. Why should we yield to others?’ This is the message of self-confidence that the narrative intends to convey.



*Social Critique: A Utopia of Reversal*

The story conveys a particular worldview and social representations. A sociological reading reveals vividly enough two unambiguous structural social divides conspicuous in the narrative. They obviously project a critical insight of a hierarchical and binary structure of the world set-up.

The first divide is between two orders of beings with no common concerns: the immense world of divine entities—*devas* and *śivas*—and the down-to-earth world of the common country peasant. The idioms are, on the one side, the usual high Marathi words: Śahādev with a religious book, hobbling along as a learned Brahman with his *pothī* (popular scriptures); the gods concerned with their ritual bath and blind to the ‘dirty’ world around them. On the other side, a cowgirl, the simplest of women tending to her buffaloes who enjoy bathing in the water and mud of a pond along the path the gods are taking.

The reversal of value parameters and of the attributes of each world is both radoca; and crucial: the simple woman can cross the seven oceans (the limits of this world, apparently inhabited by humans and divine beings), and transport herself beyond these limits into a realm of magic powers where she belongs. She moves at will. In sharp contrast, the gods are helplessly rooted in the earth, where they are comprehensively impotent. They depend absolutely upon the presence and magic powers of the woman to simply survive.

Bhāḍāḷābāi takes on full and sovereign authority to give life, beckon, admonish, curse the gods, and assign to each one his place. None of them dares to object. She denounces their deceitful manners—‘If your mind is clean....’—qualifying as irrelevant and ineffective, in that single stroke, all their baths of purification. The core value of purity, in which the humans-gods divide is grounded, vanishes as being illusory. The effects of her words and curses are immediate, and the listeners can observe their effectiveness: she curses the crow—henceforth, the crow is always seen moving and crowing; she curses the donkey—thereafter, it is always seen rolling about on heaps of garbage.

The story exhibits the inner social conflict of subalterns who, through their narratives, invert the system of competencies and authority, capsizing the given order and rising to a position of

absolute ascendancy. The inversion, moreover, places at the top a subaltern woman: the gender hierarchy is simultaneously reversed. In the waters of her pond—in her womb, so to speak—jewels, gold and riches aplenty; in her hands, the essence of life to be sprinkled on the dead; in her absence—when she disappears—anxiety of death and the ineffable longing for her return.

### *From Utopia to History*

Till today, the story of Bhāḍāḷābāī has circulated as a living tradition, carrying with it representations collectively shared by the Māṅg community. The story is a mirror of the world order as seen from the Māṅg perspective, and is a utopian claim to a radical inversion of the established system. Now, how can this narrative actually stand its ground as a symbol that effectively prompts historical reversals based on those very imaginary claims of self-respect and identification? Through accepting these utopian perceptions as legitimate traditional grounds as claims to an alternative order: ‘We have also our particular tradition’; ‘We shall not submit to others’; ‘We are also powerful people’; ‘We retain a mysterious power,’ and so on. Moreover, the central hero being a Māṅg woman, a human being considered contemptuously both as a woman and as an untouchable, we shall ask: ‘Why, then, should our women feel inferior? A woman—no woman, though she be the commonest and most discriminated against—has any reason to feel inferior. She is gifted with strength and capabilities.’ This is our Māṅg tradition.

## Notes

1. *Sher tree*: the milk-bush, *euphorbia tirucalli* (Molesworth).
2. *Hāraḷī*, grass: a type of grass, although cut clean to the ground and removed in appearance altogether by being dugged out with its roots, still continues to shoot out from the few ramifications remaining and at length to flourish as at first (Molesworth).
3. *Kuṇḍā*: a kind of grass (Molesworth).

# 6

## BHAKTI: A Faith for Rehabilitation

GUY POITEVIN AND HEMA RAIRKAR

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### First Acquaintance: Fascination and Fantasy

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Gaṅgubāi was 57 years old when we came in touch with her in her village, Tāḍkaḷas,<sup>1</sup> in 7 April 1996. We<sup>2</sup> were for the first time in the village to record grindmill songs. A group of women gathered for that purpose at the invitation of Prof. Sham Pathak<sup>3</sup> and his family in their spacious, old house in the village. The Pathak family belongs to the Brahman community, but Prof. Pathak's mother<sup>4</sup> enjoys collecting women from various castes: Bhoī, Marāthā, Dhaṅgar and Brāhmaṇ women had enthusiastically assembled to sing, as with one mind, and be recorded.

A number of women settle down to grind and sing when Prof. Pathak's mother sends a young girl to summon Gaṅgā from the Rām Mandir. A short while later, a woman, all of 5 feet tall, enters the room, wrapped in a six-metre-long green sari. She keeps both her hands hidden under the *pallu* of her sari. Black tooth powder has turned her teeth blackish. Deep wrinkles all over a dark face tell their own stories of endurance. Her large eyes thrust whitish beams of disquieting light. She sits leaning with her back against the wall of the veranda. The songs of the grindmill bring gleams of joy to her face. When a singer makes a mistake,

she intervenes to recall the correct word. She constantly raises the hands hidden under the end of the sari to wipe the liquid oozing from her eyes. Sometimes, lost in her own world, she whispers songs for, and to herself. Prof. Pathak's mother calls out to her, 'Eh Gaṅgā, sing a song!' Gajarabai Darekar (from our group) also insists that she should join the group, set herself to grind, and sing loudly in the middle of the assembly. Then, a smiling Gaṅgubāī, with her head keeping nodding gently, strikes up the first verse, which is then followed by many other distiches:

*'He has gone out of station, my dear one...'*

Her marvellous voice surpasses those of the other women. Her words flow from her innermost depths. Her singing exerts an irresistible attraction.

Then we realize that she is hiding her hands and feet because she has leprosy: she has lost all her fingers and toes. So there is no question of her coming forward to grasp the handle of the grindmill while she is singing. We immediately feel a particular sympathy for her. We learn that she contracted the disease when she was ten years old. As a child, she would sleep close to her maternal grandmother, who was similarly affected. The washerwoman who washed the clothes of the family also contracted the disease. We are told that she stays absolutely alone in the temple of Rām, distant from her relatives and the villagers. We leave the village under a spell, but determined to come again and meet Gaṅgubāī independent of her audience.

Gaṅgubāī's singing was of such a high quality that Bernard Bel could not but wish to make a special, prolonged recording of her personal performance. Considering the particular condition of the leprosy-afflicted Gaṅgubāī, apparently abandoned by everyone and left to seek refuge for herself in God, we were both perplexed by, and curious to understand how, the tradition of grindmill songs helping a deserted and stigmatized woman to cope with, and possibly overcome, a societal condition of extreme solitude and deprivation. Our intention went beyond recording a significant wealth of tunes and songs for the objectives of musical analyses and study of traditional musical creativity among peasant women—we wanted to take Gaṅgubāī's interview to get her testimony about the particular relevance and meaning of that tradition of songs for

herself. Meanwhile B. Bel directed Malavika Talukdar<sup>5</sup> to simultaneously realize a document of visual anthropology on Gaṅgubāi's life experience with special focus on the singing performance as a significant example of spontaneous self-expression and assertion.

On 5–6 February 1997, we<sup>6</sup> were again in Tāḍkaḷas for a second visit with definite purposes. We directly went to the Rām temple in the centre of the old part of the village to meet Gaṅgubāi. At first, she was reluctant to speak, and it took us some time to obtain information from her. Thereafter, we spent all our time with her in the temple, exchanging, recording her interview and her songs. Talukdar shot scenes in the temple and the village on video.

Not only did Gaṅgubāi sing a great number of songs, but she also revealed her particular motives for singing. First, as a rule, her songs always express to God what she carries in her mind. Second, we had come to meet her personally, and as she had nothing to offer, neither tea nor meal, to her hosts, and she felt that she should sing songs for us to tape, since that was our purpose, and our expectation. When we departed the next day, she confided:

If somebody like you comes, I feel entertained. I feel peaceful now. Once alone, my mind is in turmoil.

The information that we received was not always corroborated by what we gathered from other people in the village, and we<sup>7</sup> visited her and her village again a third time on 22–24 March 1997, and a fourth time<sup>8</sup> on 3–4 May 1997, in order to clarify several points.

The first visit had prompted us in particular to entertain serious misconceptions about the rapport between Gaṅgubāi and her relatives—the villagers, in general—on account of her leprosy. We had precipitously ascribed to her condition a stigma that explained her rejection and enforced isolation within the temple. We soon realized, though, that we could figure out neither Gaṅgubāi's perceptions nor the attitudes of relatives and village people in an atmosphere of taboo, social stigma, curses and the like. Gaṅgubāi has not been rejected or banished to the outskirts of the village for reasons of impurity due to her leprosy: she stays within the Rām temple, which is located at the heart of the old village. We could, on the other hand, regret the initial carelessness of a

grandmother keeping her young granddaughter so close to her. Gaṅgubāī does not feel socially marginalized nor personally rejected either. Soon enough, many events made us realize that a perception of societal rejection was an example of fantasizing on the part of ‘outsider’ observers. We actually found no trace of stigma, pollution, quarantine, and the consequent symbolic rejection on account of her leprosy. For instance, on 5 February, we had just started recording Gaṅgubāī’s songs when a teenage girl from the village entered the temple with a couple of friends of her age, stood on the staircase and addressed her:

Aunty, I come to fetch you, our aunty is with a bad headache.  
She is calling you to give the *mantra*. Come to our house.  
‘I’ll come after some time,’ replied Gaṅgubāī.

Our curiosity was aroused: Gaṅgubāī replied to all our questions about her competence in healing through *mantras*. Meanwhile, instead of immediately returning home, the young girl and her friends had sat with us and requested her to sing the following song—a homecoming song for the bride:

*The bullock-cart with bells, from my mother’s place  
My dear brother is here, today I shall go to my mother’s place.*

Then Gaṅgubāī explained to us how young girls were very fond of her songs, especially the one that she had just been requested to sing.

They come, sit and enjoy listening. All of them call me aunty—  
*ātyā!*<sup>9</sup>

## Family Bonds

Gaṅgubāī belongs to the Marāṭhā community. She was born in the village of Airandeśvar, that of her maternal grandmother,<sup>10</sup> in the same district of Parbhāṇī. Her parents were from the farmers’ community of Tāḍkaḷas and among its leading *Pāṭi!*<sup>11</sup> families. They owned the 12 acres of rainfed land that they cultivated. Gaṅgubāī remembers with pride:

In this village of Tāḍkaḷas, my father had a *vādā*<sup>12</sup> of 16 *khaṇs*.<sup>13</sup> As number three of the *Pāṭīl* House, I used to strut around.

Gaṅgubāi was not taught to read and write, occasionally hearing about the wider world through others. She knows of two important events of her time, the first of which was the *razakar* movement<sup>14</sup> when she was about five or six years old (the movement, which started in 1944, was at its peak between 1946 and 1950):

Their men were plundering and looting the houses, and detaining people. They were marching past in the streets of the village. I remember the fighting that was going on. People were terror-stricken.

The second event was the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948, when ‘the houses of Brahmin people were set on fire’. She had also heard about Indira Gandhi’s assassination in 1984.

Gaṅgubāi had three brothers and one sister.

We are four altogether: my elder brother Saybu; Gyandev, the number two; myself, the number three; and my younger brother, Shahu. There was no small girl of my age in the neighbourhood to play with. My uncle, too, had no daughter. Women used to go and work in the fields. I also went with them. I used to keep busy with small works. Women sang while they worked. They used to sing *abhaṅgas*.<sup>15</sup>

Before I got married, my mother took me to Paṅḍharpūr. Since then, my mind is filled with the *bhakti*<sup>16</sup> of God. Also, after my marriage, I went with a neighbour woman again to Paṅḍharpūr.

Gaṅgubāi was given in marriage at the age of 11 to Dājibā Cavhāṇ, a man of 35, from a village called Aḍgāv.

He was from our caste, from our lineage, not from outside. He had lost both his parents within the 11 days of his birth. He had been looked after by a paternal aunt living in Tāḍkaḷas, where his parents had come. He then stayed on permanently in Tāḍkaḷas.

My *mālak* (literally, owner, but often meaning husband) had no father, no mother, no brother, no sister. This is the reason why he opened a retail shop in the village of my parents. He had no land. Our marriage took place in the temple of Rām.

Gaṅgubāī never visited her in-laws' family at Āḍgāv, where they had some land. Her husband never went back there, either. He was keeping a woman, Parvatī, who was from the village of Khaḍak Kānhegāv (of Parbhāṇī district). 'She might have been from a Maratha, a Māṅg or a Vārik (Nhāvī, barber) community, but nobody knew more about her.' They were living together but had not been duly wedded. According to local belief, a man must get married to obtain salvation. Therefore, considering that he was already over 35 and that no one would agree to marry his daughter off to him, the village people thought of marrying Gaṅgubāī to Dājībā Cavhāṅ. Gaṅgubāī was physically handicapped, so no one would have accepted her as a wife, either. At the beginning, Gaṅgubāī's father was reluctant to give her to a man so much older, but he had to abide by the decision of the villagers.

Gaṅgubāī gave birth to three daughters at her mother's place. Māyā, the first one, died when she was four months old. The second, Chabu, died when she was a year and a half old. Only the third survives—Śilā, also called Sūlocanā.

Though I had not offered the slightest thing at all to any god, this daughter survived.

Sūlocanā was given in marriage in the village of Ukhalpimpolī, Jintur taluka, in the district of Parbhāṇī. She has two daughters who attend school—the older, Mānikā, in Std VIII, and Svātī, a cadet, in Std V.

Pārvatī remained with Dājībā Cavhāṅ as his co-wife. She had no child. She took care of the domestic work, looked after Gaṅgubāī's children, entertained close and good relations with Gaṅgubāī's parents, who, says Gaṅgubāī, never harassed her. The co-wife visited Gaṅgubāī's parents every now and then, but nobody from Gaṅgubāī's family ever maintained any contact with Pārvatī's family.

Pārvatī never delivered. She never gave me any trouble. Pārvatī had nobody close to her like her husband. She had no issue.

Gaṅgubāī's sister's husband had two co-wives, and bore no children. According to Gaṅgubāī, her sister was killed by her husband. Gaṅgubāī's family no longer maintains relations with her



sister's family. 'The handmill is broken, the rapport is broken,' says Gaṅgubāī.

'I feel shocked:' for the sole reason that her husband murdered her. During her life, he married three times.

## Support and Desertion

Gaṅgubāī says that her parents used to help her: she delivered her three daughters with the assistance of her mother in their house; she had her daughter married off with the cooperation of her parents and brothers; her daughter went for her delivery to the house of her grandmother, Gaṅgubāī's mother. To all our questions about her husband's attitudes and behaviour, Gaṅgubāī's replies were always that her husband behaved very well with her; he was very tolerant and considerate with regard to her disease, too. When he died after a serious fever, Gaṅgubāī returned home and stayed with her parents, while Pārvatī, the co-wife, went back to her own parents.

I used to go and work in the fields with other women, discharging any sort of tasks except stitching. I could do all works: washing, cooking ... As long as I had strength, I was accompanying women in the fields, helping out, looking after the cattle, bringing fuel, searching for fodder—but now I am worn out.

While we were conversing, a distant and older female relative of Gaṅgubāī visited the temple. She told us:

We are from a *Pāṭī!* lineage. Formerly, when we were going to our fields, we used to wrap our head and face with a *dhoti*.<sup>17</sup> Once we had reached the fields we used to take off and keep aside the *dhoti*, and start working.

These practices were commonly observed. They also had to similarly cover themselves while traversing the village. We were also reminded that women were not allowed to visit shops and make any purchases on their own: those were the men's prerogative. The women, meanwhile, were sent to the fields to work.

When Gaṅgubāī's brothers got married, her disease was not considered a hurdle in the marriage arrangements, although

everybody knew about it. Gaṅgubāī said that her brothers' wives accepted her with equanimity. Nor did her disease become a barrier during the marriage of Gaṅgubāī's sister, nor during that of her own daughter. Her prospective son-in-law came and met her. After the marriage, she once visited her daughter in her new village, with no objection being raised by anyone.

When we asked Gaṅgubāī whether her parents had given her any medicine, either allopathic or indigenous, for her condition, we were amazed by Gaṅgubāī's very matter-of-fact reaction:

At that time, forty years ago, my parents did not have the idea of going to a doctor and giving medicine. My parents took me two times to Tuljapur, [pilgrimage to the abode of the Goddess Āmbābāī, famous all over Maharashtra]. My mother offered to the Goddess as votive offering hands made of silver. Once I had lost my fingers, what is the point of offering hands to the Goddess? What is the use of this?

Once, a guru came to the village. He advised my mother to take me to a village where there is a lake and give me a bath in it. But my mother did not take me to that village.

Once, a *Mahārāj*<sup>18</sup> came from Phadkal and told me to take juice of the *mendi*.<sup>19</sup> I drank it for 21 days but it proved to be of no use.

Barring these incidences, Gaṅgubāī does not remember having been given any medicine. Today, a doctor visits the village under the government's programme of leprosy eradication. He examines the schoolchildren and distributes medicines. 'He gave some to Gaṅgubāī too,' said a schoolboy of 12.

According to a villager, Gaṅgubāī had owned some land, but her second brother sold it and then drove her out of her parents' house. Gaṅgubāī, however, said that her father did not put any land under her name. (We asked her again in various manners about any land in her name, but her answer remained the same):

My father happened to pass away seven years after my husband. When he was dying I asked him: 'Father, give me one acre from the share of each of my three brothers. I shall live on it.' But my father did not agree. While dying, my father told Saybu and Gyandev: 'After me, take care of my daughter.' Now, the three brothers stay separately. I got nothing from my father's property. I have nothing under my control. I became dependent upon other people. Those two drunkards, Shahu and Gyandev,

went on drinking and seven acres of land were sold. But Saybu does not drink that much. Everything went under the control of my brothers. As long as I was able and could walk and work in the fields, my brothers took care of me.

We asked her, 'You did so many things for the family, and they still have not given you a share in the property?'

Why should they give me a share? Yesterday, an old lady died in the village. She was the owner of a field. She had seven brothers. Every brother had been saying that the other brother would look after her. But she died alone. What is the use of an estate, after all?

As for the reasons that obliged her to stay in the temple, she explained:

Our *karma*<sup>20</sup> is like that. What can we do about it? What's the use of incriminating anybody for it, and whom to blame? The destiny (*daivagati*) decides. What can we do? Now, I feel no shame nor any fear. This disease was in store (*sarñcit*) from a previous life. Such is the wish of God. It grieves me inwardly to be sick. I do not share this suffering with anybody: I do not even confide this grief to my daughter. I would have shared it with my son if I had got a boy.

At these words Gaṅgubāi straightaway strikes up the following song:

*I sang my first verse on the mill, Rām on your chariot, I greet you,  
My second verse I sing it every now and then at a stretch in my  
heart.*

Gaṅgubāi tells us that she was not driven out of the house, but left to her own counsel:

My second brother drinks too much. He gives trouble to everybody, above all to his wife. He breaks utensils, he beats the floor, he shouts. I have not been able to bear this. Then, I started living in this temple.

When my brother drinks and comes to the temple, he also says to me, 'Sing a song!' In the beginning when I started staying in the temple, for the first six months, I refused to talk with

my brother. But, then, I thought in myself, 'Why should I be so proud, I am a simple person.' One day, he came drunk to the temple. I was afraid and I hid behind the statue of god Datta. He went back. The next time, he came and stood before me. He said, 'Come and eat with me.' I told him, 'Today, I am on fast.' Then he said, 'I cannot give you anything to eat for your fast. I do not have money in my pocket. At home, nobody cares for me, what can I give you? But you sing songs. Why have you learnt singing? Is it only to keep songs in your mind or to sing? I want to listen to your songs.'

Once, in our presence, the youngest brother happened to enter in the temple and talk with her. Nevertheless, none of the three brothers seemingly wants to take her back.

When my brothers got married, the daughters-in-law entered the house. They gave birth to children. The disease that I had made them uneasy. I was putting my hands in the flour, handling the salt, dipping my hands in the water, fondling the children. The new daughters-in-law got restive with me—that old lady who was, moreover, doing nothing. Therefore, two years ago, I came to stay in this temple.

Village women, on the other hand, confirm that Gaṅgubāi used to go and deliberately touch the cooked food. Her family advised to keep her plate separate from the rest of the family's, but she refused.

Prof. Pathak's mother told us:

Gaṅgubāi has been suffering from bleeding since childhood. Although she has lost her fingers and toes, she performs all work by herself. It was when her brothers had children that she began shoving her hands in the flour, leading her daughters-in-law to wonder what might happen to their children if she continued behaving thus. That is what fuelled the quarrels, and that was why they drove her out of the house.

Said Prof. Pathak's brother:

We invite her to our place. People give her food. As long as she still had strength enough to work, they kept her at home. When they felt that they could not get work from her, they expelled her. I gave her medicines myself. The disease is now under control.

When we went to meet her on 6 February 1997, Gaṅgubāi took Malavika Talukdar and Jitendra Maid with her and entered her family home. This angered her younger brother, and he hurled abuses at her:

That damned nuisance, *pīḍā!* Why has she come? What shrew is this one, *avadasā!*

Gaṅgubāi felt hurt. She said:

Woman, the moon from the sky is in my house, Pāṇḍuraṅga<sup>21</sup> from Paṇḍhari, is in my heart. I came for nothing to this idiot's house. There is nobody at night in that temple but myself and my God.

The brother's son and his wife, though, showed no anger. Gaṅgubāi took the children in her arms. The three of them came out 20 minutes later. We learnt from Prof. Pathak's mother that after our departure from the village, the brother quarrelled with her and abused her because she had taken some of us into the house.

In the village, Prof. Pathak's brother successfully recommended her name for the Sanjay Gandhi's scheme of assistance to people with no means of support.<sup>22</sup> As a result she gets Rs 50 a month. When her daughter visits her, which she does once a year and stays for about a fortnight at Gaṅgubāi's brothers' house, she makes it a point to give her clothes. We asked Gaṅgubāi whether her brothers invite her at least when her daughter comes to see her: 'Why do you not go and visit all your brothers?'

If they invite me, I will go. But if there is no will from their side, why should I go? If I had wealth, then they would have bowed down at my feet. Really speaking, they do not want to invite me. Had I some money, they would invite me. But I have nothing. Why should people invite me?

## Guest in the Temple of Ram

Gaṅgubāi now resides permanently on the first floor in the Rām temple.

God has ruined my life, but the same God has given me gladness and happiness. I feel happy in the temple now.

The temple is roughly constructed after the pattern of the local *vāḍās*, or mansions, which in that region follow Mughal architectural tenets. Four walls, with neither doors nor windows, completely isolate the interior from the street, the world outside. An impressive gate grants access to a vast inner courtyard surrounded by verandas that run round the four sides of the courtyard upon an elevated platform. Walls are erected on these platforms with doors and windows that open onto the courtyard, thus offering as many independent rooms as necessary. These rooms give the residents privacy, isolating them from the crowded courtyard. They protect them from sun, wind and rain, because the courtyard itself is open to the elements.

The *vāḍās* might have a single storey or more and rooms of various designs, all built so that they always open onto the inner courtyard. The veranda of the temple's ground floor has small rooms built expressly to give shelter to the gods; there are spacious verandas where devotees can roam about, or go on a walkabout of the gods' sanctuaries or assemble to listen to preachers or to perform collective prayer rituals.

Gaṅgubāi usually stays on the first floor, where no wall or partition makes it an independent room that can protect her from the changing weather conditions. She makes it a point to come down to welcome the visitors who call on her. Her room is accessible only via a ladder, with no door that separates the ground floor veranda from the first storey. She sleeps alone at night.

One tiny earthen pot (for filling water), a couple of earthen pots (to keep water in, or, occasionally, foodstuff), two or three metallic plates (for meals), a metallic pot as jug, a couple of old saris, a patchwork blanket, some tatty gunny sacks—this is the sum total of Gaṅgubāi's property. The saris—in blue, dark pink, and green of various shades—she wears have simple brocade-work, and are presented to her during feastings. Every morning, whence she gets up and has her bath, she first waters the sacred basil, the *tulsi*, in the courtyard of the temple, and then walks around the idol of the god Datta. She takes the *darśan*<sup>23</sup> of all the gods present in the temple. We asked her, 'What do you murmur when you walk around the gods and pray them?'

Take me soon, liberate me, this is what I say.

‘You do not feel like living?’

What’s the use of living now?

Previously, at the time of the severe drought in 1972, a villager, Tātyārāo Āmbore Pāṭīl, his family and their relatives built a small structure dedicated to the god Datta. Later, villagers erected a small memorial, a *samādhī*, to the *Jagadguru Mahārāj Motīrām*. The people’s devotion seemed to be on the increase: villagers began assembling and performing several sorts of collective religious functions such as *pujā*,<sup>24</sup> seven-day *Harīnām*,<sup>25</sup> *pāṭh*,<sup>26</sup> *āratī*,<sup>27</sup> etc. Eventually, all villagers together raised the funds to construct a big temple, surrounded by a compound wall, and dedicated it to Rām (the Rām *mandir*, or Rām temple). Although the plot still belongs to Tātyārāo Āmbore Pāṭīl and his relatives, the temple is a public space and the approach street carries the name of Rām Mandir Alley. Sometimes, a pre-primary school is started within the temple premises. Āmbore Pāṭīl’s wife gives Gaṅgubāi meals twice a day and his daughter-in-law serves her tea.

Each time we visited Gaṅgubāi, sat around her in the temple and conversed with her, children and schoolgirls would come and play noisily, aiming to make themselves the centre of attraction. Older women, too, done with their domestic chores, came over especially in the free hours of the afternoon siesta, and, together with the children, often joined us to chitchat and spend some time with Gaṅgubāi, often times mending blouses, breastfeeding or rocking babies in their laps.

Said Gaṅgubāi:

Digambar Āmbore, a distant relative, brings me pancakes of *bhākrī* (millet). He is not from an alien caste. He is one from among us. He, accordingly, behaves very kindly with me. Women from neighbouring houses come and give me company. There is a whole circle around me to chit-chat. This makes me feel better. On the occasion of feasts, other women present me with saris and blouses. They show a lot of love for me.

Digambar Āmbore said:

We give alms to people from outside (from different castes). What is wrong, then, to give to Gaṅgubāi?

Gaṅgubāi confided:

At night, from 10 to 11, there is *bhajan* in the temple. This is a real moment of delight for my mind. Since childhood, bhakti has been haunting my mind. My time is spent in remembering the name of God, *nāmasmara*.

The day we went and took Gaṅgubāi's interview in February was a Thursday, which she told us was her day of fast. Women, who had assembled with us to meet Gaṅgubāi, confirmed that, together with some other women, she had been given a *gurumantra*—a *mantra* by the guru, Śivlikar Mahārāj Dattupant.

This *gurumantra* was a 'right', said Gaṅgubāi. J. Maid and B. Nanekar asked her, 'You say that you have a guru: we do not understand what this means. What procedures should one follow to have a guru? She replied:

The initiation ought to be performed on a day with a solar eclipse. First of all, we had to stand in the river, Ganga, with water reaching up to the chest, otherwise one does not remember the *mantra* and it would prove to have no effect. Then, each of us sat on the guru's lap. While beating cymbals, the guru blew into everyone's ears and uttered a *mantra*. That *mantra* cannot be used for oneself. The disciple should not reveal it to others. Everyone had to present the guru with a full dress and, on the top of it, anything that they would wish to offer. Thereafter, the *mantra* must be correctly remembered and recited everyday after taking your bath. Thursday is considered the guru's day, and disciples fast on that day. There is a string of 108 beads; we join hands and recite the *mantra*.

I observe two more fasts. On Tuesday, I fast for goddess Amba, as it is the goddess's day; and I observe a fast on every full moon day.

Gaṅgubāi, along with Prof. Pathak's eldest sister, learnt another type of *mantra* from Prof. Pathak's father. She administers it in the temple to those affected by someone's 'bad eye', *dr̥ṣṭa*, to patients suffering from migraine, sprain, backaches, etc. The *mantra* is expected to dispel the ache or spell. This might explain



why people throng around Gaṅgubāī. (We felt surprised that a traditional Brahmin taught the *mantra* at the same time to his daughter and to a Marāṭhā woman.)

The *mantra* is administered to those who suffer from sprains along with the following ritual: the hand is waved over the head, then both the palms are placed on the chest of the patient and a strong push is applied. The patient ought then to begin moving and gesturing with his limbs. The sprain then disappears. In the case of *karaḷ*, the hand is waved in front of the patient with a pinch of ashes while the *mantra* is being recited. In the case of cataract, the patient should arrive at Gaṅgubāī's in the morning. Three lumps of salt are tossed into a glass where sesamum seeds are mixed with oil, the mixture is stirred with the weed, *haraḷī*, and waved thrice over the patient, then thrown on an acacia (*bābhul*) bush. Sight is then said to become as sharp as an acacia thorn. Then, nine dry dates are to be eaten three days each for three days. Gaṅgubāī administers the *mantra* to patients at the temple or at their homes when people call her.

When Andréine Bel and Malavika Talukdar entered the temple on March 22 for a third visit, Gaṅgubāī was alone, busy performing her ablutions and prayers. She took them up the ladder to her attic. When M. Talukdar took pictures of Gaṅgubāī having her food, Gaṅgubāī was not the least bothered—one had the feeling that she had 'reconciled' with her leprosy. Then, Gaṅgubāī asked whether Malavika would be willing to record her songs, saying that she had a number of them to sing. Malavika acquiesced, telling Gaṅgubāī that she had to fetch the recording equipment; but before climbing down the ladder, she asked Gaṅgubāī whether she could cure her headaches with incantations. Gaṅgubāī replied that she could utter the *mantras* only during a moon's eclipse. When Malavika had left, Gaṅgubāī confided to Andréine Bel that she herself had an awful headache.

Said A. Bel:

Then, I found myself instead attending to Gaṅgubāī. I laid my hands on her head: a furnace, indeed! When I so practice the 'breathing' I cannot guess in advance how much time will be required. It took possibly 45 minutes till the sensation in my hand became again neutral. Going by the sensation I can say that I found Gaṅgubāī's body absolutely sane, remarkably

energetic as far as muscles are concerned, but gripped by tensions. I would say that according to the sensation, though I am not a physician, Gaṅgubāi is cured from leprosy. During that time, H. Rairkar and M. Talukdar were waiting downstairs with women from the village, and children keeping the contact between the scene upstairs and the group below. After the 'breathing' I asked Gaṅgubāi to lie for a while and take rest, and joined down the group. Other village women came and we recorded their songs. Some strong and loudly nasal voices were very keen to be recorded. We gave them full attention. Gaṅgubāi remained alone in her roost, but she soon came down to stretch herself and rest at a few metres distance from the group. Then, she came closer and sat behind the other women, sometimes encouraging them or reminding them of the correct words and tunes. Other women seemingly appreciated her suggestions. When everyone stood up and departed, one of them put her arm round Gaṅgubāi's waist. Both smiled at each other with all their heart.

When we took her leave on 8 May 1997, Gaṅgubāi was in a turmoil, grief-stricken. She was remembering the previous visitors and saying:

One feels disgusted with leading such a dog's life. If you have your own house, you can prepare and eat your own food. Now, without relatives, those other women who have pity on me look after me. You come and visit me, talk with me and inquire about me. I feel better. Give the sisters<sup>28</sup> my regards. They are marvellous people. Give my regards to the elder brother<sup>29</sup> from Delhi, too. Do come again, I feel better.

Gaṅgubāi stood up when we departed.

## A Compulsion to Sing and Confide

Gaṅgubāi's knowledge of songs is her wealth and the reason why village women need her, enjoy her company and hold her in high regard. They appreciate her songs so much that when we initially inquired about who could sing in the village, Gaṅgubāi's name came up immediately and virtually consensually. During our third visit, on 3 March 1997, a few Brahmin women had gathered around us at the Rām temple and were singing songs for us. Gaṅgubāi

was then sitting apart. When she set to break into songs from where she was sitting, all the Brahmin women invited her to come and sit near them. When she came close, a couple of them touched her feet and sat next to her. At another moment, another Brahmin woman, Mrs Joshi, met us at the temple and then went and brought her neighbour from a *Kāsar* (bangle-sellers) community, telling her, 'Sing songs, you know so many.' They all broke into songs in unison.

Gaṅgubāi sings in a very melodious and trained voice. To our question about when and how she had learnt music, her reply was that she had liked to sing since her childhood. She would remember, and preserve in her heart, tunes and words she had heard even from a distance.

I stored in my mind the songs of the grindmill that I was hearing. As soon as somebody was singing a song, I would keep it in my heart.

My father was very traditional. He never allowed me to go out. We were not even allowed to go and enter the shop of the village. We used only to go to our fields where women and men use to sing work-songs. As I liked to sing, I participated and remembered all those songs.

My father used to send me to the fields to protect the crops or to stay on the threshing fields when the crop was brought in. To keep myself awake, I used to sing all night. Father used to come in between to check whether I was sleeping or not.

We said, 'People say that your songs have become sour.'

I cannot read and write. What can I do? I do not pay attention to the people.

We said, 'We find your voice very melodious.'

My voice was very clear. When I started singing at home, my voice carried very far. When I used to sing in the field, at a mile's distance from here, my voice reached here. I was singing when I was working in the field, when I was sweeping, when I was grinding—[and] always my voice carried over a long distance. My paternal aunt says, 'Her whole life is ruined, still she sings.' When my husband died, I did not sing for a year. After death of my parents, I also discontinued singing for a year. My uncle

likes my singing and listening to music—he always asks me to sing songs. He lives in the village. I go and visit him when I wish. I have a cordial relationship with him. He is the one who asks for me sometimes.

When there was a *bhajan* in the village and people invited Gaṅgubāī, her father would accompany her—in effect, he allowed her to attend the *bhajan* because that was a religious programme. Whatever might be the norm, this provided Gaṅgubāī with the opportunity to learn and sing *bhajans*. Even robbed of the use of her fingers, she used to help her mother grind the flour and sing with her—her mother knew many grindmill songs.

One distressing incident remains vivid in her memory:

Both my mother and I were grinding and singing. I was singing in a loud voice. My brother rushed home angry and scolded me, ‘Your voice reaches up to the boundaries of the village. You want to go and sing in a *tamāsā*?<sup>30</sup> Are you a prostitute? Everybody is listening to your song.’ I felt very hurt. I replied, ‘I never go out of the house. I do not belong to the caste of Goṅdhāī.<sup>31</sup> I was grinding with mother, moreover singing on the grindmill. If I join *tamāsā*, whose name will be ruined?’ Then my father pacified me. But the scar remained deep in the mind.

When we ponder over the recorded interviews that Gaṅgubāī eventually acquiesced into giving us, we cannot resist making a parallel between her testimony and the *abhaṅgas* of sant Janābāī.<sup>32</sup> Both are immersed in the same feeling of human loneliness. Whom can one communicate in such solitary helplessness but with God alone? Dialogue turns into a soliloquy with God as witness, as in Janābāī and Gaṅgubāī’s wish to go, meet and see God. At times, the desire not to live any longer forcefully articulates that state of mind desperately in search of a confidant to talk to, a fact that has nothing to do with either philosophy or other worldliness.

In this respect, one should not either be misled by the fact that Gaṅgubāī is suffering from leprosy. We have already pointed this misrepresentation. Leprosy for Gaṅgubāī and people around her is one particular hardship among others, a calamity similar to other serious physical handicaps or social disabilities such as the death of a husband, spousal desertion, lack or loss of a son,

widowhood—in short, one serious type of misfortune to which human beings are vulnerable.

It is against that wide background that the universal import of Gaṅgubāī's constant engrossment in singing should be understood when her heart burns and smarts within, at times out of anger, at other times out of despair. The religious idiom of sin and *karma* carries that deep suffering that one intensely wishes to get rid oneself of, while singing opens up a way towards achieving what seven births<sup>33</sup> or suicide cannot possibly grant—a state of peace and a foretaste of liberation:

What sin have I done? I shall finish with it in seven births. How can I finish with it in one birth? Destitute women commit suicide. But I do not want to commit suicide, because that sin would follow me. I tell God, 'What you want to do, do it in this birth. I am ready to repay everything in this birth. I want to carry nothing from this birth into another one.'

My youth was spent under my father's control. Now, I have to bow down in front of other people. My father never gave me a good sari. Now, my brother has given me a good one. My father gave me birth and became a *Vāṇī* (a rich shopkeeper)<sup>34</sup>. I stayed in my father's place with my daughter.

My brother once beat my daughter. I felt very much hurt that day. I felt like a destitute. I felt like committing suicide that day, along with my daughter. But I did not because I realized that people would say, 'She was a sinner.' My father had kept me under check as I was of that 'race of girls,' but he never put any check on my singing. He never put constraints on my religious practices and took me three times to Paṇḍharpūr.

The urge to confide oneself and open up the heart is pressing. But how does one express one's feelings? Moreover, to whom does one do so?

Like many of her sisters in a similar plight, Gaṅgubāī, after Janābāī, expresses her feelings through grindmill songs, *bhajans*,<sup>35</sup> *abhaṅgas* and *gavṛaṅs*,<sup>36</sup>—forms of religious songs specific to the bhakti movement in Maharashtra—in an allocation mainly addressed to God co-opted both as witness to devotion and as confidant. No other interlocutor is available for Gaṅgubāī's secret thoughts. Her mention of a father placing no constraints on her religious inclinations and taking her three times to Paṇḍharpūr, as well as her notions of sin, *karma* and destiny, are clear

references to the prevailing bhakti discourse, while providing a pattern of allocation or a model of address to a compassionate and merciful, intimate and divine, nurturing entity. The reference to God under a number of various familiar god-names in Gaṅgubāī's songs is of the nature of an address, or honorific, written at the top of any letter, or made at the beginning of any undertaking—such as the appeal to the god Gaṇeś at the start of a dramatic performance; by actors, or by a student when he begins his homework—in order to bring God's attention to one's endeavours. This formal cultural set-up inscribes the singer, the performer, the writer, the student, etc., within a framework of relationship and communication, in which God is a sort of encompassing and reassuring pole of relation. Gaṅgubāī, the lonely one, sings forth her thoughts in the presence of this perceived reality, who is not only a true witness to her lot but also a benevolent addressee.

Why should I blame others? I am suffering from disease. One feels sad about it. I cannot say that I am not upset. But my *karma* was bad. I committed some sin. To whom should I give it? Why should I feel grief and sorrow now? Such is the path of my destiny, *daivagati*. Why should I blame someone else? I get all this because of my *karma*. My mind is burning. But I have not felt aggrieved.

We asked her, 'You sing *bhajans* or grindmill songs when you feel lonely or restless?

Yes, I sing both.

Don't you feel that you should go and stay with your daughter?

No. I do not feel so. Because of my illness. Till now, I was not realizing the seriousness of my disease. Now, I understand and I think that I should not give anybody trouble. Moreover, if I go and stay in my daughter's village, then blame will fall on my brothers. So, I do not go.

You stay in the temple. Does this not bring blame on your brothers?

Yes, it does. But if I leave the village, they will have to suffer a much bigger blame.

Do you sometimes open your heart? To whom do you confide the secrets of your mind?

Once I have thrown the dirty cobwebs out of my mind, then my mind becomes clean. With whom should I share my thoughts? I go to God. I go to *bor*<sup>37</sup> and *bābhaḷ*.<sup>38</sup> I have no son. Had I given birth to a son, I would have talked the whole song (*gītā*) of my life to him. I have not told anything to my daughter.

*Sant Janābāi* was abusing God. Do you feel like doing as she did? Don't you wish to give vent to your anger?

I become angry with my mind. My mind smarts. In such a mood, I do not eat, I do not drink, I let my body wither away—it is drought, a want of love.

Tell us how that drought of love is. Have you not experienced the tenderness of maternal love?

I did experience it.

Do you enjoy singing on the grindmill? Sing grindmill songs that you like.

If you say 'which I like,' then I remember God.

*My first verse, I sing on the grindmill*<sup>39</sup>  
*I sing on your chariot, Rām, on the mill.*

*My first verse, I sing on the grindmill*  
*My first salute, Rām, on your chariot.*

*My first verse, Gaṇarāyā Gaṇapati, with sweets in hands*  
*I perform āraṭī to Raghupati with sweets in hands.*

*My first verse, I sing here and there*  
*Rāmcandra's mūrtī*<sup>40</sup> *in my heart eternally.*

*My first verse, I sing to my clan (Gote)*  
*My salute to the father who gave me birth.*

J. Maid asked her, 'Do you know whether songs tell us something about the birth of a girl?'

*The birth of a girl is like a bed of carrots*<sup>41</sup>  
*My father and mother, what do you get fondling me?*

*Oh God Father, do not let me come to life as a girl  
Foolish father and mother, what do you get fondling me?*

*In the Arunya forest; listen! who is weeping?<sup>42</sup>  
To console Sītā, jujube and acacia trees, her women friends.*

H. Rairkar asked Gaṅgubāī whether she had ever opened up her heart to these trees (jujube and acacia) in the fields. B. Nanekar asked her which songs she preferred to sing when she felt unhappy. Gaṅgubāī replied with a personal testimony of hardship, followed by songs of lamentation.

When my heart is full of sorrow, where to confide? I talk with these trees. One feels like pouring out one's grief. If our fathers or sisters-in-law hurt us, we express our pain. If our mother or sisters hurt us, we feel angry about it. If some one is sarcastic, we feel hurt in our mind.

My husband died. What a grief it was to my mind! What God did was right. But I remained back alone without him. I put the matter before God: 'Oh God, I am alone, in a forest exile, *vanavāsī*.<sup>43</sup>

*In the childhood, father and mother give us sorrow<sup>44</sup>  
In the youth, father-in-law and mother-in-law harass us  
What kind of Kali Yuga is this, the dharma is decaying  
What to tell you, woman, what has come to my lot!  
Do not give me again a woman's birth, oh God  
Don't give! I am serving you with all my heart.  
Kṛṣṇa is playing flute in the temple  
Oh God, let me serve my husband  
Brothers-in-law are heartless and they beat  
Sisters-in-law look at me with contempt  
Radha asks with respect the God with lotus-like eyes  
What sort of sin did I commit to get a woman's birth.*

Gaṅgubāī revealed that she had herself composed this song. We asked her why she had the feeling that women resent having been brought into existence. She answered that parents are always angry against their daughters and keep them in bondage.

My father did not allow me to enter the village shop. But I must admit one fact: my father never put any hurdle to my singing. He allowed me to sing *bhajans*, there was no constraint as far as religious practices were concerned. Now, the young women do



not listen to what others tell them. They behave according to their own wish. Even our daughters behave like this.

In her own way, and paradoxically, Gaṅgubāi resents the modern trends of life.

## Verses for all Seasons

B. Nanekar asked Gaṅgubāi whether she had personally composed other songs. She replied that she had actually composed some songs but was in no mood to sing them. 'Still,' she added, 'I will sing them now.' The songs<sup>45</sup> were composed when she remembered her husband after his death:

*Oh God, keep happy the lord of my kuṃku<sup>46</sup>  
My life partner is my repose.*

*I have gone to live in my in-laws' house  
In their kingdom, sorrow in plenty  
Now and then I recite his name.*

*This night he came in my dream  
His moon-like face looked tired  
My heart started beating fast.*

*I was telling you, 'Do not go away from me'<sup>47</sup>  
In sorrow and happiness, let's stay here only  
He listened to no one and departed.*

*I don't want gold, I don't want silver  
I don't want wealth, I don't want kingdom  
I want a loving friend close to my mind.*

*Let my eyes close before his  
Let my voice be silent before his  
Oh God, keep happy the lord of my kuṃku.*

B. Nanekar asked Gaṅgubāi, 'What you have described in the song was a very sad event in your life. Still, we face events in life that are still worse than those you have described. We become grief-stricken. What thought comes to your mind, what sort of song do you sing?

There is no use just repeating songs by heart, these songs twist the heart, pierce the mind:

*Morning evening I take your name<sup>48</sup>  
I forget myself altogether.  
Strike with a stick, water does not part  
Such is our relationship, unbreakable.  
Who will save the one whom you kill?  
In the same way, I challenge the world.  
When I come on stage, I take Lord Viṭṭhal's name  
I forget myself altogether.*

Gaṅgubāi told us that this was an *abhaṅga* of Tukaram.<sup>49</sup>

B. Nanekar asked Gaṅgubāi about the songs that she usually liked to sing when, on account of her leprosy, she felt unable to do what she would otherwise have enjoyed doing. The question about possible feelings of anger or frustration apparently did not attract her attention. Engrossed in her realm of song, Gaṅgubāi continued her singing with a *gavḷaṅ*<sup>50</sup> on Rādhā.

*Look, Kṛṣṇa, I have come to see you  
Do not tell my mother-in-law.*

*Kṛṣṇa has sent me a yellow cloth woven at Yewala  
Mother-in-law does not allow me to wear it.*

*I do not feel at rest either inside the house or at the door,  
I say, I will come at your feet, do not tell my mother-in-law.*

*Rādhā was thinking, blaming her mother-in-law  
My mind is running after you, I feel like meeting you.*

Gaṅgubāi told us that this was a *gavḷaṅ* of Eknath.<sup>51</sup>

J. Maid asked her, 'Which verses were you murmuring this morning, alone, standing in front of the god? Were you not reciting that prayer: "For your sake, I give up my Self. Do not desert me, Perfect, Eternal. This is my sole demand from You, Raghunāyak." Did you mean that since the world had rejected you, you expected God not to reject you?'

B. Nanekar asked her, 'When you wish to convey the secrets of your mind, how do you express them? To whom do you open your heart? Do you open your heart through songs?'

I sing songs. I speak my mind through songs. If I reveal my feelings to a woman-friend, she may disclose it to others. Therefore, I do not share my mind with a friend. As a consequence, I always talk to songs.

How can you open your mind to songs?

Gaṅgubāi answered with a *bhajan*:

*My mind finds delight in the praise of God Harī<sup>52</sup>  
I do not want a useless mansion, one can stay in a hut.  
Mattress and pillow are of no use, we can use patch blankets.  
This is what Tukadā begs keeping his hands on the feet of God.*

B. Bel stressed upon the melodious musicality of the tune.

B. Nanekar asked her, 'From where did you hear this *bhajan* of Tukadoji Maharaj?'<sup>53</sup> Gaṅgubāi continued with another *abhaṅga* of the Tukadoji Maharaj:

*Oh God! To whom [do I] tell my grief but you<sup>54</sup>  
My soul knows no repose, saṃsāra<sup>55</sup> spells fright  
Walking through thorns, distress sweeps along my mind  
The mountain is so huge! My feet ache, I was born in vain  
Looking at the world I became blind  
I am useless, says Tukadā.*

B. Nanekar asked Gaṅgubāi, 'Why did you feel that you should learn these songs?'

Just now, Bernard said that he was impressed by the tunes. It is like that. I have attended *bhajans*. I listened. The words and tunes captured my mind.

Why did you find these *bhajans* beautiful and good? Did you not find also other things beautiful?

Gaṅgubāi simply continued with a *gavḷaṇ*:

*Let me go and fetch water, why do you stop the milkmaid?<sup>56</sup>  
  
Let go! Let me go to Mathurā, why do you stop the milkmaid?  
When I took earthen pots and went to fetch water  
Kṛṣṇa obstructed my way, he threw stones and broke my pots.*

He threw stones and broke my earthen pots.

*While carrying milk and curds and going to Mathurā  
Kṛṣṇa obstructed my way, Radha implores  
Yekā Janārdanī,<sup>57</sup> Radha is enamoured with Hari.*

J. Maid asked her, 'What is your daily routine?'

Gaṅgubāi paid no heed to the question. Carried along by her songs, she was immersed in her dialogue with herself. She continued her singing with the following *bhajan*:

*Why are you going to Pañdharī, Viṭṭhal has come to my house.<sup>58</sup>  
On the 11th day of āṣāḍh and kārtik, sants come to meet you.*

*Garlands, basil and black powder are offered to you.  
Viṭṭhal has come to my house.*

*Cymbals, drum are resounding, your court is full of tunes.  
Viṭṭhal has come to my house.*

*God, saviour of sinners, husband of Rukhmini, beautiful Sham  
Without form, holding hands at the waist.  
Viṭṭhal has come to my house.*

*Shankaracharya, the great one, incarnation of Brahma<sup>59</sup>  
Came as avatār guru of the world, he just sat on the mat of  
salvation.*

*In śrāvaṇ, right from the first day of the month  
He decided on his observances,<sup>60</sup> sitting on the wooden stool.*

*Worship in every house, bel<sup>61</sup> and basil are offered  
The āratī is performed with loud acclamation of god.*

*Ninadas says: 'May Mother-Sadguru have pity on me  
At the feet of the guru, I, a simple human being, what can I say?'*

The disease affects Gaṅgubāi's eyes, water runs down her eyes. B. Nanekar advised her to consult a doctor. Reluctant to take medical advice, she insisted that the watering of her eyes was due to a cold. Then she returned again to her world of tunes:

*Oh, Bhagavan, give me your darśan<sup>62</sup>  
How long will you try my patience, Eternal.*

*You saw Puṅḍalik<sup>63</sup> attending to mother and father.  
You saw the devotion of Gora<sup>64</sup> the Kuṁbhār.  
In the same way come, you, my dear saint.*

*When he heard the voice of sant Cokhobā  
God Viṭṭha! himself appeared to him.  
What a gift you grant to your dear sants.*

*You who give existence, create the universe  
While singing your virtues, the mind gets peace.  
This is my hope, fulfil it. Now.*

I stay the whole day in the temple. If I feel like singing, I sing.  
If I feel like visiting someone, I go and visit him. I go and fetch  
drinking water for myself but I do not cook. If somebody invites  
me, I go. If they do not invite me, I do not go.

Why do people invite you?

To sing or to chit-chat.

What kind of songs do people ask you to sing?

They ask me to sing *bhajans*. They do not tell me to sing any  
other song.

*Now, let us go to Paṅḍharī and take the darśan of Viṭṭha!<sup>65</sup>*

*On the 11th day of āṣāḍh and kārtik, devotees go to meet you  
Let us offer abī<sup>66</sup> and bukkā<sup>67</sup> to you.*

*On the bank of Caṅdrabhāghā a town is constructed  
Its name is Paṅḍharpūr. We see him with full eyes.*

*He settled on the bank of the Caṅdrabhāghā  
Let us wear a string of basil beads and go.*

*He is the friend of the poor, he sides with the weak  
All of you, youngsters and elders, come on! Let us go!*

*Give me sight, Shri Hari! Let me see your Paṅḍharī!<sup>68</sup>*

*It is on the bank of Bhiwara, people assembled in the desert*

*Among them the tan-skinned Viṭṭū, he puts his hands at the waist.*

*He keeps cattle with Cokha, he grinds flour with Jani  
He sings verses on the grindmill.*

## Talking through songs, an enjoyment

We were amazed by Gaṅgubāī's indefatigable enthusiasm and unflinching compulsion to sing. We asked her: 'Why do you feel like singing today? Why do you feel like talking through songs?' She just continued singing with the same resoluteness:

*Hurry up, Gaṇa, without you the temple remains empty<sup>69</sup> Refr.*

*Let us prepare strings of bel fowers,  
Let us put them today around Gaṇa's neck.*

*Let us kindle lamps of camphor.  
Let us make āraṭī to Gaṇa's murṭī.*

*Let us spread red powder<sup>70</sup> on Gaṇa.  
Let us perform āraṭī to Gaṇa's murṭī.*

*Gaṇarāyā, you know 14 wisdoms  
I glorify you, I bow down at your feet.*

*Oh! Oh! At Gundagaon I saw Datta<sup>71</sup>  
I saw the Lord! Joy! I saw Datta!*

*He wears no brocade cloth round his waist or various ornaments  
His head is decorated with a crown  
He who guards his devotees, I bow down to him, I glorify him.*

*In this saṃsāra no happiness no success  
One should go and stick to Datta  
He who guards his devotees, I bow down to him, I glorify him.*

*Whom should I call Rām? Whom should I call Lord, Prabhū?<sup>72</sup>*

*Silver stool, bucket with precious stones, whom to bathe now?  
Yellow cloth with brocade border, whom to give it to wear?*

*Silver pot and golden cup, whom to present with milk to drink?  
I have prepared rice with saffron, whom to serve the dish?  
Jasmine buds in full bloom, whom to give the string of them?*

*Say: Shri Rām! Jay Rām! I want no worry in my mind.<sup>73</sup>*

*When I recite Rām's name, all sins vanish, happiness spreads  
all over*

*Ajāmelā,<sup>74</sup> his sins vanished, the prostitute was saved<sup>75</sup>  
Ahilyā<sup>76</sup> was raised from stone*

*I seek liberation, I bow down at your feet, Das Ganu<sup>77</sup> says:  
'Say Harī! Harī! Stop worrying! Your deeds will bear fruit.'*

*Have you become deaf, oh Lakṣmaṇ!  
I recognised the voice of Rāghava.<sup>78</sup>*

*The master of my kuṃku is in danger  
Oh Lakṣmaṇ! There is some sin in your mind  
The king of Ayodhya will felicitate you.*

*Oh moon in the sky, help me!  
Sītā is bothering her head, she exerts herself  
Have you become deaf, oh Lakṣmaṇ!*

She said: 'Should I sing grindmill songs?'

*Sāsurvās<sup>79</sup> for Sītā because of the aunt of Rām<sup>80</sup>  
At the door, the basil garden of Rām's aunt has dried up.*

*Sītā is going towards her forest exile, her forehead filled with  
kuṃku  
Rām observes from a distance, it brings tears to his eyes.*

*Sītā attaches pearls to the arrow  
The bag goes to hell.*

*In the Arunya forest, who is crying? Listen!  
They are women jujube and acacia trees to soothe Sītā.*

*In the Arunya forest, what yellow is being seen?  
What yellow is being seen? The ritual dress<sup>81</sup> of Sītā.*

*The shoes of the father fit the son's feet<sup>82</sup>  
My brother is my jewel, a king, a fortunate one.*

Then, Gaṅgubāi reverted to her favourite *gav/āns*. She had told us that she knew a great number of grindmill songs; women from the village confirmed that she knew thousands. But now, living alone in a temple, her life environment had changed entirely. Grindmill songs are sung in the context of a family life and in the domestic company of close female relatives. For years now, Gaṅgubāi has settled in god's house, aloof from housewifely chores. She has a certain rapport—except for casual visits by village girls and women friends—mainly with the divine hosts who share the temple with her, and those male and female devotees who assemble to chant bhakti compositions. Then her participation is welcome and appreciated. The hymns and songlike poems of the Maharashtrian bhakti movement have become her essential means, and milieu, of communication.

*Nandalala, don't obstruct my way, let me go and fetch water<sup>83</sup>*  
*We are the wives of poor milkmen, Yādavṛāyā, let me go*  
*You are mischievous, malicious, black, do not wink your left eye*  
*Let me go and fetch water, Rāghurāyā, I bow down to your feet.*

*Viṭhobā, how should I forget you, how should I forget you<sup>84</sup>*  
*You are a mother, I am your child*  
*When I am nine months pregnant to what extent can I have*  
*patience?*  
*When five, twenty-five people follow me, how to make an about*  
*turn?<sup>85</sup>*  
*Gaṇa, how should I forget you, how should I forget you?*  
*Jñāndev says to friend Viṭṭhal, Nivrutti is my guru.*

*You should not put a roof of rotten bamboos<sup>86</sup>*  
*I will destroy your hut, beware!*  
*It is a hut with 360 joists; you installed nine doors for security.*  
*When you come into this world, try to finish the work.*

*Vashistha the sage gave an admonition*  
*'You should not forget the name of Harī Rām Prabhū'*  
*Rām will grant you salvation.*

*He got engrossed in the bhajan*  
*During the beating of the drum he fell asleep<sup>87</sup>*  
*You will experience the blows of Time.*

*Let us offer to Sāraṅgधारā a jasmin flower for his name<sup>88</sup>*  
*Let us not come back to this saṃsāra. Refr.*



*Let us offer Lakṣmī's husband a śevantrī<sup>89</sup> of devotion  
Engrossed in saṃsāra errors may happen.  
Let us offer to Pānduraṅga a basil of renunciation.  
Let us go to heaven Vaikuntha by the mercy of Harī.  
Let us offer basil and black powder and make a friend of Harī.  
Then the danger of Time will not follow hot on our heels.  
The dāsī Bhāmā says: 'Keep this in mind,  
Let us remember Viṭṭhal time and again.'*

*Garlands of bel, basil and flowers, fragrant saffron, yellow dress<sup>90</sup>  
I like him, he is Nāganāth, say: 'Harī! Harī!'  
Come on, let us go and take his darśan!  
In the big temple Tīrtharājā looks beautiful  
He is the innocent Śankar from Kailās  
Lacking in splendour and riches  
He has come to meet Datta, come on, let us take his darśan!  
The goddesses Gaṅgā, Pārvaī have come, grandeur of morning  
worship  
One recognises Nāmā, Khecarū<sup>91</sup>  
He reversed the temple's direction, he made a revolution.  
He has come to meet Datta, come on, let's take his darśan  
Aundhe land is a holy place, Nāganāth is always holy  
Say the mantra 'Harī! Harī!' Let us praise him!*

*Come on, come on, let us see the feet of Pānduraṅga<sup>92</sup>  
The group of sants stands near the pillar of Garuḍa<sup>93</sup>  
Let us hurry to go and meet Viṭṭhal.  
Keeping his hands at his waist, he stands on the brick.  
Come on, let us go quickly and meet Viṭṭhal.  
Let us surrender to him, he will save us from rebirths and deaths.  
Let us offer to Viṭṭhal our body, our mind and our wealth.*

*Hari started the bhajan, the Lord started the bhajan in my hut<sup>94</sup>  
Refr.  
Thieves have entered the heap of goods.  
Thieves have stolen the wealth.  
The goods are kept in the safe, still there is a theft.  
There are no strings on the door of my hut.  
On the floor there is a bed, nobody is true.  
One is to come alone in the world, one is to depart alone from  
the world.  
Carry with you Śivaliṅga and always take the name of god.*

*The parrot has gone, the cage remains empty<sup>95</sup>  
You amass wealth, the cage is empty.*

*A high mansion is built, a tender young woman kept in.  
The obstacle is not understood, the cage is empty.  
The parrot says: 'Kṛṣṇa, listen! Take and repeat the name of  
Harī!'  
Lift the corpse, there are crowds, people set it on fire, they return  
home.  
The obstacle is not understood.*

*Oh Gaṅgā, your water is pure<sup>96</sup>  
The saint says to his friend: 'Water flows  
Gautam ṛṣi made penance and Gaṅgā is flowing.'*

*Oh! What a decaying condition is yours, do you not feel  
ashamed?<sup>97</sup>  
There is an abundance of tea, a shortage of food  
Tea comes from foreign lands and it mesmerizes the world.  
If we take tea, we do not feel like eating, we lose sleep.  
This is the root cause of diseases—leave the habit of taking tea.  
Look at your body, you cannot even stand or walk.  
Leave the habit of taking tea.*

*Now, I feel tired. Still I feel like singing many songs. I shall  
sing one gavḷaṇ.*

*Let me go, do not hold my hand, you will ruin me<sup>98</sup>  
This night is a no-moon night.  
Till today you were the spouse of an alien person  
Now I have become your husband.*

*When we were going to fetch water, Kṛṣṇa came in the way,<sup>99</sup>  
He obstructed our path with the sweet tunes of his flute.*

*He goes into the house, eats curds and milk, his lips are full of  
butter.  
When we were going to fetch water, Kṛṣṇa came in the way.  
He enthralled the milkmaids with the sweet tunes of his flute.  
Yaśodā,<sup>100</sup> tell him something, your Kṛṣṇa gives us troubles.  
Yekā Janārdanī. He captivated the milkmaids with the sweet  
tunes of his flute.*

*Raghunāth is standing on the way, how can I go to Vṛndāvan?<sup>101</sup>  
My ears are full of the tunes of his flute, how can I go to Vṛndāvan.*

*I take a pot and go to fetch water, Kṛṣṇa is standing on the way.  
How can I go to Kunjavan?<sup>102</sup>*

*When I went to Mathurā with milk and curds, Kṛṣṇa was standing on the way.*

*My ears are full of the tunes of his flute, woman, how can I go to Vṛndāvan?*

*Kānhā, I don't go, Kānhā, I don't go to fetch water from the Yamunā<sup>103</sup>*

*My work is slackening at home, my attention is captured by you  
Without you I do not feel like doing anything*

*Milk and curds in the house, my attention is captured by you  
I do not feel like eating them, Yekā Janārdanī*

*You Kṛṣṇa, husband, you do not let me meet my innocent brother.*

*Rush up, Pāṇḍharināth! You are my saviour<sup>104</sup>*

*In this world, I have no one, Bhagavant, give me your darśan.*

*Devotees come to Pāṇḍharī in āṣāḍh and kartik.*

*That tune reached my ear, accept me, Bhagavant.*

*Nobody is immortal in the world, the person who takes birth dies.*

*My saṃsār is floating on rock and water, accept me Bhagavant.*

*The lamp is burning at your door, with your name sin burns and runs off.*

*People say, 'This is my saṃsār! This is my saṃsār!'*

*Let us take the path of true bhakti.*

*Nārāyaṇ says: 'This is the easy path.'*

A young girl entered the temple, sat, and requested Gaṅgubāi to sing the song of the bullock-cart. Gaṅgubāi obliged her with delight:

*The bullock-cart with bells from my mother's place<sup>105</sup>*

*My dear brother is here today I shall go to my mother's place.*

*I bow down to mother-in-law's feet, I go and meet my husband.*

*I take an oath that I will not stay there many days.*

*I go and meet everybody. I will not stay there many days.*

*The popcorns of the poor are offered to the cobra on pañcamī<sup>106</sup>*

*Today, I shall go to my mother's place.*

*My mother's mansion is colourful—pillars, windows, on four sides.*

*Tulṣī vṛndāvan in the inner courtyard,<sup>107</sup> my sister-in-law loves me.  
We all four sisters—let us go together to my mother’s place.*

*Let us sing bhāubij songs!<sup>108</sup> oh God! keep my brother happy  
We all four sisters let us give water to Nāgobā, the cobra.*

*Let us offer milk sweets to Nāgobā! Oh God! Keep my brother  
happy.*

*Today, I shall go to my mother’s place.*

## Subtle Communicative Defiance

We may roughly distinguish in Gaṅgubāī’s repertory four categories of songs.

The grindmill distiches and a few verses, which Gaṅgubāī claims to have composed following her benign husband’s demise, reflect mainly the daily life of a housewife lovingly dedicated to her considerate husband and family, but nonetheless deeply hurt by her lot as a woman. They articulate feelings in consonance not only with Gaṅgubāī’s course of life but also the experience that peasant women have, for generations, been sharing in their vast and varied tradition of grindmill songs.

Against this setting, the foremost significant and superabundant set of songs comprises those that centre round Viṭṭhal, the god *par excellence* of *bhakti*, and the common iconic, geographical, liturgical and ritual imagery or idioms, as well as gods and holy figures associated with the cult of Viṭhobā.<sup>109</sup> Here, we concern ourselves only with their semantics: these songs clearly lay open the intimate relation that currently unites the devotee to Viṭṭhal: in effect, ‘There is no need to go to Paṅḍharī when Viṭṭhal comes to my house.’ That affective liaison prevails over rituals and pilgrimages, and gives them shape and inner motive. Viṭṭhal is recognized as the god who graciously takes the initiative to visit his dear *sants*. The latter long for his vision and, in return, eagerly wish for his gaze upon them—‘Give me your *darśan*, we see him with full eyes, give me sight’—with the impatience of a nine-month pregnant woman; they persistently and unforgettably—almost in the manner of a pathological fixation—remember his name, and are keen to rush up and stand in his presence in order to surrender to him, mind, body and wealth.

Besides the Lord of Pañḍharī, there is no giver in a world where falseness, futility and incertitude predominate. Viṭṭhal is a mindful Mother who sides with the poor and the weak. The daughter-in-law's obsessive dreaming about her mother's house is the crucial and most telling analogy of the devotee's faith in a 'Mother Land'<sup>110</sup> as the only 'Home Land': 'Let me see your Pañḍharī.' The poetic and musical compositions here are mainly *bhajans* and *abhaṅgas*.

The second extensive and no less significant set of poetic and musical compositions—the *gav/aṅgs*—relates to the pranks of *Kṛṣṇa* with milkmaids on their way to the river. The location has shifted to Mathurā. The scenario is the love games of a naughty youth-god. This popular theme, regarded widely with both amusement and devotion, is specific to the type of bhakti precisely qualified as Krishnaite, wherein the god has bewitched his devotees, body, mind and soul; it centres round *Kṛṣṇa* enamoured with Rādhā, the chosen one, the unwilling playmate but utterly devoted companion. Although embedded in a different, erotic symbolism, the semantics here is analogous to the previous one: the female lover, whose ears are full of the tunes of his flute, bows down—literally surrenders—at the feet of her beloved god, who is set upon claiming her and not letting her go, so resolved is he to become her husband. The chosen one cannot but desert her daily chores as the god has captured all her attention: '*Kṛṣṇa, my mind is running after you.*'

Other songs, which refer to different gods, sages, cults, gurus and religious traditions, also focus on abstract concepts and philosophical allegories: the apocalyptic Kali Yug, deeds that bear fruit, time as death and decay, entropy, *dharma*, sin that extinguishes itself or runs away and vanishes, anguish and fright as attributes of daily life, salvation and liberation at the guru's feet, the recognition of avatārs, observances and penances, god's mercy, the renunciation of sensuous gratifications, the human condition as a cage for the soul, worldly wealth doomed to be stolen by thieves, life as utter and bewildering suffering and worry, the cycle of rebirths. These representations are evidently at variance with the expressions and semantics of the two previous sets of songs. They recur less often but are by no means anomalous. Two observations can be made in this regard: first, the devotional faith, or bhakti, in Gaṅgubāī's songs is far from being a watertight, ideological state of mind, competent or prone

to adequately discriminate and dissociate itself from other religious representations; second, this state of mind actually does thoroughly enfold these other representations and discourses with its own idioms and perspectives, as much as it already marks common ritual practices with its specific inner quest of affective relation.

On the whole, these sets feature bhakti as a quest for intimate intercourse with the divine, developing into a blissful fusion in which the devotee tends to forget herself altogether, all of it set against a background of solitude, hardship and helplessness, a state that the polyvalent word *samsāra* outlines. The passage from one state to the other is through communication and trust: 'To whom do I tell my grief but you?'

We are now in a position to sum up our analysis by taking a theoretical view of the testimony in its entirety and ponder over the function of bhakti as machinery of communicative forms. The whole life-profile can be constructed in terms of two opposite semantic contexts that intertwine and overlap while contradicting each other. The context of destitution, which defines the social status of Gaṅgubāī as a state of estrangement and denial of human dignity—in short, of human nonentity—is constantly contested and sought to be substituted by rehabilitation, which grants desired recognition and saves the 'victim' from social alienation, mental annihilation and a sense of futility.

The contest with destitution is fourfold: first, it is characterized by the social processes of deprivation. Gaṅgubāī was not born in want: it was society and environmental circumstances that led to her becoming physically handicapped, and socially marginalized due to lack of education, denial of property and wealth, ostracism from the family home, and the lack of personal belongings, even of elementary facilities to offer tea as an outreach of hospitality to visitors. Gaṅgubāī has been progressively deprived of elementary human facilities.

Second, the stigma of solitude is an added suffering to the hardships of loneliness and desertion: marriage as a child to a much older partner, himself an orphan with no family ties and looked down upon for entertaining only a mistress, rejection by brothers and sisters-in-law, a lonely life in a temple, gender incapacities and fraternal abuses, denial of land and home of her own, the deaths of daughters and husband, the murder of her

sister. Gaṅgubāi has been sequentially bereft of essential human bonds.

Third, she has been mainly deprived of autonomy and a voice of her own through control by deeply—internalized representations that explain and justify her condition as god’s will and a result of imperturbable, impersonal mechanisms. In her mind, this pre-empted all reasons to object to, and possibly rebel against, an adverse destiny, whatever the nature of the ordeal that she endures. Gaṅgubāi has been forced to surrender and suffer a life that ‘God has ruined’. Being thus divested of a right to take a contrarian personal view of her whole existence, she eventually finds herself absolutely alone, with no one in whom she might confide and with whom she might share: wishes of suicide and death come naturally to her mind.

This is precisely where bhakti comes as a response to the challenge of a deadening solitude by opening a space for symbolic communication. Bhakti effectuates the passage from a state of nonentity to an inverse state of cognition, thanks to the construction of a privileged rapport of an intimacy of love with God. Not that bhakti, as a form of personal relation with, and attachment to, a transcendent entity provides an avenue for a religious discourse, let alone an ideological sanction, to such a state of deprivation. As such, bhakti transcends even its rationalistic Brahminical appropriation—and repressive perversion—of merit, sin, the apocalyptic but self-serving concept of Kali Yuga, *karma*, *saṁcit*, *mokṣa* (as liberation from corporeal time, which is construed as heading inexorably towards death), renunciation, god’s will, rituals, and subjection to the guru’s constraining and often dictatorial mediation, with which a long-established philosophical tradition tries to identify it.

This tradition successfully pervades the minds of devotees. But by displaying modes and means of symbolic and direct relation to God, bhakti opens up a space of autonomous and spontaneous attachment to an affectionate and responsive entity. Thus, it secures an assurance of recognition to those doomed to nonentity, providing the devotee with that existential identity and sanctity that he is otherwise denied in human society, even as it invalidates the very Brahminical bhakti ideology of absolute surrender to *karma*, impersonal destiny and guru.

Instead, bhakti constructs a context of rehabilitation, which pervades all of Gaṅgubāī's testimony, while running parallel to the social and ideological dynamics of destitution.

Bhakti inverts despair into delight, emptiness into plenitude, suffering into joy, fatal solitude into love intimacy. That context is brought about by forms of communication that create a relational space: singing and confiding, remembering and chanting names, a sharing of a vision of god, and sharing the upswelling of the heart. These forms monitor a rapture. They implicitly carry wishes of defiance and the inversion of structures of dominance and repression, albeit in a subdued form.

## Notes

1. The village of Tāḍkalas (circa 10,000 population) in Maharashtra is located on Parbhaṇī-Pūrṇā road, 14 km from Pūrṇā, the centre of the taluka, and 38 km from Parbhaṇ, the district centre. It comprises of two distinct parts: inside the old walls are old, impressive houses or *wāḍas* of the landed gentry, the huts of labourers' families and artisans, the crux of traditional activities; outside the walls are alleys of shops, godowns (constructed under Jawahar Rojgar Scheme), a Primary Health Centre, six private doctors, public primary school and high-school, one private high-school, three pre-primary schools, two nurseries, two banks, and modern administrative offices (police station, post office, *gram panchayat*, *Talāṭhī*), and many private concrete houses. A canal brings the waters of the Gaykwadi dam (Paithan) to the village fields, and secures a relative agricultural prosperity: cotton, jowar, groundnut, vegetables are staples. The cotton industry and the stone quarries offer job opportunities. Consequently, Tāḍkalas has recently developed into an important commercial centre, with 30 small hotels, 25 *pān* centres and five general stores, a weekly general market, and a daily trade of vegetables. Represented in the village are 28 castes, approximately as follows:

| Caste Name     | Families | Caste Name     | Families | Caste Name        | Families | Caste Name     | Families |
|----------------|----------|----------------|----------|-------------------|----------|----------------|----------|
| <i>Bhoī</i>    | 3        | <i>Gurāv</i>   | 4        | <i>Liṅgāyat</i>   | 8        | <i>Shimpī</i>  | 6        |
| <i>Bhoudha</i> | 75       | <i>Haṭkar</i>  | 300      | <i>Lohār</i>      | 4        | <i>Sonār</i>   | 4        |
| <i>Brāhmaṇ</i> | 8        | <i>Kaikaḍī</i> | 2        | <i>Māṅg</i>       | 75       | <i>Sutār</i>   | 10       |
| <i>Cāmbhār</i> | 17       | <i>Kāsar</i>   | 10       | <i>Marāṭhā</i>    | 2000     | <i>Telī</i>    | 15       |
| <i>Ḍor</i>     | 3        | <i>Komaṭhī</i> | 10       | <i>Mārvāḍī</i>    | 7        | <i>Vaḍār</i>   | 4        |
| <i>Ghisāḍī</i> | 3        | <i>Koṣṭī</i>   | 15       | <i>Mhasaṅjogī</i> | 6        | <i>Vaṅjārī</i> | 2        |
| <i>Gosāvī</i>  | 2        | <i>Kumbhār</i> | 5        | <i>Musulmans</i>  | 200      | <i>Vārik</i>   | 7        |



2. Bernard Bel from the Centre for Human Sciences (CSH), Delhi, and Hema Rairkar, Jitendra Maid, Bhimsen Nanekar and Gajarabai Darekar, from the Centre for Cooperative Research in Social Sciences (CCRSS). This study was a part of the joint programme on *Culture, Communication and Power* of the CSH and the CCRSS.
3. Prof. Sham Pathak teaches Marathi literature in the College of Majalgao (Beed district). Acquainted with the project of collection and valorization of grindmill songs during a seminar on Sita held in Pune in December 1995, he volunteered to facilitate the collection of songs in his own native village, Tāḍkalas, where his parents and brothers reside.
4. Prof. Pathak's mother is meticulously faithful to many domestic ritual observances while keen on mixing with women from other lower castes in which she keeps many friends. She likes to sing with them not only grindmill songs but also *bhajans* (she has formed a group of women belonging to different castes who enjoy coming together to sing *bhajans* among themselves) or even film songs: during our meeting she wanted to sing from a very popular Marathi film a song about the sorrow of a mother bidding her farewell to her daughter, who is leaving with her in-laws after the wedding ceremony. Prof. Pathak's father is 92 years old, and is a traditional healer of wide repute.
5. The project, *Autobiographies*, of Malavika Talukdar from Communication Design, Department of Video, National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad, takes advantage of the accuracy and reflexivity of the audio-visual media to document the forms of expression and communication specific to women in rural areas through a representation of an individual's motivations, vision of life and patterns of communication. At the same time, paradoxically, it is an outsider's view of an intimate expression. The project attempts to portray the various social forces and events in the individual daily existence that appear as messages in songs, and, thus, provide more comprehensive information about the emergence of female identity and individuality in a rural society. "My curiosity was aroused by these strong, resilient women who seem almost invisible in the texts of their songs. How did they live, what were they all about? What has brought on this poetry? This developed into the idea of doing portraits of these peasant women. My initial assumption of portraying two women who were different, yet marginalized in their society, proved incorrect as I went on. Dharubai is very much part of the social hierarchy as a *dai* (traditional midwife), moneylender and landowner. Gaṅgubāi, too, is well integrated into her community by her melodious voice and repertoire of songs influenced by the Bhakti cult. As I got to know them better, both these women, though physically so apart, shared a zeal to keep the tradition of grindmill songs alive."
6. Bernard Bel, Hema Rairkar, Bhimsen Nanekar, Jitendra Maid and Malavika Talukdar.
7. Hema Rairkar, Andréine Bel, Malavika Talukdar, Jitendra Maid and Bhimsen Nanekar.
8. Guy Poitevin, Datta Shinde, Jitendra Maid and Bhimsen Nanekar.

9. *Ātyā* 'paternal aunty', the usual address for a woman like Gaṅgubāi who had, till recently, stayed in her brothers' house with the latter's children.
10. A pregnant woman usually comes back to her mother's place for delivery.
11. Headman, traditional village authority, from leading, landed Maratha family.
12. A sort of mansion or manor resembling a stronghold: enclosed within a high stone wall with a single decorated gate as entry, houses are constructed round a central, open courtyard for members of a joint family.
13. Architectural unit: the space between the main wooden pillars of the house structure, usually 4–5 × 10–12 ft.
14. A movement of Muslims faithful to the Nizam of Hyderabad—who ruled over, at that time, a region known as Marathwada—which came into being protesting Marathwada's merging into the new political entity that became Independent India in 1947.
15. *Abhaṅga*: a particular metrical composition in praise of a deity, usually in a vernacular language; a hymn.
16. Devotional love: as a generic term, in common parlance, the noun *bhakti* refers to an emotive state and suggests no ideology, no doctrine nor particular representation of the divine, but an 'engagedness of the heart' (Poitevin and Rairkar 1996).
17. A piece of cloth that men commonly wrap around their waists.
18. A kind of medicine man.
19. A plant, *lawsonia inermis*.
20. The Hindu divine law of payback for the acts of the previous life, it is one of the bedrocks of quotidian Hinduism, seeking to explain extant hardships or happiness in terms of the merits or otherwise of preceding actions.
21. Common name of Viṭṭhal, the deity of Paṅḍharpūr or Paṅḍharī, at the core of the *bhakti* movement in Maharashtra.
22. Sanjay Gandhi Niradhar Yojana—Destitute persons who are mentally and physically handicapped and those who do not have their own resources. Under this scheme, the age of male applicants is 65 and that of female applicants is 60.
23. Literally, 'take the vision,' to gaze at the god: meet him, stand in front of him, look at him and address him with confidence and faith.
24. Ritual worship of the idol.
25. Predication with chanting of the God's name, *Harī*.
26. Recitation of the Scriptures.
27. Prayer of praise with a ritual of lights waved in front of god.
28. Hema Rairkar and Malavika Talukdar.
29. Bernard Bel.
30. Form of popular comedy which women of good repute were not supposed to attend let alone play in: the actors use to belong mainly to untouchable and other low castes, women actors being looked down upon as prostitutes.

31. A caste of musicians and singers, traditional performers of *Goṛdhaḷ*, a popular religious performance defined as 'tumultuous festivity in propitiation of *devī*, the goddess' in the Molesworth Dictionary (1831, 1857), the noun is commonly used to mean disorder and confusion.
32. One of the female Bhakti poet-saints of the 14th century, servant of the *sant*-poet Namdev (1270–1350) who rescued her as a girl-child abandoned by her poor parents on the threshold of Viṭhobā's temple at Paṇḍharpūr and left with no one but Viṭhobā and his saints to be taken care of by. The usual Marathi term *sant* is purposely retained for his flexible meaning, being in particular associated with all the holy figures of the bhakti tradition, including those devotees themselves who regularly perform the yearly pilgrimage to Paṇḍharpūr or Paṇḍhari (see in the section 4 of the third volume of this series the essay *The Cultural and Social Scene on the Way to Paṇḍhari*).
33. This is one of the most important tenets of Hinduism, in general. A translation of Stanza 29 of the book, *Tiruppaavai of Godaa*, translated by S.L.N. Simha, says: 'We are one with you for seven times seven births, and we shall serve you and you alone. Convert all our desires into a desire for you.'
34. This sentence comes from a grindmill song seemingly known all over the Marathi-speaking regions: it refers to a father who 'gave away' in marriage against 'one hundred rupees' (the dowry system did not exist at that time) his daughter, 'the beautiful cow now tied up at the door of the butcher's house,' in the same way as the village shopkeeper from a merchant caste, the *Vāṇī*, trades goods from his shop against payment made by a customer, who becomes the next owner of the goods.
35. *Bhajan*: Worship through repeating the name of a god or singing hymns in his praise, such hymn or piece of verses.
36. Literally, a female from the caste of herdsmen, the Gavaḷī, with the songs usually referring to milkmaids infatuated with the youthful prankster Lord Krishna, and their mutual erotic plays. The songs were reappropriated by the bhakti *sant*-poets as an idiom that described a mental state of frenetic attachment to God, or simply of affective religious fervour.
37. Jujube tree (*Zizyphus jujuba*).
38. Gum-arabic tree: These are thorny trees that grow in the arid zones and drought-prone areas of Maharashtra. They are feminine names.
39. UVS-33-02, CD GAN-01-01 (This is the index for the song in the corpus available from <http://ccrss.ws/gaṅgubāī/>).
40. A statue, an idol, an image, any figure of divine shape—here, the Rām figure.
41. CD GAN-01-02 (See note 39).
42. UVS-33-03, CD GAN-01-02 (See note 39).
43. Reference to Sitā rejected by Rām and sent into exile in a forest—essentially a symbol of helpless solitude and desertion; by extension, it also refers to the harassment meted out to a daughter-in-law by her in-laws.

44. UVS-33-04, CD GAN-01-03 (See note 39).
45. UVS-33-05, CD GAN-01-04 (See note 39).
46. Red powder smeared by women on their foreheads as a symbol of their married status.
47. This is a common enough plaint by Hindu Vaishnavite women to Lord Krishna, who made a habit of rollicking and departing, leaving the women enchanted and himself ostensibly inaccessible.
48. UVS-33-06, CD GAN-01-05 (See note 39).
49. One of the most famous of bhakti *sant*-poets (1608–1649), a Śudra from Dehu, near Pune. But since it was common for all non-Brahmins at that time to be called Sudras, it is not usually known that his family made a living selling produce off their land. Tukaram was hardly poor—he was a *mahajan*, a revenue collector from traders, as was his father. Tukaram lost his first wife and some of his children to the devastating famine of 1629, and thereafter turned to poetic compositions (*abhaṅgas*) to Lord Viṭṭhal (Viṭṭhal).
50. UVS-33-07, CD GAN-01-06 (See note 39).
51. A leading exponent of bhakti and *sant*-poet (1533–1599), a Brahmin from Paithan (Pratishthaan) in Maharashtra.
52. UVS-33-08, CD GAN-01-07 (See note 39).
53. Rashtrasant Tukdoji Maharaj, a reformist *sant* of the 20th century, had composed 3,000 bhajans.
54. UVS-33-09, CD GAN-01-08 (See note 39).
55. Daily worldly life, inclusive of all its duties and chores.
56. UVS-33-10, CD GAN-01-09 (See note 39).
57. *Sant* Eknath ended his compositions of *gavḷaṅ* with these words, which were his signature: ‘Eknath, disciple of guru Janārdan.’
58. UVS-33-11, CD GAN-01-10 (See note 39).
59. UVS-33-12, CD GAN-01-11 (See note 39). This is a song in praise of the guru.
60. Religious observances, such as vegetarianism, wearing white dress, taking one meal only, performed by devotees during the holy month of *śrāvaṇ*—in general, the four holy months of the rainy season.
61. The *bel* tree (*Aegle marmelos* or *Cratava religiosa*): sacred to god Śiva, particularly its leaves .
62. UVS-33-13, CD GAN-01-12 (See note 39). This is a song well-known in rural areas and among the urban proletariat to the devotees of Paṅḍharpūr. It is sung by Prahlad Shinde and available on audio cassette.
63. Puṅḍalik, a 12th century Brahmin, a model of godliness, was devotedly attending to his aged parents when god Viṣṇu came to visit him: Puṅḍalik threw Viṣṇu a brick for the god to stand on with hands held up to the waist till he finished with his parents. The god was so pleased that, as a boon, he acceded to Puṅḍalik’s request to appear in his presence henceforth in that form alone (the characteristic posture in which devotees recognize and worship Viṭṭhal), and stay forever at that very place, to be named the ‘the city of the one who fulfilled Puṅḍalik’s entreaty,’ an expression from which Paṅḍharpūr derived its name.

64. Gora was a potter (*kumbhar*) of the 13th century and Cokhoba an untouchable Mahar of the 14th century: these poor and destitute devotees became exemplary bhakti *sants* on account of their unbounded faith in Viṭṭhal, who reciprocated with the support of his loving presence.
65. UVS-33-14, CD GAN-01-13 (See note 39). This song is an *abhaṅga*. About Pañḍharī, see section 4 of the third volume of this series: the study *The Cultural and Social Scene on the Way to Pañḍharī*.
66. *Abīr*, a fragrant powder composed of sandal (*Zedoary cyperus rotandum*).
67. Bukka: a black powder.
68. UVS-33-17, CD GAN-01-14 (See note 39). This song is an *abhaṅga*.
69. UVS-33-19, CD GAN-01-15 (See note 39). This is a song in praise of Gaṇapati.
70. *Gulal*: the red powder that Hindus throw about or smear on faces during festivals, particularly Holi. It is made with flour of millet (*bājari*, *nācṇī*) dyed with a decoction of red sanders wood or crushed flame-of-the-forest leaves. These days, it is prepared with chemicals, often toxic.
71. UVS-33-20, CD GAN-01-16 (See note 39). This song belongs to the tradition of the god Datta (short for Dattatreya). Dattatreya is a Hindu god, an incarnation of the Divine Trinity comprising Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.
72. UVS-33-21, CD GAN-01-17 (See note 39).
73. UVS-33-22, CD GAN-01-18 (See note 39).
74. Ājāmelā was a Brahmin from Kanyakubja who fell in love with a śudra woman, but repented; when he called his son, whose name was Nārāyaṇa, by his name, he happened to 'take the name of god': his sin vanished.
75. According to a Puranic story, a prostitute had a parrot named Rām: she was saved simply because while calling her parrot she happened to 'take the name of god.'
76. This is a story from the *Rāmāyaṇa*: Ahilyā was cursed and transformed to stone by her husband for her mental infidelity: she was accused of entertaining, in her mind, thoughts of Indra, the king of the gods. She pleaded pardon. Her husband toned down his curse—Ahilyā would retrieve her human form when Rām, the incarnation of Viṣṇu, would touch her with his foot while passing through the forest.
77. Das Ganu is a poet from the early 20th century who wrote, in verse, hagiographies of such holy men as the Sai Baba of Shirdi and Gajanan Maharaj of Shergao.
78. UVS-33-23, CD GAN-01-19 (see note 39). This popular song (*lok gīta*) refers to the story from the *Rāmāyaṇa* when Sitā has sent Rām (Rāghava) to bring the skin of a golden deer for her to prepare a blouse with. The deer turns out to be a demon, who imitates Rām's voice. Sitā feels that Rām is in danger. She tells Lakṣmaṇ to go and help Rām. Lakṣmaṇ knows the demon's trick but cannot convince Sitā.

- Sitā blames Lakṣmaṇ that there is a sin in his mind. Ultimately Lakṣmaṇ is forced to go, which is when Rāvaṇ kidnaps Sitā.
79. Literally, the residence of the daughter-in-law in her in-laws' house: by symbolic extension, harassment meted out by the in-laws.
  80. UVS-33-24, CD GAN-01-20 (see note 39).
  81. *Sovaḷa*, a silk dress generally put on at the time of worship, that women wear to prepare ritual meals.
  82. UVS-33-25, CD GAN-01-21 (see note 39).
  83. UVS-33-26, CD GAN-01-22 (see note 39). This song is a *gavḷaṇ*.
  84. UVS-33-27, CD GAN-01-24 (see note 39). This song is an *abhaṅga*.
  85. Once people are with you—devotee or guru—you cannot turn your back on the path of bhakti.
  86. UVS-33-28, CD GAN-01-25 (see note 39). There are 360 days in a year (which is either poetic licence or absence of precise knowledge). 'Nine doors' stand for the human body with its nine 'receiving agents' or orifices. When he takes birth, a human being must start taking god's name and never leave the path of bhakti lest his life remain unfulfilled.
  87. Rām discontinued practicing bhakti, with all its deadly consequences.
  88. UVS-33-29, CD GAN-01-26 (see note 39). Literally, 'holding the *sāraṅg*', the bow and arrow prepared from a horn, a metonym for the god Vishnu, whose name is also avoided, the god being presented and worshipped with a jasmine flower in lieu of the utterance of his name. This song is an *abhaṅga*.
  89. A flower, *Rosa glandulifera* (also called *semantika*, *semanti*, *sevati*, the Indian white rose)
  90. UVS-33-31, CD GAN-02-01 (see note 39). This is a song of god Datta cult.
  91. Nāmā is the name of the *sant*-poet Namdev, a Shimpi or tailor. Khecaru stands for *sant* Visoba Khecar, a Brahmin, the guru of Namdev. Once, in the assembly of all the saints, Namdev declared himself the most intelligent of all of them. Jñāndev (1275–1296), a Brahmin poet-philosopher from Āḷandī, near Pune, and considered the founding reference of the bhakti tradition in Maharashtra, dispatched Gora Kumbhar, the potter, to ascertain whether Namdev was really so clever. To check whether their pots (*matke*) are properly baked, potters rap them with their fingers. Gora knocked on Namdev's head (the cranial *matka*) and declared that it was not rightly baked, just rubbish. Namdev was directed to improve, and Visoba Khecar appointed to examine Namdev's intellectual acumen. Once, Namdev happened to enter the temple at Aundhe (a town in Marathwada, Parbhani district, with a temple of Śankar known under the name of Nāganāth, the Lord of Snakes): he saw a man lying near the *liṅga* of Śiva, with his legs stretched upon the *liṅga*. Namdev tried several times to haul the man's legs aside, but a new *liṅga* regularly emerged under the sleeping man's feet. Namdev then realized that god is everywhere. That man was Visoba Khecar.
  92. UVS-33-30, CD GAN-02-02 (see note 39). This song is an *abhaṅga*.
  93. In the temple of Viṭṭhal, or Viṭhobā, at Paṅḍharpūr, there is a pillar called 'Garuda (eagle) pillar' opposite the statue of Paṅḍuraṅga, or Viṭṭhal,

- from where devotees take Viṭṭhal's *darśan*. The Garuda is the vehicle of Viṣṇu.
94. UVS-33-32, CD GAN-02-03. The name of god alone is a secure and lasting value when all worldly goods are bound to go to thieves of various sorts, and everything is heading towards ruin. This is a song of Tukadoji Maharaj.
  95. UVS-33-33, CD GAN-02-04. The parrot is a metaphor for the soul, which should free itself from its cage—the body—overcoming the hurdles of worldly concerns, life and sexual pleasure.
  96. UVS-33-34, CD GAN-02-05 (see note 39). These lines are sung as *bhajan* as well as grindmill song.
  97. UVS-33-35, CD GAN-02-06 (see note 39). This is a song of the Independence National Movement.
  98. UVS-33-36, CD GAN-02-07 (see note 39).
  99. CD GAN-02-08 (see note 39).
  100. Yashoda: mother of Krishna.
  101. UVS-33-37, CD GAN-02-09 (see note 39). This song is a *gavḷaṇ*.
  102. In Assam, Majuli, the largest river-island in the world and close to Kunjaban, is known for its Hindu Vaishnava monasteries called *satras*. Lord Vishnu and Lord Krishna are worshipped through dance, music and poetry, with the performances narrating the *Mahabharata* and other salacious pastimes of Lord Krishna.
  103. UVS-33-38, CD GAN-02-10 (see note 39). This song is a *gavḷaṇ*.
  104. UVS-33-39, CD GAN-02-12 (see note 39). 'Saviour': literally, 'donor' of life; *dātā*, the only 'one who gives'. This song is an *abhaṅga*.
  105. UVS-33-40 CD GAN-02-13 (see note 39). This is a popular song (*lok gīta*).
  106. The fifth day of the holy month of *śrāvāṇ* (August), the lord Cobra, Nāgobā or Nāganāth, is worshipped by women with offerings of curds, milk, popcorn, etc., placed for him at an anthill. Married women return to their mother's house for this very purpose, singing and dancing the whole night away; celebrations continue for over a month. In effect, this return to the maternal home is as important as the relocation, or displacement, to that of the in-laws immediately following marriage.
  107. In the courtyard of any house, on a square platform, a small structure is erected and filled with soil in which a sacred basil (*tuḷsī*) is planted to be worshipped every morning by the women of the house, who maintain the plant.
  108. A part of the festival of *Divāḷī* (October-November), when the brother goes to meet his sister unless the sister is expressly invited to her mother's place: the sister honours her brother with the ritual of *ārāṭī* (waving of purificatory lamps), brother presents her with gifts, and then the sister composes songs about her brother, from whom she expects protection.
  109. The reader will find all clarifications in this respect in *The Cultural and Social Scene on the Way to Pañḍharī*; section 4 of volume 3 of this series.

110. The semantics of this analogy and other related metaphors are discussed critically in the wider context of *The Cultural and Social Scene on the Way to Pañḍharī* in section 4 of volume 3 of this series.

## Reference

- Poitevin, Guy, and Hema Rairkar, *Stonemill and Bhakti* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1996).





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Part 2

GROUNDS OF

WORK RELATIONS

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# INTRODUCTION: Faculties of Correlation

EDITORS

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The symbolic function, the mechanism of producing signifiers, is at the heart of social life. It actualizes itself when it comprehends and organizes the world by turning it into signs to be exchanged. Part 3 concentrates on work practices, occupational skills and professional competencies as symbolic forms. These forms, conscious and public emblems of a distinctive identity for members of a particular group, bind them into a community that their thoughts and acts pertain to and that belong to. The forms interconnect the group in accordance with systems of occupational interaction that the social division of labour marks out and also bind them to the entire physical environment that the disparate work activities constantly affect.

On the whole—with some exceptions—generations of Western analysts and scholars have been habituated to viewing and conceptualizing work practices and occupational activities as the main, if not the sole, symbol of individual social status. As a system of social relations, society has, in many ways, been theoretically defined as rooted in the division of labour as its organizational infrastructure. As a result, labour and the labour force were perceived as having stakes in social dynamics, domination and transformation. The social relations of labour became, accordingly, a constituency of social knowledge of particular strategic significance for various social agencies and social actors. Workers' anthropology (Holmström 1985), and attempts to articulate the subjective experiences of the workers themselves, (Heuzé 1989, 1992) were, by contrast, of less

interest to scholars than the stratification of the working classes and their transformation in history following technological progress and consequent changes in working conditions. Despite a growing awareness of the limitations and biases of this approach (Méda 1995), work practices and occupational competencies continue, by and large, to be represented as an essential ground for human assertiveness of a claim to dignity. They are, first of all, the main markers of social differentiation, and a substantial base of the systemic organization of societies, traditional as well as modern.

The following studies will not contradict the many social attributes, modalities, functions and qualities long since recognized by work practices as integral to them. They will, however, attempt to apprehend all of the above as a peculiar totality by pointing to the logical foundation of the role that work practices perform. This role is simultaneously that of cohesion and dissociation, aggregation and differentiation, in which occupational attributes play the role of symbolic forms endowed with an exchange value. Invested with the symbolic function of configuring the social totality, work, a common feature of everyday life of everyone, becomes a characteristic 'total social fact', *fait social total* (Mauss 1960: xxiv-xxix).

The four studies of Part 2 focus, in two subsections, on two types of work configurations, in different sociocultural and historical environments. For the sake of analysis, two work spaces, traditional and modern, are taken as ideal for our purposes. In the course of time, when work practices change and adjust to modern working conditions, our attention shifts towards the moira and role of the symbolic forms in the context of changing labour relations and social rapports. Work practices become the hub of networks of many-sided symbolic communication and heterogeneous social formations by incorporating a wide range of diverse cultural representations.

Two general themes run through the essays—those of ambivalence and instability of symbolic forms. The first theme is noteworthy in Chapter 10, on the Parit, the washermen communities, in which we consider the social function of the symbolic censure of untouchability attached to their occupation in the village. The attribute is simultaneously indicative of integration and separation with people who consider themselves superior to them, on the one hand, and with people whom they prefer to

consider inferior to them, on the other. The psychological reflection of this ambivalence is evident in the mixed feelings of hate and reverence, anger and scorn that they entertain coevally with regard to the other communities in the village. The narrative's incisive observations reflect the principle of graded inequality that Bhimrao Ambedkar<sup>1</sup> suggested that students of the Hindu social structure consider as its plinth. He defined the model as 'an official gradation laid down, fixed and permanent, with an ascending scale of reverence [Ambedkar later changed that to: of hatred] and a descending scale of contempt' among the four classes of Hindu society (Ambedkar 1946:26). He traced it to the unique scheme of the *Purusha Sukta* which 'fixes a permanent warrant of precedence among the different classes, which neither time nor circumstances can alter.' (Herrenschmidt 1996: 11).

In the system of graded inequality there is no such class as completely underprivileged class except the one which is at the base of the social pyramid. The privileges of the rest are graded. Even the low is a privileged class as compared with the lower. Each class being privileged, every class is interested in maintaining the social system. (ibid.: 15)

The second theme of Part 3 is that of the precariousness of symbolic forms of communication based on work. On the one hand, these forms shape, inform, reflect and consolidate social totalities; on the other, they differ accordingly according to the principles at the root of the totalities. They are also endlessly subject to variation and mutation under the pressure of environmental and historical transformations that occur, in particular, in technology and the division and management of labour. This focuses attention on the processes and strategies shaping representations and social formations—the symbolic and communicational social forms—as a result of the transformations that affect occupational activities.

The first subsection 'Integrative Links of "the Traditional"' presents two examples of workspace typical of cohesive rural societies. The first example in Chapter 7 is that of the life-world of the artisans. 'The Communicating Goddess of the Artisans' by Jan Brouwer demonstrates how the entire existential environment of the artisans is created and integrated by the goddess, who is the symbolic link between every dimension of their existence.

This is a methodologically significant essay, since Brouwer actually demonstrates how the goddess is the integrative symbolic form through whom the artisans apprehend, organize and manage their immanent world, find their collective identity, their inner cohesion and outer distinction, pattern their transactions and unify their diverse crafts. The goddess offers the distinct possibility that, ultimately, liberation and prosperity should be reached without any attachment to the world. The goddess' dynamic personality—her symbolic effectiveness—becomes their comprehensive mode of social communication. She is the mediating link, establishing correspondences—intrinsic relations of translation—between the various symbolic levels of the craftspersons' existence. She is herself that very relation that fashions the artisans both into a distinct temporal social body and among the gods. She is their substantial reality, more real than the life and death of the artisans themselves.

The second example of integrative workspace, in Chapter 8, 'The Mother Earth of the Mawal Peasant' by Baban Khandbhor and Prabhakar Ghare, is that of the everyday existence of peasants in Mawal, the hill regions in the Western Ghats that roughly correspond to the talukas of Mawal and Mulshi in the district of Pune in Maharashtra. There are three basic features of traditional peasant communities that might help us better discern the profoundness of the testimony of two representatives of the Mawal peasantry.

Land, the essential parameter in all agrarian societies, is the basic idiom around which rural communities find their moorings. But the meaning that land holds differs qualitatively between cohesive traditional societies and the titles of land ownership in modern societies. For communities that get their life from the soil, Mother Earth belongs to a cultural category of the first magnitude. Furthermore, while binding generations to particular patches of land, labour adumbrate for the toiling peasants the vast horizon beyond which all aspects of existence find significance. Land is the font of identity and meanings: within these boundaries blossom work skills, symbolic practices, and practical and symbolic systems of inherited local knowledge to be meticulously transmitted. All these testify to the potentialities of the symbolic creativity of agrarian communities. Then, again, each agrarian community comprises various collectives that are as omnifarious

on the basis of occupational skills as they are interconnected by their proximity to the land cultivation activities of the peasant communities. Systems of interaction embedded in work practices intricately weave rural communities into variegated networks founded on kinship systems, work bondage, authority relationships, religious and ritual observances, etc. These are symbolic evidence of a distinctive sociocultural habitat, a 'territory'.

The testimonies of B. Khandbhor and P. Ghare show how they see Mother Earth as all-encompassing symbolic entity that secures meaning for, and affluence to, the peasant's existence, land and territory. Mother Earth mediates between the various symbolic levels and networks of occupational relations, more real than all the realities that she binds together. Similarly, to the communicating goddess of the artisans, Mother Earth is the comprehensive principle of social coherence of the various components of agrarian communities.

The second subsection, 'Disruptive Challenges of "the Modern"', presents two narratives on the vigour with which two subaltern communities face the disintegrative impact of a modern work environment on traditional occupations. Both communities were traditionally assigned tasks of servicing local rural societies. The Vaḍārs of Chapter 9, *Vaḍār Communities: Traditional Skills in Changing Times* by Datta Shinde, were stoneworkers. The Paṛiṭ of Chapter 10, *Paṛiṭ Communities: Occupation and Survival* by Suresh Kokate, were washermen. Existent heretofore in a subaltern state—albeit integrated with the rest of society—of deferential subservience, they today find themselves left alone to care for themselves. Integrated subordination diminishes social initiative. An occupation that might formerly have been an indication of status tends to be whittled down to an uncertain means of physical survival. Forced modifications in the traditional practices, skills and techniques, and the reorganization of occupational stratifications, tend to strip former symbolic forms of their substance and social function.

In this context, the narratives do not address issues of development or social welfare. They wonder whether and how the symbolic resources of past skills and work experiences might offer solid ground for negotiating the entry into the symbolic systems of communication of current modern occupations and their renewed avenues of social integration. Once ancestral



territories and boundaries are infiltrated by the new, on the strength of what resources—physical, symbolic and social—can new workspaces be symbolically and practically invested? Can former forms face up, and adjust, to changing circumstances without vanishing? Can they dredge up from within themselves some latent potential for metamorphoses? Can they, on their own strength, regain a symbolic initiative? The feasibility of the members of such communities to retain a space of theirs in the new networks of social communication depends upon their ability to answer such questions. Social integration for them is, above all, a strategy for gaining symbolic fortitude and strength.

The narratives are guided by the methodological conviction that attention should be drawn towards local discourses and people's forms of expression and explanations, metaphors and myths. Once workspace is figured out as a symbolic pattern of a particular social fabric, the subjective representations and accounts of individuals sharing their work experiences become significant indicators of the totality of their existence within that social anatomy. 'Individual history gives a chance to observe the behaviour of total beings who are not divided into faculties' (Lévi-Strauss 1960: xxv).

The social and the mental complement one another but this complementariness is dynamic and not static. The reason is that

the psychic is at the same time simply an element of signification for a symbolism which extends beyond it, and the only means of verification of a reality of which the multiple aspects cannot be grasped in a synthesis without it. (*ibid.*: xxxvii)

A methodological rule follows from this, which is particularly relevant in respect of the human science of communication, and is exemplified in Part 3. Now that we are concerned with the identification of the symbolic configurations at the root of the systems of social communication, we should look for the most spontaneously and clearly displayed symbolic systems. To that effect, we ought to facilitate, and rely on, the verbal accounts of the symbolic representations given by the subjects who mediate their incorporation and social actualization. This rule explains and justifies the focus placed on the testimonies of peasants and artisans in the Chapters 8, 9 and 10. The purpose is to apprehend

the logic of symbolic systems of social communication through the artisans' perceptions as expressed in their own words and language/s. The preamble to Chapter 8 comprehensively summarizes these perceptions.

The variety of the contributions in Part 3 ultimately leads towards three main lessons:

**Lesson 1:** When societies cannot remain cohesive any longer, the narratives point to two paradoxical facts: a) the limited potency of the symbolic function, and; b) the resulting fragmentation of the symbolic. This is equally borne out by other chapters, particularly those on health practices in Part 4. Increasingly complex social stratification and the consequent wide disparity of symbolic orders—sometimes *nihil ad rem*—rapid technological changes resulting in intensified social differentiation, and exposure to societies with alien lifestyles and social formations entail an uncontrollable expansion of the symbolic.

**Lesson 2:** This razing leads us to question the predominant relevance of the concept of negotiation that we suggested at the outset of Part 2. Negotiation prompts us to search for models of communicational strategy within the semantic horizon of a contingent reconciliation. But while reconciliation remains a valid category, and proved helpful at the inception, to counter dichotomous paradigms, it might not deserve to be given prominence. The last two narratives suggest looking for alternatives to negotiation, in terms of symbolic potential finding within itself the fonts of its own initiative and renewal within a changing environment. The narratives speak more of the capacity for revitalization emerging from under the imposition of an adverse contextual ecology than from that of adjustment, interpretation, reappropriation, compromise, and the like. Paradigms are wanted that will focus on self-memory and innate power. This is the approach that the next contributions in Part 4 will again explicitly advocate. Communicational strategies for coping with environmental changes are better described in terms of a symbolic function associated with creative potency than as a sort of bargaining practice.

**Lesson 3:** The function of symbolization at the root of symbolic forms of social communication is a puzzling paradox in itself, and not only on account of the number of contrasting modalities that

it engages. On the one hand, it is a faculty, in the original sense of the term, a capacity possessed by the human mind to perform. The innate and creative potency of the human mind—its symbolic forms—are more than a representation, personal or collective, more than a psychological trope, more than just a symbol, more than what they represent, and more than their modalities of social operation.

On the other hand, the explosion of the social forms of symbolic communication—which did not wait for the explosion of communication technologies and is essentially of a different nature (although significantly conditioned by these technologies nowadays)—confronts us with a dazzling multiplicity of forms and modalities, an intriguing and sometimes violent confrontation of symbolic orders, and a tragic precariousness of historical symbolic configurations. The symbolic function appears increasingly unable to cobble together its diversiform fragments into a single symbolic social dispensation.

What presents itself as an absolute weakness or congenital limitation may be the reverse of the same coin—that is to say, only reflect an infinite power to turn indefinitely any ‘thing’ in the world—that ‘floating signifying’ of Lévi-Strauss—into a ‘sign’, and thus build up the ‘social’ at will, out of anything, at any moment, and anywhere (Lechte 1994: 26–27).

The symbolic knows no condition but the accord of others. It is an inexhaustible and free faculty of Brownian correlation. Thus, communication is relation through symbolic forms only.

## Note

1. Dr Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891–1956), born into the ‘untouchable’ Mahar caste, is considered one of the founding fathers of modern India, an indefatigable fighter for the civil rights of the 60 million-odd ‘untouchables’ to whom he belonged. The Constituent Assembly of Independent India appointed Dr Ambedkar as the Drafting Committee chairperson to draft the Constitution of India, which Ambedkar presented in February 1948. It was adopted on 26 November 1949 with all its 356 Articles and eight Schedules intact. Article 11 abolished untouchability in all its myriad forms.

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2.1

*Integrative*

*Links of*

*'the Traditional'*

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# 7

## THE COMMUNICATING GODDESS OF THE ARTISANS

JAN BROUWER

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History books—and even historical studies—are replete with examples of kings who built temples and their idols and chariots, and so on. What is probably meant is that the kings sponsored their construction and manufacturing. The real ‘Makers of the World’ were—and are—the voiceless artisans.

Recently, these voiceless artisans ‘have been put on the world map’, as one of the craftsmen, an informant in the writing of my book, *The Makers of the World*, told me.<sup>1</sup> This, and subsequent works, inform us about the life and work of craftsmen. We now know how they view themselves and perceive the world for which they manufacture the basics. Comprising a variety of crafts such as blacksmithing, carpentry, coppersmithing, sculpture and goldsmithing calls for a well-defined and credible process of communication within and without this relative comprehensive caste of artisans.

The texts of the Visvakarma artisans show that Goddess Kali is their chosen deity for communication within their community, and between themselves and with society at large. (By text, I mean not only myths, stories and the lexicon of the crafts,<sup>2</sup> but also material expressions and actions at the workplace.)

A careful reading of all these texts reveals the structural position of this dynamic goddess. In the Visvakarma view, she represents Nature and Culture, Life and Death, Self and Society.



The third position she occupies in various triads<sup>3</sup> is not a static one. From her position on different boundaries, she demonstrates a flexibility and adaptability to incipient change. As such, she represents a movement in Time and Space from which the indigenous concept of 'development' can be deduced.

I shall restrict myself in this paper to the goddess as communicator within the caste of artisans.

In section 3, her communicating role in the craftsmen's workshops and the crafts processes are described. Sections 4 and 5 focus on the goddess' role within the actual transactions between the craftsmen and society.

In the concluding section, I will show that the goddess is, in the Visvakarma cultural ideology and on the ground, a crucial asset of collective identity and communicative action.

## The Goddess, Her Priest and Her Sponsor

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In the towns of Mysore, Srirangapatna, Channapatna, Channarayapatna,<sup>4</sup> Hassan, Holenarsipur, Huliurdurga, Halgur, Magadi, Tumkur, Bangalore, Sargur and Arkalagud, the Visvakarma caste of artisans maintains small and often beautiful temples dedicated to their Goddess Kalika. In most cases, these temples, called Kalika Kamateshvara temples (*devasthanam*), serve as a point of reference for all Visvakarmas of the locality, irrespective of craft in which they engage or the subcaste to which they belong.

The Visvakarma caste comprises blacksmiths, carpenters, coppersmiths, sculptors, and goldsmiths. In its entirety, the caste claims Brahmin status. In southern Karnataka, the Visvakarma artisans are distributed over four subcastes—two non-vegetarian subcastes: the Kulachar subcaste of blacksmiths, carpenters and goldsmiths; and the Matachar subcaste of coppersmiths. The two vegetarian subcastes are the Sivachars, who are blacksmiths-cum-carpenters, coppersmiths-cum-sculptors, and goldsmiths. The Uttaradi subcaste consists of goldsmiths.

On closer inspection, it was found that in the case of Mysore, Srirangapatna, Hassan, Holenarsipur, Huliurdurga and Halgur in the Mandya, Mysore, Hassan and Tumkur districts, the chief sponsors of these temples always belong to the Kulachar subcaste,

although no Kulachar has ever been found to have served the goddess as a priest.

For the past 350 years or so, the Uttaradi subcaste has enjoyed the priestly rights in these temples. Among the younger members of the Uttaradi lineage, from which, traditionally, priests are recruited, there is actually very little interest in becoming a temple priest. The younger generation of Uttaradis, in particular, is opting out of the crafts and the traditional world of manufacturing.<sup>5</sup>

In this respect, they are following earlier generations of Sivachar priestly lineages. The history of priestly rights is closely connected with the changing socio-economic position of the concerned subcastes of a given locality. It is also clearly expressed in the architectural and iconographical aspects of the temple buildings. These developments can be seen, in particular, in the Kali temples of Srirangapatna, Channapatna, Huliurdurga, Magadi and Arkalagud.

In the big Kalika Kamateshvara temple in Srirangapatna, the temple management is dominated by Kulachar carpenters and goldsmiths, while a goldsmith from the Uttaradi subcaste is the priest. There is a second, smaller, and probably much older Kali temple located on the same road as the Kalika Kamatesvara temple that leads to a fort. The gate has an architectural provenance not common in this region, but corresponds in style to the Kali temples at Arkalagud and at Halgur. The Srirangapatna Kali and the Kali of Halgur are both called Hankali and are said to be sisters elder and younger, respectively. Both temples are maintained by the Kulachars, and the priest of the Srirangapatna temple is the elder brother of the priest at Halgur. Both are Sivachar blacksmiths-cum-carpenters. In the Srirangapatna Hankali temple, the central shrine is designated to Virabhadra,<sup>6</sup> whose iconography is similar to that of Hankali.

In Channapatna (Bangalore district), three shrines are devoted to Kali: the oldest is located outside the eastern border of the bazaar; the second is located on Iron Club Street (*tandibidi*) in the bazaar, and the youngest in the Old Fort area. In the first two shrines, which are defunct now, the Sivachars held the priestly rights, while in the currently functioning temple, those rights have been given to an Uttaradi.

In Channarayapatna (Hassan district), the present Kali temple is a new structure whose inception was in the late 1970s and was

completed in February 1982. It is located on a road between the old fort and the bazaar. In the temple's central shrine, we find two deities: Lord Visvakarma<sup>7</sup> (five-headed and 10-armed); Kali is to his left. Between these two idols, but about three feet forwards towards the entrance, stands the phallic image of Siva (*lingam*), called Kamatesvara. The image is guarded, as usual, by the bull Nandi, one of Siva's outriders.

The temple committee is dominated by goldsmiths from all the Visvakarma subcastes, including a few wealthy traders from the Sivachar subcaste.

This temple's predecessor is a shrine to Kali in a residence-like structure on Coppersmiths Street (*kanchu-garabidi*) on the northern end of the bazaar. I was told that it was maintained by the Kulachars, and that there used to be a Sivachar priest. Nowadays, it is almost always locked, its doors opened only on New Moon Day by the present priest, who lives on this street itself. The caretaker-priest told me that the shrine was moved to this house during a relocation of most of the Visvakarmas on this street to the main bazaar.

Huliyurdurga is a town in Kunigal taluka (Tumkur district) at the junction of the Kunigal and Magadi roads. It was a taluka headquarters for a considerable time in the late 19th century. The place was surrounded by jungle—even today, there is a substantial forest to the north and east of the town. It is in this forest that we find the Kali temple, on a hill that forms the southern end of a dam (*bandh*), which itself is the Dipambudi Tank. Although the temple's compound is large, the original shrine is a small but well-proportioned building. The presiding deity, an unaccompanied Kali idol, is a sculptural masterpiece. According to the local Sivachars, there used to be a *lingam* image in front of the Kali idol. The changes in the temple building, which are of recent provenance, are a result of a dispute between Sivachar and Kulachar Visvakarmas about the priesthood of the temple. It is not disputed, however, that the Kulachars have always been its chief donors.

In Magadi town (Bangalore district), the Kali temple, located at a crossroads in the main bazaar, was renovated in 1990. I did not see the temple before its renovation, but I am told that there was only a stone representing the goddess. Now, the central shrine is designated to Virabhadra, who is guarded by Nandi. The Kulachars have always been its chief donors and maintainers,

although the latest renovation was cosponsored by one of the local traders, the owner of a 'jewellery mart' (a Shroff). At the time of the reopening of the temple, no priest was appointed, but till January 1991, a Brahmin had been temporarily appointed as one. After January, a goldsmith-cum-bookseller from Dharwad District agreed to function as priest on a salary basis. Although he belongs to the vegetarian Konnurpanta subcaste of northern Karnataka, he has been living in Bangalore for years.

The Kali temple at Arkalagud (Hassan district) is located inside a fort on a street leading to the main Siva temple of this locality dominated by Brahmans. At the entrance of this temple, an inscription mentions 1808 AD as the year of its establishment. Between 1808 and 1959, the priestly rights were given to a Sivachar goldsmith lineage. Between 1959 and 1989, the temple was locked. Thereafter, the Kulachar carpenters and goldsmiths took the initiative to renovate the temple and restore the priesthood to one of the last Sivachars of Arkalagud.

Considering the temple priesthood, three different situations have been observed: (i) the Kulachars are the donors and the Sivachars the priests; (ii) the Kulachars are the donors and the Uttaradis are the priests; and (iii) the Kulachars are (or were) the chief donors, but conflict between the subcastes about the priesthood led to different resolutions on matters related to priesthood.

In Mysore, the Uttaradis have the priesthood, but the Kulachars have been accommodated as priests of the Visvakarma idol: they may also assist the Uttaradis on festivals and other busy days of the temple. In Bangalore, the dispute ended in a draw, and, as a result of a court case, the government appointed a Brahmin priest. In Huliurdurga, the Kulachars have themselves taken to the priesthood, after a violent conflict between the youths of the two subcastes.

As for the architectural and iconographical aspects of the temples, these summary observations can be made:

1. The central shrine is designated to the goddess (Channapatna, Channarayapatna [new temple], Huliurdurga, Sargur and Tumkur), but then she is (or was) accompanied by a male deity: or the Goddess is placed to the left of the central shrine;

2. The goddess holds weapons of control (Mysore, Srirangapatna [big temple], Channapatna, Channarayapatna [new temple], Hassan and Holenarsipur);
3. The goddess holds weapons of attack (Channarayapatna [old temple], Huliurdurga, Srirangapatna [small temple], Halgur and Sargur);
4. In some temples she is unaccompanied, while in others she is accompanied;
5. The layout of the temples shows unusual features (Hiriyur, Srirangapatna, Halgur).<sup>8</sup>

From the change in the goddess iconographic details, the place of her shrine and the mode of worship (from sacrifice to worship), it may be concluded that her journey (from the forest to the fort) is guided by the concept of purity. During the past centuries, she has come closer to the Visvakarma ideal. The latest development shows her even sharing a shrine with Lord Visvakarman himself (Channarayapatna). In the Channapatna Kali temple myth, she involves the Kulachars, who remained the goddess' chief donors, in monetary transactions (Channapatna), and only recently they claim to serve her as priests.<sup>9</sup> But the freshly gained priesthood (full-time at Huliurdurga and part-time at Mysore) brought the Kulachars back to square one. In my view, the Kulachars have projected their own journey into that of the goddess, in so far as a settlement of the issue of the priesthood is concerned. Both the goddess and the Kulachars move from the wilds to the bazaar and then to the fort. But where the goddess has changed her diet, the Kulachars have not. They still sacrifice a sheep, goat or chicken, the difference being that it is no longer to the goddess in her temple, but to her manifestation in tools and other assets at workshops.

Thus, the structural position of the goddess is defined by her dynamic character, her capacity to adjust to changing contexts and conditions. She is engaged in a journey from her original place in the wilds—the abode of esoteric knowledge, or a form of authority—via the bazaar, where interdependence is juxtaposed with independent monetary transactions, to the fort, where she tends to supersede distinctions. While her location, attributes and name change, her position does not.

For all Visvakarma subcastes, she is the authority as Parvati, or consort of Kamatesvara, who vindicates their existence as a caste. However, the various subcastes have different views of the goddess' authority in relation to monetary transactions, priesthood, and power.

From the Mysore Kali temple myth, we learn that the Sivachar idol-makers do not want remuneration for the idols they deliver. In reality, they used to do so against such payments. In other words, the Sivachars were already involved in monetary transactions.

The Channapatna Kali temple myth clearly shows that the goddess involves the Kulachars in monetary transactions, which they were not into previously. In other words, the Kulachars got involved in the money-and-market economy on the authority of the goddess, while the Sivachars did so independent of her.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, while the Sivachars and the Kulachars differ in their views on the authority of the goddess, both share the view that money supersedes the domain of power.

## Culture and Nature

The goddess also manifests herself in the crafts, appearing as tools and fixed assets in the layout of the workshops. Above all, she manifests herself as iron.

The Kannada-speaking blacksmith can choose from a variety of words to indicate his principal raw material. Most frequently, he uses the word *kabana* to denote iron. Other words for the metal are *karbon*, *kabpuna girija*—which literally means mountain-born—or *ghana*, which also means cloud.

According to the Visvakarmas, iron ore is a manifestation of Mahakali. Iron, as raw material, or in the shape of a product, is considered to be the Goddess Kali. It is also worshipped by those blacksmiths who engage in iron mining and smelting.<sup>11</sup> The intriguing point here is that iron's sacred value remains unchanged despite the labour-intensive manufacturing process.

When the blacksmith goes to the forest to collect iron ore, he is not accompanied by his patron. He delivers his product unceremoniously to his patron, who is either the local *yajman* or the carpenter. When he goes to the forest himself, he is neither

*yajman* nor priest, but the price he pays for his independence is his involvement in a violent activity (mining ore). When he delivers his products, he is the servant of the king or the carpenter. Thus, the blacksmith does not ritualize his relationship with, or his dependence on, the *yajman*. On the other hand, it is the blacksmith who delivers the tools to the other Visvakarmas, who can thus be seen as his collective *yajman*.

The blacksmith has no contact with the patron at the beginning of his craft. At the end, his contact with the patron has a direct, non-ritualized nature. But, at both times, the reason for the relationship of the blacksmith with the patron is the same. As the substance (iron ore) and the principal raw material (iron) are thought to have no link with the soil, the patron's presence is not required.

All the blacksmith's patrons receive products from him that are essential for them to perform their own duties: without tools, no artisan can practise his craft; without swords, warriors, whether divine or human, cannot fight; without ploughshares, peasants cannot farm; and without iron parts, the carpenter cannot complete his products. Thus, the blacksmith seems to supply his *yajman* with a particular power that only he is able to give, and which is as essential to the carpenter as the goddess' power is to a king.

Finally, when the blacksmith performs the ritual in the smelting-house, he is unaccompanied. In other words, he does not act as a priest. The blacksmith, in general, never acts as a *yajman* for others. It may, therefore, be concluded that the blacksmith does not represent any priestly or royal power, but only the female power (*sakti*) that is closely associated with Mahakali or Kali.

At this point, the blacksmith draws our attention deeper. As a miner, he literally breaks into the existing natural order. But this statement is only true if he is viewed as belonging to the cultural order. If, by contrast, he is viewed as belonging to the natural order, his violent activity of breaking into the natural order is nullified *ab initio*.

The problem of the blacksmith may be formulated as a contradiction between his violent activity of making iron and the dependence of all five kinds of craftsmen on iron for their tools. In view of the Visvakarmas' claim to Brahmin status, such dependence is acceptable within the caste, but not outside. Thus, on the one hand, the blacksmith must perforce be a Visvakarma;

on the other hand, he is too violent to be a Brahmin. Apparently, the participants themselves are aware of this problem as the analysis of his situation, the lexicon, the narratives and the handbills show.<sup>12</sup>

In the *adurubasha* secret lexicon, the Visvakarmas view themselves as well as others in terms of a cultural order: whereas society, in general, is viewed in temporal terms, they see themselves in spatial terms (because the latter are three-dimensional manufactured objects). However, there are three significant exceptions: (i) a member of the Visvakarma caste is called 'Spark of Fire'; (ii) the blacksmith is called by the name of a bird, the heron; and (iii) the blacksmith's principal raw material, iron, is called the 'forehead'.

The two exceptions, the blacksmith (Self) and the stonecutter (Society), may now be compared with the help of the information provided in the handbills, in which the blacksmith is associated with Earth (*prithvi*) and with the colour white. In the lexicon, the stonecutter is named by Earth and the blacksmith by the white-coloured heron. Both the blacksmith and the stonecutter are classified in terms of the natural order. The colour of the bird for blacksmith is the same as the colour in the handbill associated with the blacksmith. The blacksmith, in his capacity as iron miner, as well as the stonecutter, have one action in common: they break into the natural order to obtain their chief raw material (iron and rock).

From the lexicon, it may be inferred that, like a bird that moves from the earth to the sky, the blacksmith moves from the natural order (Earth, Time) to the cultural order (Self, Space). The heron (*Ardeidae: eicomiformes*, suborder *Ardeaco*) seems to be an appropriate choice: it is non-vegetarian and all-white in colour of which the sexes have a general physical resemblance.

From the narratives it has been concluded that the blacksmith has an androgynous nature, similar to the dual nature of the goddess. In the handbills, the blacksmith is associated with the colour 'white'—as opposed to iron, which is 'black'—and with the 'original power' (*sakti*), which is essentially a feminine principle.

In three different ways, the Visvakarma ideology deals with the Nature/Culture opposition. First, when the activity of the blacksmith and stonecutter are considered, both artisans are classified under Nature (as Earth and Bird, respectively), thus creating a



dyadic relationship. The blacksmith here is autonomous and complete. Second, when the nature of the activity is viewed, the triad—Nature (Earth), Culture (Sky) and Blacksmith (Bird)—appears. Here, the blacksmith, because of his violent activity, mediates between Nature and Culture. There is also a third position in which the focus is on the principal raw material—iron. The code word ‘forehead’ could signify as belonging to the Visvakarma Self. Thus, besides the activity and the nature of the activity, the material of the activity takes the blacksmith back into the fivefold Visvakarma image. The dichotomy Nature/Culture is now expressed in a complex pentad relationship.

## Life and Death

The finished products of four crafts<sup>13</sup> are not complete products at the time of delivery.<sup>14</sup> When a product is ready to be delivered, the craftsman calls it ‘finished’ (‘I have finished [*mugiside*] it’). This is an original Kannada word from the verb *mugisu*, which means ‘to conclude’ or ‘to finish’ and it is used as such. But the semantic value of *mugisu* does not stretch to include ‘to complete’. For the verb ‘complete’ and the adverb ‘completeness’, there is only a Sanskrit loan word in Kannada, which is textual rather colloquial (*purna* or ‘complete’, ‘perfect’; *purana* or ‘completion’; or *pari-purnate*, or ‘completeness’, ‘entireness’. The participants use these terms in the context of Lord Visvakarman).

The distinction the artisans make between (i) *finishing* a work and *completing* a work, and (ii) between the use of these two terms in two different contexts (textual versus colloquial), adds to our understanding of their perceptions and actions concerning the delivery of their product. The carpenter’s bullock-cart does not yet carry the final linchpin; the steeple (*kalasa*) of the temple tower does not yet include the iron rod to fix it, the eyes of the temple idol (*murti*) still remain to be opened with the black for the pupil, and the wedding necklace still lacks the black beads (*karimanī*).

The craftsman hands over each of these products to the respective patron a while before the patron is going to use them. The time lag between the delivery of the product and its functioning in the world might vary from craft to craft and from patron to patron. Shortly before pressing the product into service, the patron

conducts a ceremony during which the craftsman actually completes the product (putting in the linchpin, fixing the peak, opening the eyes, attaching the beads).

Naturally, after having delivered his incomplete product, the craftsman engages himself in a new work (*kelasa*). After some time, while this work is in progress, he receives a call from the previous patron to attend the ceremony to 'complete' the previous product. The craftsmen call it a 'new work'. In our words, each task—the old work, the new work, and the completion of the old work—is considered to be a separate assignment. Thus, the manufacturing of a product up to its delivery and the making of the product ready for functioning are viewed as two different assignments.

This system of breaking up a single production into two different assignments is not restricted to the members of one caste (Visvakarma) or to so-called traditional artisans. Carpenters, masons, plumbers, electricians, glass-setters, painters, polishers and similar artisans of any caste background used to follow the same system.

In its most simplistic form, the reasoning behind this 'splitting system' is this: the transcendent order is the order of completeness and perfection. It is placed outside the world where human beings like you and I reach only on our demise.

In the secret crafts lexicon, the terms for Society or the World are temporal, notably those terms associated with Death. The spatial terms for Self, insofar as they are not manufactured objects and unrelated to persons or their customs and habits, are those taken from flora and the crafts. Viewed in contrast to the concept of *Death* that underlies the terms for Society, this may be interpreted as terms to which the concept of *Life* is basic. Moreover, the handbill as an exegesis of the Visvakarma 'culture', in the image of the single body with the five heads, associates the total Visvakarma with the Five Elements of Life. The avoidance of completion and perfection which, as we have seen above, are located in the transcendent order, and is thus one of avoidance of Death.

This is to be seen both metaphorically and sociologically. For, during the time lapse between 'finishing' and 'completing' a product, the artisans start up a new work for another patron. The cultural ideology is thus inseparable from the mundane survival strategy. The ritual and social domains are intertwined.

## Self and Society

The case of the Visvakarma goldsmith shows that his constrained connection with society, expressed through time, finds its origin in his perception of Self and Society. The crux of the Visvakarma artisan's cultural ideology is the view that ultimate liberation and prosperity should be reached without any attachment to the world. Hence, relationships should be denied (for example, through the intervention of a deity) or made incidental (for instance, through the use of money).

The artisan finds a solution to his problem in a relationship with the goddess who provides him with Time. This explains his ritual donations and honoraria (*dakshine*) to her: a payment in exchange for a ritual service. Interestingly, the word for a gift to the goddess is not *kanike*, but *dakshine*. The latter is cognate to *dakshina* (*dakshin* literally means south, but in real terms, it was paid at the completion of a task by an acolyte to his guru), which is associated with Death. The goldsmith and the goddess thus exchange Life and Death.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, the complementary opposition contains a contradiction: the mediating role of the goddess. The Visvakarma perception of society in terms of Death seems not to be an isolated one. Galey (1983) demonstrated that the debts of men resemble debt toward death and that the world is ordered by debt: the relationship between death, debt and society seems to be a key perception in the Indian Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

The other important connection is the one the goldsmith has with the Shroffs, the traders who run jewellery marts. The goldsmith receives principal raw material from the Shroff, as well as money. He, thus, receives the goddess (in her material manifestation) and does not return the gesture. He cannot, and should not, give a gift to the Shroff, as the latter, like all non-Visvakarmas, belongs to Society (Death).

This observation has two implications: (i) the goldsmith returns the gift from the goddess by offering presentations to her temple in the direction of ever-flowering life; (ii) the money received from 'Death' terminates the relationship of exchange.

From the Shroffs, I learnt that the goldsmiths never actually repay loans that they have been given. (The average outstanding loan is about Rs 30,000 per goldsmith per year). Of course, the

goldsmith cannot repay a loan, for this would imply a form of reciprocity which, once returned and received, would end the social relation attached to it. Were he to repay the loan, it would mean recognition of a relationship. On the other hand, the Shroff is not keen on the repayment of outstanding loans, either. For him, it is through outstanding debts that he has command over people, and, more precisely, over the best of goldsmiths.

In this context, it is also possible to deduct the views on profit. The Shroff makes his profit (*labha*) by buying gold at cheaper than official rates, and by selling jewellery made from this gold to his customers. Thus, he profits *from both ends* of the process of a deal. The margin of his profit links him with society. In the Shroff's view, money creates a relationship: he thinks that the more he pays the goldsmith, the better and more the goldsmith will work for him; the smaller the margin at selling time, the better his relationship with the customer.

In contrast to the time of the Shroff's profit-making, the goldsmith makes his profit *within* the process of manufacturing (the wastage [*tyamana*] and the wages [*majuri*]). Together, wastage and wages are *his* profit (*labhadevi*, from *labh*—gain or profit—and *devi*—goddess), which literally means 'added by the goddess'. The temporal process of transformation of substance (gold) into form (product) is, thus, the result of a cosmic exchange between the male and female constituent parts of the universe, and not the result of a worldly transaction.

A closer look at the dialectical relationship between the ideal Visvakarma placed outside the world and the Visvakarma craftsmen of the social world reveals the way in which the Visvakarmas cope with the fundamental break between the two orders. The ideal concept of the universe constituted by a male and female part becomes a complementariness of the male, the female and the neutral in the world. The place of the ideal Visvakarman is, in the world, taken by the craftsman, specialist and generalist. The unavoidable use of external agents in the world is, then, either mediated by the goddess or denied by making them incidental.

## Conclusions

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Thus, the Visvakarmas' social bonds are unthinkable without the goddess. Her importance to the artisans is also shown in their

compromise in installing an image of Siva in the central shrine of their Kali temples under pressure from kings and others with more influence.

The goddess communicates in three distinct discourses: intracaste—between the subcastes; between the Visvakarmas and the world; and in collaboration with the blacksmith between Nature and Culture in the crafts processes.

The Visvakarma caste, fragmented by the crafts and subcastes, is unified through the cohesive dynamics of the goddess. In her manifestation as the goddess, Sri Kalikamba, in the temples named after her, she ties together the various subcastes. She represents a central point of reference for the complementary opposition between inclusive (sponsoring) and exclusive (priestly) subcastes.

The ideal Visvakarma, being placed outside the social world, implies avoidance or denial of social bonds. The Visvakarma ideal is the Brahminical world of independence, exclusion, completeness and non-violence. In the social world, the artisans participate in the market, depend on patrons, and have a relationship (through sacrifice or worship) with the goddess who rules over the world of matter.

The goddess, her temples and their stories show her as the preserver of the unity of the caste through a division of labour between the establishers and maintainers of temples, on the one hand, and temple priests, on the other.

The journey of the goddess from the wilds, via the bazaar to the fort, reflects the voyage of the Visvakarmas from patronage and customary transactions to the market.

The process of the journeys makes it clear that purity is the indigenous concept of development. It is a comprehensive concept covering the ritual, the social, and the economic domains of society.

For the two categories of subcastes—the exclusive (from which the priests are recruited) and the inclusive (from which the temple sponsors hail)—under interpretation of the caste's ideal, deny themselves the social bonds that their work and life demand. This problem is solved through the mediation of the goddess.

For the crafts, it is Nature that provides the raw materials. The Visvakarmas break down Nature to obtain the material for their crafts. The crafts processes lead to an artificial reconstruction,

culminating in the delivery of the finished product. In the Visvakarma view, both iron and land belong to Kali. Thus, the goddess controls, or even embodies, their principal raw materials. The manifestation of Kali as iron is catalyzed by the blacksmith, who exchanges the values of Siva and *sakti* within himself. The goddess as *sakti* is the dynamic substance of which the blacksmith, too, is made. In this context, it is difficult to differentiate between the goddess and the androgynous blacksmith. But it is certain that without the goddess, the Visvakarmas cannot mediate between Nature and Culture.

At the end of the crafts processes, the goddess appears as the black colour of the iron linchpin for the bullock-cart, the iron rod for the temple's steeple, the paint for the pupils of the eyes of the idols, and the beads for the wedding necklace. The conjointment of these black items marks the completion of the finished product. They are attached during an assignment that is not the same as the one during which the product is manufactured. The incomplete and imperfect product is metaphorically seen as Life, while the complete and perfect product is viewed as Death. The black goddess stands between Life and Death, thus protecting the artisans through her communicative actions.

In the social discourse, the Visvakarmas conceptualise the Self (as a group) and Society in terms of a transcendent completeness. On the boundaries of the transcendent order of the Self and mundane order of Society for which they manufacture their products, the Goddess Kali is drawn to consummate the circle of completeness by her dynamic effectiveness.

In summation: the goddess is the Visvakarma agency of symbolic communication to express the inner cohesion of their community and its outer distinction. In material and social discourses, each intertwined with the ritual, the goddess, in different manifestations, represents the third element in various basic triads.

In the material discourse, she appears between Nature and Culture. In the social discourse, she operates between the Self (as a group) and Society, as well as between the exclusive and inclusive Visvakarma subcastes.

The immanent world of social bonds is, thus, structured by a triad of opposed but complementary elements mediated by a third element: the communicating goddess.

## Notes

1. This statement was made by one of the key informants of my PhD project on the artisans of Karnataka when I presented him a copy of the thesis on which text the book, *The Makers of the World*, is based. The data for this essay were collected during fieldwork in Karnataka between 1980 and 1984, in 1989, and in 1994. I am indebted to Prof. M.L. Reiniche (Paris), Prof. G.K. Karanth (Bangalore) and Mrs M. Gupta (Mysore) for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.
2. The source of the Visvakarma views on Self and Society is their secret 'craft lexicon'. The lexicon is called *adurubasha* in Kannada. *Aduru* means 'deceit' as well as 'iron-ore'. *Basha* means 'language'. A workable translation could be 'language of deceit' or 'language of the ironsmiths'.
3. The various triads have been discussed in Jan Brouwer (1999a).
4. The names of these places have recently been changed. However, to facilitate comparative research, the older names have been retained.
5. For a reconstruction of the history of the Uttaradi subcaste, see Brouwer 1992.
6. Virabhadra was a sort of supergod whom Siva created from his own hair. Virabhadra also defeated Vishnu and Brahma in the war against Daksha. He is the head of Siva's followers. The fact that he was created by Siva for a definite tactical purpose probably helps create an iconographic similarity between him and Kali.
7. The patron deity of workers, artisans and artists. In Sanskrit, Visvakarman means 'All-Accomplishing', the architect of the gods. Visvakarman is the divine carpenter and master craftsman, the maker of the weapons of the gods, the builder of their cities and chariots. He constructed the mythical city, Lanka, and is also said to have made the gargantuan image of the Lord Jagannath at Puri in Orissa.
8. In a separate essay, I have given an exhaustive analysis of the architectural and iconographical aspects of the Kali temples in conjunction with the changing socio-economic position of the Visvakarma sub-castes. (The publication of this essay is under negotiation.)
9. In the present situation, in which the Sivachars are not inclined to take up temple priesthood and the Uttaradis are withdrawing from temple priesthood, a few lineages of the Kulachar subcaste that have a vegetarian tradition have put forward strong claims to the priesthood. This trend was also observed in the 1980s. (See Brouwer 1995)
10. In the Sivachar interpretation of the general Visvakarma ideal, they should not worship the goddess in temples as a visit to a temple is polluting. They worship the goddess as Chakra at home. This shows the Sivachars' (and other exclusive subcastes') preference for vertical ritual connections, in contrast to the horizontal ritual connections of such inclusive subcastes as the Kulachar. The Sivachar interpretation thereby comes closer to the Brahminical ideal than those of the others.

11. The blacksmiths of Halgur in southern Karnataka and those of Bellary district in central Karnataka were engaged in surface iron mining till about 1910 AD.
12. The handbills are schematic representations of the social, material, divine, physical and metaphysical discourses of the Visvakarma ideology. A handbill shows a single figurative image of Lord Visvakarman, the mythological ancestor of all Visvakarma craftsmen, who are the living replicas of the Lord. The five archetypical craftspersons came from the five faces of the Virat Visvabrahma: Manu, the ironsmith; Maya, the carpenter; Tvashtri, the coppersmith; Silpi, the sculptor; and Visvajna, the goldsmith. The printed or memorized handbills are clearly variations on an original idea, the origin of which is still a mystery.
13. Therefore the use of the word 'pentad' in the previous paragraph, 'pentad' meaning 'the cardinal number that is the sum of four and one'.
14. Although the carpenters, coppersmiths, sculptors and goldsmiths quote their patrons as saying that they conduct the 'delivery *puja*' for their prosperity, it is the Visvakarma perception of his craft and his position in the world that demands this *puja* and his activity therein. Notwithstanding the similarity in performance of the delivery *puja* and the *ayudha-puja*, the structural position of the ceremony is different. Here, I observe congruence between the Visvakarma view and the general perception prevalent in society regarding iron products. And, of course, the blacksmith does not need a *puja*, for his relationship with the goddess is not one of the 'worship of sacrifice', which *puja* literally means, but one of sacrifice itself. (See Brouwer 1997)
15. Sir John Woodroffe (Arthur Avalon), in *Garland of Letters*, says that Kali is the deity in her aspect as withdrawing time into itself. 'Kali is so called because She devours Kala (Time) and then resumes Her own dark formlessness' (p. 235).

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# 8

## THE MOTHER EARTH OF THE MAWAL PEASANT

TESTIMONIES FROM BABAN KHANDBHOR AND  
PRABHAKAR GHARE

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### Preamble

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The reader finds here not an essay but testimonies. They are the outcome of an effort of direct observation by two peasants from villages of the Mawal area, in the Sahyadri Range, Western India (the Western Ghats of Pune district). A sense of self-respect and a deeply human curiosity motivate the authors to describe in detail the traditional ways of life of their community and families, and own them as a heritage. For them, consciously testifying today with the benefit of hindsight—for their fellow villagers of—yesterday, immersed in their codes of conduct and beliefs—communication is substantively, although with a difference, a matter of appropriation of a patrimony offered as a legacy to people to live bound to one another. This is the gist of their insights.

B. Khandbhor and P. Ghare articulate the commonsensical discernment on themes of work, communication and culture in the context of the cohesive peasant society that has nurtured them. The transformations which, in the past decades, started to deeply affect the work and personal lives of both of them have, by contrast, aroused and sharpened their awareness. Their personal

profiles place the testimonies in that proper perspective. Both have become reflexively conscious of the symbolic foundations upon which their village communities thrived. They now share their observations in self-training sessions organized for social animators in rural Maharashtra. Here, they share with us their own experiences on systems of representation specific to their agrarian communities, and the way these systems foster symbolic forms of social communication.

The symbolic forms of social communication empirically displayed by the testimonies may be apprehended at three perceptual levels that are easily identifiable in terms of three symbolic modes of binding relationships. A conceptual articulation of these three levels of symbolic communication might facilitate the perspicacity of the many testimonies and help one find one's way through their intricacies.

**Level 1:** A general relation of service (*sevā*) binds the peasant to the land—qualitatively distinct territories with their particular guardians, and ultimately belonging to Mother Earth as among her various possessions. Human beings versus land and earth are a fundamental level of experience and relation, Mother Earth being their all-encompassing mediation.

**Level 2:** A yearly sequence of seasonal occupations binds the tillers to the soil through farming operations, a binding mediated by unceasing offerings and sacrificial rites performed at the time of each seasonal operation. The peasant as tiller versus nature and soil as sources of life is the second level of experience and relation, amaranthine sacrifices being their mediating agent.

**Level 3:** Relations of social binding are regulated by patterns of exchange integrating all the members of the community with one another through services secured from artisans by farmers against customary rules of remuneration in kind (*balute*), prestige performances (distinctive hereditary 'honours', *mān*, or respect), gifts and counter-gifts (at times of wedding or religious rituals), reciprocal aid practices (*irjik*), barter of products, and spontaneous help. Such forms of social communication attest to and reflect patterns of economic and material interdependence. Artisans versus peasant communities, each with both its distinct and common gods and festivals, form the third level of experience and

relation, an indefinite number of rituals being the mediating ground of their identities.

These three levels of symbolic forms of social communication yield a triple insight of the communication logic that defines their processes and their respective mediations.

The first significant insight is that the symbolic, ritual, occupational and social forms of communication semantically translate into one another. They would rarely be performed, or would stand apart, as they are reciprocally symbolic. For instance, seasonal work practices find their *raison d'être*, meaning and fullness in the veneration of deities and sacrificial offerings made at the time of agricultural operations; work relations find the ground of their coherence in ritual gestures that accompany the sharing of products; social bindings find their consistency in rituals performed at the time of domestic festivities, religious celebrations and village festivals. The economic, social and cultural levels of exchange display a perfect concurrence, finding their firm ground on symbolic forms. These forms are the substratum of the systems of communication that bind the members of the community into a collective. The secret of cohesive societies is in this transparent accordance that lies in both resemblance and the reciprocity of differences.

A second significant insight is that the symbolic forms of cohesiveness are those that secure a distinctive identity for all members of the village community. Conjunction and distinction, connection and differentiation, are the two sides of the same symbolic forms, whether it is a matter of family and caste deities, exchange of services and 'honours', labour and remuneration, ritual performances at the time of the 12-yearly festive worship and domestic celebrations, and sacrifices to gods of the land and to ancestors. A principle of differential incorporation is a communicational asset of these cohesive agrarian societies.

A third significant insight explains the resilience of cohesive societies: the symbolic level of significance and truth points to their substantive grounding by referring the material, social and cultural realities upon Earth to a transcendent order that pervades and encompasses them. Mother Earth is the most prominent articulation and symbolic incorporation of this Reality. Other godly figures are equally present—but in her wake—to symbolically achieve the same connective distinctions, presiding every now

and then over various occurrences, from birth to death, work to festivals, domestic ceremonies to collective functions. These divine entities stand for more than just themselves: they point to a Reality more real than the everyday realities that they preside over. For instance, at Mawal, Mother Earth, at the head of an indefinite number of village deities, forms, on the ground, both milieu and horizon of communication of all forms of social relations and symbolic communication of the peasant communities. That transcendent horizon not only maintains a conjunction of various orders of realities: it equally and simultaneously secures the completion and fruitfulness of each Earthly level.

Besides exemplifying the relevance of the methodological rule of relying on the capability of verbal articulation of the subjects and operators of symbolic systems of communication, the following testimonies are presented in this book for two other major reasons.

On the one hand, the testimonies directly display the human mind's distinctive capacity to symbolically represent reality. Reality does not exist for a human mind as a given object, but as an experience mediated by a mental form of a symbolic nature—a representation of the reality, so to speak. Any object, tangible or intangible, is submitted to this process through which the human mind constitutes the world of life-experience, attributing to it a specific significance. This is achieved through the vehicle of forms that represent the experience and carrying its meaning. Symbolic forms allow for a reading of the world: they are an insight or an intelligence (a 'reading within') that may be articulated through a variety of symbolic forms of representation: cultural construct, ritual practice, expression of feelings, psychological propensity, code of conduct, social relation, material artefact, occupational activity, and so on. All these forms enunciate experience by fashioning languages, designing rapports with nature and other beings, motivating human agency, organising work and festive activities, etc. In short, they constitute the life-world of humans through a constellation of invented and incorporated meanings.

The following testimonies, on the other hand, evince how symbolic representations are the root of systems of social communication. Symbolic forms are shared and acted upon so as to structure the systems of communication that bind the

members of the community into a collective. These forms circulate as idioms between human beings for them to build collectives. All forms and systems of social relation are embedded in, and constituted of, constellations of symbolic forms that they express while incorporating them to build up a cohesive community.

The awareness of the possible anthropological meaning and social function of these symbolic forms is not a condition of their effectiveness. The profound compulsion that prompts their observance comes from firm faith in them. Their performance is secured by an inherent necessity—that of a collective that needs them to hold together all its components: deities, nature, soils, territories, people with their conducts and mental resources.

## Personal Profiles

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### Baban Khandbhor

I am 44 years old. Born in a peasant family, in the village of Nagathali, in Mawal taluka (Pune district, Maharashtra), I remain an agriculturist of the district of Mawal. My father has four brothers and two sisters. Ours was a poor family. I am the eldest son; my parents wanted another son: they took four more chances in that hope, but in vain. I have four sisters. My parents toil without respite. They have no vices. The role of my mother in the family upbringing is equally important. I helped her in the household work, looking after my younger sisters, and so on. Moreover, I helped my father in the fields.

I reached Standard XI after changing schools five times. We live in very remote rural areas—traditions have a strong hold on my father's mind. Relatives and village people advised him: 'Your only son should not look for work outside the village. This would alienate him from you.' I was, therefore, denied any chance of employment. I had to accept the laborious traditional village work culture. When I was in school, I had only one set of clothes that I washed myself. I had to study from second-hand books borrowed from friends. I never used any footwear. The village had a school up to Standard IV. For further education, I stayed with relatives and friends. Being a poor student, I had to follow their wishes and

work for my guardian families: I looked after their cattle, worked in the fields, etc. As everybody highly praised my talents and qualities, this encouraged me to be a studious student. I was always at the top of the class. My teacher used to say: 'You are gold in garbage.' Because of deprivation, I never mixed with others. I never took part in picnics. This made me shy: I nurtured feelings of oppression. My life remained confined to home and school. I was a bookworm and a very obedient son. I remained under my father's authority, accepting the life of a toiling peasant under his guidance.

I could not fail, realizing how local leaders oppress people and do injustice. I used to think about it. Teachers are absentees from village schools: this is the main obstacle to people's education. I lodged complaints against this. As a result, I became the target of a group of educated unemployed youth who utilized their strength as a pressure group. I had to suffer hardships. They went to the extent of trying to break my house. They looked down upon me because, despite being an unemployed educated, I nurtured feelings of disrespect for those local leaders who have no pity for common people. I was, meanwhile, also developing a guilt feeling: Not being able to help others, why should I expect others to take me into account?

I was in this state of mind when I got an opportunity to attend a meeting of the Organization of the Poor of the Mountain, or the *Garib Dongari Sanghatna* (GDS), on 12 December 1990. I found a new meaning to life. I was sweating when, at this first meeting, I was made to speak up and asked to explain why I had come to attend it. At the GDS meetings, education consisted in discussing social structures, superstitions, deprivation and oppression, women's condition, child labour, and so on. I learnt how to study these issues and was trained how to communicate with people. My courage increased. For example, four and a half acres belonging to my uncle had been illegally bought: I obtained the cancellation of the registration act. (Companies and private owners encroach on and purchase village land; this had happened on my own land). When I stopped this, the encroacher threatened me with a knife. I stood firm: the village people realized the strength of our organization. From the organization, tribal women gained the strength to challenge officers. We organized a health camp for the people in our taluka. In the self-learning training

sessions of the Village Community Development Association (VCDA), I got to know many new things and became acquainted with many social workers from Maharashtra. In the GDS, I am in charge of the training of those women newly elected (as a result of the 33 per cent reservation policy) into the *gram panchayat*. When these women gather, share their difficulties, initiatives and successes, and become knowledgeable about laws, administrative rules and regulations, and their duties and rights, they acquire a firm self-confidence that prompts them to go ahead with increased personal strength and collective efficiency.

Our culture is in the way we live and the way we think. Dress, language, formal behaviour, attitudes and conduct during festivals and ceremonies can be called our outward culture. The inner culture, the culture of the mind, consists of our ideas regarding codes of conduct within the community and with relatives, and the origin of, and aims in, life. The life of the people, their economic conditions, cultural peculiarities, manners and mannerisms, their religious outlook, differ from region to region. This means that their frames of mind and social lives are influenced by the geographical context and economic conditions, the traditions and customs that have been handed down the generations.

It is said that a country commands respect if it gives labour a place of honour. This is, therefore, an attempt by a labourer to present you with a real picture of a labourer's culture. We know that times have undergone changes: this is the basic factor behind today's transformation. But let us verify to what extent it is true that, as far as the past is concerned, 'Old is gold.' That was yesterday. Today, our peasant from Mawal is going through a transition period. He is coming increasingly in contact with the outside world. All the old things might not be 100 per cent good, but they certainly might prove useful while proceeding ahead.

## Prabhakar Ghare

My village, Jawal, is located in the valley of Rihe, at the foothills of the Sahyadri Range, in the taluka of Mulshi (Pune district, Maharashtra). People depend mainly upon the land to make a living, but the land itself depends upon the rains. The whole physical, educational, economic and social environment offers



rather meagre resources. This is where I was born 45 years ago, on 2 June 1956.

Ours is a joint family. My family comprised my parents, three brothers and three sisters. The distress at home was such that my father had to migrate to Mumbai and work there as a coolie. He died in 1958, when I was two years old. I vaguely remember his face. Before his death, my two elder sisters had been married but, unfortunately, both of them died at the time of their first delivery. This situation held me back from studying and education. Our parents put all of us, brothers and sisters, for three to four years at school. Being the youngest, I was the darling of everyone at home. Everybody wanted me to study a lot—myself included—but the situation did not permit it. I had to abandon school when I was in Standard VII.

The charge of the whole family fell upon my mother. In our valley in 1958, there was no possibility of hiring oneself out as a labourer. My uncle cultivated our field, my mother helped him. In return, he gave us a meagre amount of food. My mother grinded flour for other families to earn something.

As I grew older, and left school, all of us—mother, brothers and unmarried sister—became daily wage earners. In such severe circumstances, we had to suffer a lot. At that time, we could rely on only one-and-a-half acres of land to secure a living. This land was entirely dependent on the rains. When the rains were normal, we could harvest enough cereals from our fields to live on for six months. The remaining half-year, we had to resort to agricultural labour work. My mother also became an agricultural labourer to feed us. While the labour charges were not increasing, inflation was at its height. We used to go to work without sufficient meals. When we married off my elder sisters, we had to mortgage our land to the moneylender.

Came the general and severe drought of 1972: worksites were opened by the government under the Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS). I found a job with Mafatlal, a trader, which distributed amongst the workers of the EGS Scheme the dry rations provided by the government. This brought me in close contact with the workers. I then realized the injustice and exploitative treatment meted out to them by supervisors and higher officials. I also experienced the same injustice personally. I watched the implementation of the scheme deteriorate into

embezzlement of cereals and money, and the maltreatment of the people. But, alone, I could do nothing to stop this. All I felt was terribly angry. But I had no place and no methods to articulate this profound anger.

I went to Mumbai in 1977 and worked there for some time as a coolie. I even sold mangoes, carrying them in a basket on my head. I ate with a family, but as I owed them Rs 300, I returned home. I found work for some months for Rs 12 a month in a relatively better-off Brahmin farmer's house, and repaid my debt. In Mumbai, I experienced the appalling distress of the workers. Some were deprived of even a place to stay and had to live like animals. I saw with horror their destitution, and thought of coming back home with the intention of working in the fields and staying on in the village.

In 1977–78, we took some land from other people to cultivate it, in exchange for a part of the crop to be handed over to the owner. But we were still dependent on the rains. My elder brother was employed as a peon in the village council office for Rs 15 per month. This was insufficient. My brothers felt deeply frustrated. In 1979, they had to leave home and go to Pune in search of work. One of them found work as a coolie in a market yard. The elder one found a job at a private printing press. They sent home to the family in the village Rs 30–40 per month, making our living conditions a little less severe, as this was sufficient for buying rations for half a month. Moreover, in 1979, the many cousins of the larger Ghare family arranged for the distribution of the fallow land belonging to the Ghare. My two brothers and I jointly got a share of one-and-a-half acres. I personally brought the land under cultivation of a paddy crop through my own labour. The rains proved good—nature helped us. This again eased our living condition.

In 1981, I worked as an EGS labourer, halftime on the dam sites of Kamboli and Pimpoli, and the other half in the distribution of dry food to the EGS labourers. It is at that time that I met Rajaram Ghevade, a social worker of the *Garib Dongari Sanghatna* (GDS), who had come to stay for a while in the valley of Rihe. He was engaged in social awakening. I had a very close personal relation with him. He was raising the awareness of people from the lower social sections, organizing them to stand up against injustice, take initiatives of their own so as to come forward and tackle their

problems. We began discussing the labourers' minimum wages, the procedures to open EGS worksites, the functioning of the scheme, and so on. These discussions gave me an opportunity to hold meetings in my village and the surrounding hamlets, which gave me a new perspective and a new purpose.

Then, the youth of my village elected me to join the GDS and we began to organize health education meetings in the villages of the Rihe valley. I became much more conscious of social problems: the GDS gave me a critical vision. Progressively, I started to organize small groups of peasants in the various valleys of the Mulshi taluka. I trained them in small study groups in making critical analyses of social problems, and in committing themselves to fight injustice. In the GDS, I was widening my social vision, getting used to analyzing social realities and organizing people against the evils in society. I became bold.

Unexpectedly, in 1983, my elder brother died. We were overwhelmed by a mountain of sorrow. Now, I had to find a job in order to face the vacuum created by, first, my father, and now my elder brother's, demise. As R. Ghevade had advised us to save up Rs. 30 a month for precisely such emergencies, Rs. 500 was available with me, and it proved helpful towards meeting the expenses of my brother's funeral.

Since the activities of awareness-raising had broadened my perspectives, I was invited to contribute to the preparation of the seminar organized in 1998 by the Centre for Cooperative Research on Social Sciences, Pune, on Popular Culture and Cultural Action with field research among peasants from Mawal displaced by dam constructions. I went and met them in their new localities. I discussed with them, and tried to find answers to the many questions that I had to ask but had never envisaged. This investigation really revealed to me new horizons, especially those relating to the social and cultural ruptures created in migrants' lives by their displacement. The harsh conditions of their resettlement in the proximity of unknown and often inhospitable and alien communities, and the difficulties of insertion in a somehow culturally different environment definitely, opened up my mind. I became particularly conscious and curious of the many types of bonds, rapports and forms of relations that have built up within our village communities since ages.

Since then, in the training sessions and self-education workshops (SEW) of the VCDA, I am pleased to draw upon my minute observations of village life, to document peasants' indigenous methods of cultivation, to bring focus on their knowledge and experience, to recollect village rituals and concentrate on networks of relations that bind people to one another, particularly peasants and artisans (*balutedars*). In fact, I had always been involved in such practices—but without understanding their meaning. I have become aware that all these traditional practices and rapports carry a human significance. I am happy to talk about them in sessions of the SEW and write them down for an in-depth insight into forms of communication specific to the Mawal peasant communities. It is through observing them minutely that I have realised that some meaning lay hidden behind the performances that all of us were maintaining as if compelled to. Discovering that I had never given due attention to it, I started, for instance reflecting upon the *balute* system, with all its rituals. It came as a great surprise to me. I became increasingly attracted and amazed as the villages' networks of relations, and their cultural grounds, unfolded themselves in the course of the questions raised and discussed. I equally enjoy expounding upon them here.

In short, I am happy for two reasons: first, for having succeeded in measuring my ability to challenge unjust and repressive social constraints; second, for having understood the significance of the practices that we, the Mawal peasants, simply observed without being conscious of their import and function. I am happy, and hopeful, for a third reason, too: for the past 10 years, the villagers have become, to an extent, capable of irrigating their land, thanks to small irrigation projects constructed on the stream of the Rihe valley. I am a member of three small lift-irrigation groups. We can, for instance, grow tomatoes, cucumbers, and so on in winter, and market the products in Pune.

## The Territories of Mother Earth

Our Mawal peasant (*kuṇbī*) is a painstaking worker (*kaṣṭakarī*) who toils (*rābṇe*) in the fields. His toiling life begins the day he starts to walk, and he does not retire: he works until his death. Pilgrim-ages are his sole holidays. 'I am born from this earth, I shall serve

it all my life till I return again to the earth at the end (when I die)'—this is his urge. Amongst us, hardworking peasants, there is nobody who will just sit at home and eat at leisure.

For generations, the peasants' habit has been to leave the house at twilight and return at dusk. The cock wakes us up early in the morning. The men give fodder to the animals, take care of the milking; the women spread the cowdung, finish the cooking, pick up infants in their arms, go to the fields with baskets of *bhākarī* (pancake made of millet), and sit under trees to chase the crows that come to steal the *bhākarī* away. When a boy child grows up a little, he begins to sweep with a broom, brings pots full of water; when he is a mite older, he takes the cattle out for grazing; once he is an adult, he drives the plough. If anyone seeks to evade this practice, it is the field that will see to his comeuppance.

When you go to the field, the field tells you what to do. No headman is necessary. No need was ever felt for any other education, such as learning the alphabet. The peasant's only thought was, 'Who will look after my cattle? Who will drive the plough? Hard work is for us and we are for hard work.' Bahinabai Chaudhari<sup>1</sup> says in her verses: '*When perspiration waters the fields, then the green crops will grow.*' Such is the affection for the earth, an affection that knows no bounds, as it can fill up the stomachs of the whole world. Axioms state the arithmetic of a peasant's labour and its fruit:

If sweat drips in the field, then crop shall come in your hand.

Idleness is a lifetime enemy.

Your greed is like the sky, but your destiny is like a grain of Sesamum.<sup>2</sup>

Land (*māṭī*) is our mother-earth (*māybhūmī*), our 'black mother' (*kāḷī āī*, in reference to the most fertile of land, black soil) or 'reddish-brown mother' (*tāmbaḳī āī*), etc., while 'white mother' (*pāṇḍharī āī*) refers to the location of a community's settlement. The word *pāṇḍhara* defines the design of the places where people stay, construct houses, temples, offices, squares, schools, and so on, within the boundaries of the village, called *vesa*; the word *pāṇḍharī* is commonly used in such sentences as 'The village (*pāṇḍharī*) has decided that...', to refer to the community as a whole that inhabits the space.

The physical labour (*mehanaṭ*) of cultivating the fields (*maśāgaṭ*) is considered to be in the service (*sevā*) of *māybhūmī*, the service for which we came into existence in this world. We prosper on the product of the soil in the same manner as we grow on our mother's milk. A kind of kinship relation (*nāte*) binds the peasants, as tillers of the land, to the soil, which is experienced as a mother who takes care of them, her children. By calling our land mother (*māy*), we make our relation to her all the tighter. This relation cannot be rejected, we cannot deny this *māy*. 'I thrive on this land. I grew from this land. I cannot forget it any more than I can forget my parents.'

A feeling of gratitude pervades and motivates the peasant work. 'This soil is our family deity (*kuḷdevatā*). We, therefore, mark (*ṭīlā*) our forehead with earth.' Sītā (the heroine of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, born from a furrow in the earth during ritual ploughing by King Jānaka) was known to, and worshipped by, some peasants as the furrowed earth that they open before sowing the seeds that will grow and bear fruit in her womb.

We dedicate our strength to serve *māybhūmī* with a sense of belonging (*ātmīyatā*). There exists no such feeling today when one works as an employee in a company that he does not belong innately in, and where he works sparingly or grudgingly. We do not even entertain, to the same extent, this attitude of intimate proximity (*javaḷik*) when we lend a helping hand to cultivate another's fields (*irjik*). The reasons are:

- (i) A peasant considers that more work means higher yield for his family;
- (ii) Work management remains entirely a matter of personal decision and initiative;
- (iii) There is no alternative to tilling the land, as the entire existence of a peasant depends upon his labour on his land;
- (iv) Some surplus should always remain in the house;<sup>3</sup>
- (v) The land and its fruits incorporate the labour of ancestors; they point to a legacy and continuity of lineage.

The service of the land, with the many expressions that refer to physical exhaustion,<sup>4</sup> symbolically carry all these perceptions. For the Mawal peasant, hard work is a self-imposed marker and

title of identity, the source of his self-confidence, feelings of security, and assurance in life:

Look, there is nothing more valuable than land in the parents' hand.  
I will dig a plot in a corner and feed myself to my heart's content.  
A handful from the field—and a purse tucked at the waist.

The peasant's delight and sole satisfaction is to see fields blooming green and yielding plenty of grains. He does not bother about the quantity of money in his purse, his only concern being whether his hands are full of grains so that he may share handfuls of grains (*pasābhar ghālṇe*) with those in need, friends, and guests, serving them with the sifting basket.<sup>5</sup> He will also then be able to barter what he needs with the crop he has grown, kilogramme for kilogramme, and so on. He will go to the village moneylenders only at the eleventh hour for his needs. Neighbours borrow from one another. The peasant believes that it is his honest duty to take a loan for social needs such as marriage, death, hospitality, and to repay it. His intention to repay is genuine—repayment is his credit. Loans are paid back with labour, grain, wood, etc.

The Mawal peasant is not ready to surrender traditional farming methods easily. For him, this would be like throwing away what is already in his hands in order to scurry behind a moving object. He will invest his small savings and earnings in more land or animals. This means that he will reinvest his capital in hard work. This is how he envisages his development. He gets happiness and satisfaction from working hard for his land and his animals. For him, there is nothing that can be easily discarded. He will use grains for himself. He will give the husk and rice-straw to the animals. He will use the chewed portion of the fodder rejected by the animals to scorch the land in order to increase its fecundity. He will make a bag or a rope, a rein or a tie-rope for animals, out of a *dhoti* or a sari or other worn out clothes. He will make a pillow from rags. The peasant uses everything, from a patchwork blanket or a rough carpet to a *kesārī* (a thread made by twisting the unravelling edges of a turban or a loincloth), and place them around the animal's neck to avert the 'bad eye'.

All the things that are useful to serve *māybhūmī* comprise the peasants' deities: the lord cloud, Megharāj, the sun god, Suryadev, shrubs useful for burning the soil, trees that give medicines, shadow, and fruits and flowers—they are as venerable to him as his own ancestors, who are themselves related to the soil that he cultivates. This is not the intimate propensity of a single peasant but the overt attitude of the entire community of *kaṣṭakarī* peasants.

The people's relationship (*nāte*) is not only with the soil that is cultivated, but also with the hills, the wind, the trees, the birds, the animals—in short, with everything in that area. There are a number of deities, one for each particular domain: castes and collectives have their own deities; the one who goes to sow will first worship the *grāmdevatā* (the village god), Mhasobā, for instance, and then offer rice to Māruti. At the time of a marriage celebration, the invitation to attend the wedding is first handed over to the household deity and then to the *grāmdevatā*. 'In our family, we first give the invitation to Kuṣsvāmī, our family god.' (P. Ghare)

Land is divided into different areas. When we enter a new area, we first take the name of the deity (*kuḷdevatā*)<sup>6</sup> who is the owner (*mālkin*) of that area. We have, for instance, the valley of Vāghjāī, the field of Bhayari, the Vetāḷ's slope named Nāgrājā. When those who take their cattle for grazing enter these lands, they first address the deity who is the owner of that particular area: 'Long live Vāghjāī! Mother, keep my cattle in good condition. Let no splinters harm them. Take care of us!'

*Kuḷdevatā* is distinctively different from the village deity, or *grāmdevatā*. The ownership of the whole village territory is with the *grāmdevatā*. The confident expectation is that the *grāmdevatā* will guard the whole area against the bad eye, ghosts, epidemics, etc. To that effect, ashes are blown all over the place.

A number of rituals are similarly performed with ashes.<sup>7</sup> Ashes are blown or sprinkled in the fields for the goddess of that area to bless the crop before bringing the harvested crop to the threshing ground; if the fields are located far in the mountains and ashes are unavailable, soil is used as a substitute. Ashes are blown around the threshing ground before one sets down to work. Crosswise strips of ashes are drawn on winnowing baskets and other baskets used for sorting grains.



On the fifth day after birth, when Satvi, the goddess of existence, visits the newborn and writes the Letter of its Destiny on his forehead, the whole house is encircled by a line of ashes. Ashes of the hearth are placed in a distinct spot in the backyard, away from any heap of garbage. When the Hoḷī fire has been lit and worshipped with offerings of sweet dishes, ashes are collected from the fire in the plate in which the sweets had been offered and taken back home, where they are applied on everybody and everything in the house—people, grain-storing baskets, the hearth, instruments, utensils, cattle, etc. The ashes are then scattered around the house or placed face up to the moon.

After the burning of a corpse, once the pyre is doused with water, everybody collects three handfuls of ashes and places them in a basket; the basket is taken to a pond, river or spring; turmeric powder is offered to the ashes; and the basket is emptied in the water. The *bhagat*<sup>8</sup> consults grains of wheat placed in front of him after mixing them up by rubbing them together between his palms with ashes called *dayā*; then, he gives the ashes to those who came to consult him and tells them to spread them in a particular direction. Similarly, god and goddess hand over the ashes to a woman who vows to observe a fast in exchange for a needed blessing.

Farmers' land records used to carry the name of the village deity, *grāmdevatā*: in our areas, for instance, the names of Vardhāī, Rāmeśvar (P. Ghare): people here say that the land belongs to Vardhāī. Those like the Gurao, the priest of the village god, who lives on the produce of the land allotted to him for his use and sustenance, say that their life is in that deity's hand, since the priest does not own the land. Wherever a village is settled, a distinctive relation prevails with its *grāmdevatā*, whose rights are recognized by everybody. The distinctive relation entertained with the *grāmdevatā* might explain the fact that people would feel for each other in the village and help anyone in difficulty. There was love and affection for each other. If anyone left for Pandharpur or Mumbai, the whole village would gather to bid farewell. If somebody's dog died, the whole village would weep. If there was no milk in the neighbour's house, someone will give milk to the children and fodder to the animals. In farm work, the practice of mutual self-help, *irjik* (labour for labour) has always been held in greater respect than payment in cash. These were the ways of mutual cooperation (B. Khandbhor).

## The Seasons, their Rites and Moderating Deities

The religious customs of the peasant who enjoys working in the company of nature are born of his relationship with nature. The peasant reveres natural things such as lightning, the moon, the sun, the stars, huge trees, as well as animals like the lion, the tiger, the cobra, etc. His deities are Vānadev, the god of the forest, or Vāghjāī, the mother tigress. His festivals are *Nāgpañcamī*, honouring the serpent: for the cobra not to bite us, we offer him milk and corn on the fifth day of the bright half of the month of *Śrāvaṇ* (August); *Vaṭpurṇīmā* is observed every year by married women on full moon day of the third month (May–June) of *Jyestha* when they worship the banyan, the sacred tree (*Ficus Indica*) of the goddess Savitri.<sup>9</sup>

The *neem*,<sup>10</sup> flowers, grass blades, cowdung cakes, *pipal*<sup>11</sup> tree illustrate his love of nature. The peasant considers himself fortunate when he can get what he wants from the resources of nature around him. For this to happen, the field works have to be completed according to the progression of the seasons in order to avoid destruction, botheration and distress (*paravaḍ*), and the rains have to be punctual. In times of *paravaḍ*, the peasant says that nature looks askance, acts showing disgrace and with anger.

Hoḷī (in March) is a festival that consists of collecting and burning flaws in the crop, logs of wood, etc. It is a warning that winter is receding and the time has come to refurbish the land by burning it. The rituals of *Guḍhī Pāḍvā*, the New Year day, first day of *Caitra* (March–April) show the relation with nature: *neem* leaves are eaten, a piece of cloth and a water pot are tied to a bamboo stick, an offering of flowers is made. After a feast, the bamboo stick used for *Guḍhī*, instead of being wasted, is used to make a basket. This is the time to begin the burning of the land.

In Mawal, a rice-growing area, peasants heat the land with dried bushes and desiccated cowdung in order to burn the grass seeds, and because ash manure is useful for seedlings: this adds to the warmth of the land in the hot months of *Caitra* and *Vaiśākh* (April–May). It is assumed that the crop grows high if the *bund* (field embankment) is high. All upkeep is carried out to secure a levelling of the land: *bunds* are repaired, and pathways are prepared for the waters that run with force downhill with the onset of the monsoon. For the paddy crop, water is to be stored, but

arrangements are made for the water to seep into the land. Since waterlogging beyond a point is undesirable, convenient gutters are dug to let the excess waters flow away.

At the time of *akṣayya tṛtīyā*, in the month of *Vaiśākh*, cowdung figures are drawn on the door and grains and flowers tucked in them, or cakes of cowdung are applied to the storing baskets for flour and pulses (*dāl*). A *pujā* (worship) is performed with lentils and flour. The *pujā* celebrates the importance of cowdung, and is expressly meant for the storage of grains to last.

The crows start crowing, the *koḷa* (a large mosquito) begins to while. *Rohīni nakṣatra* and *mṛga nakṣatra* bring to the peasants signs that announce the monsoon rains. When the *mṛga nakṣatra* starts, many small, lovely, red insects that do not bite—the *mṛga*—come out: peasants in some areas worship them. It is a busy time for stirring grains and fodder and finishing all the work leading up to sowing.

The sowing operation begins with a small plot of land being arranged in the corner of a paddy field as a bed for the required seedlings. The preparation of that piece of land (*vajavṇī*, *vahīvāṭ*) is carefully carried out so as to induce feelings of pride and complacency: 'What cultivation! We do not feel like leaving the place!' The sowing of seeds in a corner of a field is done on auspicious days, mostly Mondays and Thursdays. Tuesdays, Sundays and Saturdays are considered to be days that will bring pests or trouble. Then, the time of sowing comes. Before proceeding for sowing, five handfuls of rice are first deposited at the door of the village god (*gāvdev*). Bullocks are fed with pancakes of millet (*bhākarī*), adorned, and bells placed around their necks. Then, the peasants start sowing.

If there is a death in the family at this time, the corpse is covered, the sowing is first completed, and then the funeral rites performed. Women with living husbands (*savāśṇī*) and children (*lekurvāṇī*), and farmers, then go to sow. The woman carries the seeds and winnows the stones, while her husband holds and directs the sowing machine (*pābhar*) drawn by bullocks. While sowing seeds like those of *nācṇī* (a kind of black millet), the seed is rubbed with cow's urine and an onion and then sown, which protects the seed from ants. For the sprouts to make their way out, the farmers bury an onion in the field.

Once the rains start after the sowing, there is greenery everywhere. It is the moment to make an offering of biped animals to Mhasobā, along with five eatables (coconut, egg, lemon, hemp, chicken, needle, etc.). Mhasobā is presented with a heart and liver. It is a busy time for the peasant, who ploughs the whole field meant for paddy. Every furrow is considered as important as gold. This ploughing, performed during *mṛga nakśatra*, is called *vāhu*. While ploughing, the peasants do not face either west or south. They plough the wet mud to prepare the paddy field, both men and bullocks walking perpendicular to the direction of the monsoon rains, dividing the field into small plots out of concern for the fatigue of the bullocks.

As *mṛga nakśatra* draws to an end, our *pāmjī*<sup>12</sup> or *pāmjyā* begins in the families of our kith and kin. *Pāmjyā* is the rite where a goat or a chicken is sacrificed and offered as *naivedya* (the term for any offering of eatables to a deity) to our ancestors (*purvaj*), our god-fathers (*bāpdev*). It is a ritual performed to bring them peace. Tilling the land has brought changes in the situation: ancestors should not feel angry and retaliate. In some places, a stone or a statue of ancestors, *thaḍī*, is erected in the field in their name: there is the feeling that ancestors are troubling a son or a grandson and have to be placated. Once such a *thaḍī* is installed, the farmer is freed from the fear and worry that someone might steal something from the field. They might also name a son after the name of that ancestor who is considered as returning along with the child who bears his name (*nāvkarī*). Only relatives, *bhaukī*, attend the function. A meal is served at night. Offerings are also made to the ghosts.

*Pitṛsādhda* is another (vegetarian) ritual in honour of the memory of ancestors in order to set them free from obligation, or for their souls to rest in peace: it consists of a meal in which *kaḍhi*, (buttermilk), *vaḍī* (a salty preparation with gram flour) and *pāṭoḍī* (a preparation with leafy green vegetables) are served to relatives.

This ritual, called *sāt*, is performed only once *pāmjī* has been celebrated. Eight days before replanting, peasants come together for *sāt*. First, each offers a sweet *naivedya* to his field, and then a goat or a fowl is sacrificed to the village deity and to all the deities in the fields to ensure their fertility. Then, everyone prays for the wellbeing of the cattle and other animals, and of children. Once

a fowl (a biped) has been offered for two consecutive years, the third year demands the sacrifice of a quadruped. Then one prepares for the planting.

Once replanting draws to an end, the following ritual is performed (in P. Ghare's area). Five shoots of paddy that have just been planted are uprooted, *kaṇagā*. A few women with living husbands worship the shoots with turmeric powder, red power, black powder, coconut, and jaggery, and take them back to their original place, the bed of seedlings, *dādhī*.

It is difficult to find time to meet one another for one month, so they meet in the early mornings. During this period, instead of a proper bath, they merely wash their hands and feet. They wear a sackcloth jacket over the inside garment. The washing of cloth is not imperative, since people would have no time for it.

If somebody is seen roaming around at this time, people say that he is not serious: 'What kind of person is he?' They make an offering to each field and pray that something will always remain in storage. When they begin ploughing, they cover the entire field: if a portion were to remain unploughed, the whole crop would be endangered. If replanting is completed before *Nāgpāncamī* (in the month of *Śrāvaṇ*, August) the crop will be insufficient and the grains will be over before *Hoḷī* (March). Replanting is considered properly performed once all these rules are observed.

When the replanting is completed, they combine three bunches of shoots and replant them at the same place, worshipping them by offering *halaḍī-kumku*, sugar, a coconut broken and distributed as *prasād*.<sup>13</sup> Then one feels satisfied. A sweet meal is prepared and an offering made to the plough and the yoke. Thereafter, those who have finished help those who have not completed their fieldwork.

Once they are free from the replanting, all the peasants of the village assemble for five days at the temple of the village deity, where they light a lamp that should keep burning all the five days, through which duration they do not go to the fields. While assembling, they take decisions about the sharing or delineation of the grazing ground for the animals. They decide the rules to control the animals' grazing, clarify where fencing might be necessary, talk about each other's crop, exchange remarks and make suggestions, etc.

When new grains starts to sprout, nine of them are collected and a ritual meant to celebrate the new crop is performed on a New Moon day. Garlands are made with *nācnī*, Sesamum, leaves of the mango tree and the *pimpa!* (*Ficus religiosus*) tree, and flowers.

Then the weeding starts. As the saying goes, weeds eat wealth. Useless grass is uprooted from the fields. Some crops are scrapped. For crops like *nācnī*, on the slopes of mountains, weeding is necessary; for the plains crops, a ploughing is carried out with a special small plough. Good quality crops are thus obtained.

After replanting but before threshing, another rite called *pālesāt*, similar to but distinct from *sāt*, is performed.

In our area, we celebrate *pālesāt* by offering five goats. We take them from Dhanagar families against no remuneration because their sheep have freely grazed on village land. We sprinkle the goats' blood, mixed with cooked rice, all around so as to cover the whole village territory. Those who go and sprinkle the blood should not look back. We entrust this rite to nobody but especially assigned villagers. The village boundaries are worshipped. In Jawal, the nearby village, they bury the head of a goat within a rock bored for that purpose at a particular place. (P. Ghare)

The following ritual is performed between harvesting and threshing (B. Khandbhor's area): Five bundles of the harvested crop are offered as *naivedya*. The thread-like material used for wrapping the bundles is called *barakati*. These bundles are placed in heaps in the grain-yard. Then, the threshing and beating is done.

The threshing ground is round in shape. It is called *Mahādevācā Yedhā* (the circle of god Mahādev or Śankar). Threshing is done by bullocks around a central pillar, the *tivaḍhā*, placed in the middle and known as *Mahādev*. The Gurav, the priest of the village deity, or *grāmdevatā*, is expected to visit each threshing ground before midday and sprinkle water in three places, (i) the *tivaḍhā*, (ii) the wooden staff with which the harvesters will thresh the ears of corn, and (iii) the heap of cereals to be threshed. The Gurav is the only *balutedar* allowed to enter the *Mahādevācā Yedhā*. Each farmer closely watches the Gurav to ascertain whether he properly performs the ritual or not. If the Gurav does not reach the threshing ground at the expected time, irritated farmers meet

him and ask him whether they would have done better searching for another Gurav.

A meal is served to those who come for the threshing. But before taking the meal, they first worship the *tivaḍhā* by offering drinking water, green leaves, flowers, red and turmeric powder, *naivedya*, and only then does everybody start eating. Inauspicious words are not uttered on the threshing ground. Through these rituals, the owner expects more grains. It is also considered a good omen when foxes begin barking at that time.

Once the threshing is completed, farmers carry and store the grains home, keeping a small quantity on the ground for the *balutedars* to come and only then be allowed to enter the *Mahādevācā Yeḍhā*. The Gurav is the first to collect his *balute*.

The grains are dried and winnowed in the yard, and the heaps of grain removed from the ground and stored in huge bins in the farmhouse. A *pujā* is performed at the place where the grains are to be stored and *kuṁku* is applied to the storing baskets.

People help one another to complete the threshing work. Then, they gather near the threshing ground for the ritual called *ḍāvrā*: the custom is to sacrifice a goat at that location, and invite friends, neighbours and helpers for a collective meal. A *naivedya* is then offered to god for securing a good harvest. In some places, a quadruped is sacrificed. (As a rule, rituals performed with quadrupeds and bipeds are differentiated.)

*Dasarā* (in October–November) is marked by the worship of household utensils, implements, grindmill, crushing stones, storing baskets and agricultural tools.

At *Divaḷī* (in November), there is plenty to eat, as the crops are ready. Lakṣmi, the goddess of wealth, is worshipped, an *āraṭī* is performed to the cows and buffaloes, and presents are exchanged between brothers and sisters.

*Bailapoḷā* is a ritual that expresses gratitude to the bullock, an animal that is more than a companion to a farmer—it is also his friend. On this day, the bullock is given a bath, then worshipped, decorated, offered a *naivedya* of jaggery and stuffed pancakes, and then taken around the village in a joyful procession.

On the full moon of *Bhādrapaḍ* (August–September), on *Ganeścāurtī*, the fourth day of the month, the feast of Gaṇapati, the elephant-headed god, consists in worshipping Gaṇapati with *durva* (grass blades) and *āghāḍā*, and welcoming him with

pumpkin flowers. Gaṇapati is known as the god who brings home happiness and drives away all obstacles and sorrow. Hence, he is generally worshipped through invocations before any work is commenced. On *Ganeścāturthī*, branches are thrust into the fields: an owl sits on these branches and eats rats.

The day Gaṇapati arrives, peasants prepare boiled rice-balls and keep them in the field as an offering to rats. On the seventh day, Gaurī is worshipped with any flowers that are available around, and a *naivedya* of green leafy vegetables and a millet pancake, *bhākrī*, is made to the idol of the goddess. Daughters respect the simple food in their parent's home. Since this is a relatively relaxed period for the hardworking peasant, he brings his married daughters home.

*Rakṣabañdhan* is a festival illustrative of the bond of affection between brother and sister: the sister ties a thread around the wrist of her brother. In the second half of the month of *Paush* (January), *Makarsaṅkrānt* is a festival designed to engender the forgetting of all differences by people offering to each other a sweet preparation made of Sesamum.

## Gāvgaḍā, the village course and its rituals

The work and functions of the various artisans known as *balutedārs*—the carpenter, Sutār; the barber, Nhāvī; the potter, Kumbhār; the fisherman, Koḷī; the washerman, Pariḥ; the ropemaker, Māng; the oilmaker Telī; the cobbler, Cāmbhār; the village servant, Mahār, and so on—are defined by the farmers' seasonal requirements, the yearly cycle of the 12 religious feasts, the village festivals, and the domestic celebrations of birth, marriage and death. A number of rituals performed on these various occasions monitor the cohesive course of the village complex, the *gāvgaḍā*, and bind all the members of its community to one another.

Artisans are known as *balutedārs* because they are entitled to a share of the grains harvested by the peasant according to the customary rules and rates of a system, known as the *balutedāri* system. (The name comes from the word *balute*, which refers, in general, to the share of the corn and garden-produce assigned for the subsistence of the '12 public servants', the *balutedārs*). The



custom continued to prevail of retributing the *balutedārs* as well as repaying the loans on the threshing ground in kind. There was earlier no relation between the remuneration and the product. The latter's value (*mol*) was in reference to labour (*śram*) and hard work (*kaṣṭa*). There was no consideration either of the capability, or otherwise, of the peasant to give: he had to give his contribution perforce and live on whatever remained. If he could not give his share in a particular year, he had to give it the following year, with some increase for having defaulted, an increase that could be of six or three measures, called *pāyalī* for a *maṇ*. If, the following year, the situation had still not improved, the farmer was compelled to give at least the amount of the increase, pending the handing over of the basic due (B. Khandbhor).

The word for the share varies: *śer pasā* (P. Ghare) or *śidhā* (B. Khandbhor). *Śer* means a measure, a weight, a capacity, and varies greatly from place to place. *Pasā* is the cavity formed by the hollow formed by the joining of both palms. Both the words directly refer to the way the share of grains is handed over on the threshing ground. The *śidhā*<sup>14</sup> consisted of rice flour, grains, etc., but the proportion was not immutably fixed. Three or four village people sat together and decided the rates if someone said that he could not afford to pay that year.

The most important and skilled artisan is the Sutār. He makes the plough, the *nāngar*, the *kuḷav*, a kind of harrow that levels the ploughed ground, the *peṭārī*, another implement resembling a sifting fan that is also meant to level and smooth the ploughed ground, the yoke *jokhaḍ*, which harnesses the bullocks to the cart, and the babies' cradle, the *pāḷaṇā*. For these objects, which are in constant use throughout the year, the Sutār receives a *balute*. He makes also the sowing machine, the *pābhar*, and the bullock-cart with its wheels; he constructs houses and repairs them. For these occasional works, he is independently paid an amount that he fixes, and is given meals. For the joists of the house, he is given an *uparṇā* (a small piece of cloth worn loosely over the shoulder as a sign of distinction). He prepares the material and the wooden idols, *bāhulī*, required for the celebration of *bagāḍ*, the hook-swinging ritual on the Full Moon of *Caitra* (March), without expecting remuneration, as this work is for the village community and at its religious service.

At the time of seasonal agricultural operations, the Sutār is expected to be immediately available to peasants in their fields when implements need to be repaired. The Sutār knows which type of plough is needed, depending upon the nature of the soil to be ploughed and the crops grown. He fashions the farmers' tools according to the farmers' variegated needs, asking about the height of the bullocks, the transport constraints and other requirements. A plough can be swayed *śev* (vertically downwards) or *karā!* (inclined)—they are so required for two distinct types of ploughing, which need to exert different pressures on the bullocks. When the plough works to the farmer's satisfaction, he manifests his contentment by saying, 'I have got good stuff!' If the plough is badly assembled, the peasant will poke fun at the Sutār calling him a uselessly person, a '*pondhyā*', a derogatory term derived from *pondhā* or *pondhyā*, the bolt of the plough.<sup>15</sup> The Sutār walks around the fields when the sowing is being carried out and does on the spot repairs of the sowing machines. The remuneration given to the Sutār at the time of sowing has its particular name, *bivaḍ*.

There were two Sutār sub-castes, depending on their professional skill. Those calling themselves *Pāṃcā! Sutārs* differentiated themselves from the common Sutārs as professionally superior to them. They maintained this ascendancy particularly by taking care not to intermarry with them and by digging in their heels about appropriate wedding practices. For instance, a young couple would be made to stand up on a domestic mortar. But the main arbiter of excellence was the trial of the bridegroom's professional skill. The marriage was decided after the would-be husband, whom his parents brought along while coming to see the girl and hopefully obtain her, had proved his ability as a Sutār. The girl's parents might ask the boy to make a bolt for their door. They might challenge him to break with a hatchet an areca nut placed between two of his toes—without injuring his toes. They might show the boy a log of wood that was particularly difficult to break on account of its nodes: the boy would be asked to process it and show his expertise. A new *dhoti* would be spread on the floor and a log of wood placed on it. The boy would be made to work it out without touching the *dhoti*.

The boy's parents might return the favour and challenge the girl's father to make a lock for the door. Once, a girl's father proved

unable to make a lock: he died out of dishonour within eight days, although the marriage had been decided upon. The Sutārs' skill was also seen in the manufacturing of musical instruments and in playing them. Every Pāṃcā! Sutār family had to have a man with skilled in manufacturing musical instruments.

Such tests are no longer practiced, and all Sutārs intermarry. The young generation even keeps aged people away when it arranges marriages in order to avoid having to perform such rituals at their elders' request. Sutārs do not significantly differ from the Marathas in terms of their rituals. Nonetheless, the Sutārs, like the Kumbhārs and many other tribal communities, do not know the common Indian practice of dowry: they just know the practice of *dyaz*, goods or cash given to the bride's parents to help them meet the expenses of the wedding celebrations. Sutārs used for totems (*devak*) a ring-shaped creeper called *soundarya*. However, they seem to remember it only when asked insistently. When they go to work in a field or set to work, they would, like the Maratha peasants, take the name of their *kuḷdevatā*<sup>16</sup>—namely, Kāniphnāth, who used to be a Mahār god. Unlike the Kumbhārs, but alike the Nhāvis, the Koḷis, and the Telis, the Sutārs do not expect their spouses to learn and practice their professional skills. They send them to ask for food from the village families at the time of each of the 12 annual feasts. The Sutārs used to formerly bury their corpses in a graveyard separate from the rest of the community; today, they burn them in a cremation ground allotted by the village council to all communities.

Sutārs say that they took Kāniphnāth over from the Harijans when the latter became Buddhists and discontinued performing the ritual of *dahihanḍī*,<sup>17</sup> which marks the celebration of Krishna's birth, on the feast of *gokulaṣṭhami*, the eight day of the holy month of *Srāvan*. They worship Kāniphnāth, have a good meal, perform the ritual of *dahihanḍī*—but in the name of their own Kāniphnāth and apart from the village performance—and then spend the night engrossed in celebrating a *jāgaran*.<sup>18</sup> As a mark of difference from the Marathas, they have in their domestic altars the mask of the god of Maḍhī (a place in the neighbouring Ahmednagar district). Each year, after *hoḷī*, on the fifth day of *Caitra*, they celebrate his festival in the company of artisan castes and nomadic communities from western Maharashtra, and hold there a meeting of their caste council. They then carry along with them their

Kānīphnāth for him to meet the god of Maḍhī. Back home, they install in their domestic altars the mask of the Maḍhī god, and although they have their own guru, they summon a Brahmin to perform the worship. This is an auspicious occasion for inviting 12 people, nine in the name of Kānīphnāth and three in the name of Datta, who was the guru of Kānīphnāth, and serving them a ritual meal.

The Kumbhārs also worship Kānīphnāth as their god and attend the festival of Maḍhī. They call Jangams<sup>19</sup> instead of Brahmins to preside over their funerals. They keep donkeys and sell them in cases of emergency. In other senses, however, their rituals resemble those of the Maratha peasants. But Kumbhār women are as skilled as their men in pottery work: they fabricate earthen lamps for the *Divāḷī* and *Gaurī* festivals and coloured statues for the children's forts at the time of *Divāḷī*. Village communities maintain the tradition of expecting the Kumbhārs to provide them with the pots required at the time of six festivals only, against which they remain entitled to a *balute*. But Kumbhārs no longer depend only on the *balute* remuneration for their maintenance: for instance, they ask to be paid immediately in cash when they build a hearth. They tend to work mainly, if not exclusively, for those who settle in the urban peripheries, an easier way to market their products. Still, those who stay mainly in the villages, especially those who enjoy a *vatan* (land granted to a caste against particular services, the various *vatans* being known after the name of the different artisan communities to whom they are granted—for instance, *sutārkī* in the case of Sutārs, *nhāvīkī* for Nhāvīs' land, *koḷkī* for Koḷīs' land, *māḷāī* for the Teḷīs) continue working according to their traditional duties and right to *balute*.

The Māngs are those who make all types of ropes used by peasants for implements to fix yokes, bind animals, draw huge leather water bags from the well, and so on. They receive their *balute* (two to four measures, called *pāyaḷī*, of grains), but outside the threshing ground and the *balute* system. Each Tuesday, the Mahārs, another important service community, receive rice and edible oil. The migrant families of the Katkari, who have fewer fields, are allowed to gather ears of corn left behind by reapers.

Nhāvī families are traditionally attached to villages as their servants and *balutedārs* for hair-cutting and shaving services.

When all *balutedārs* used to assemble at the threshing ground, the Nhāvis, along with the Sutārs, both received a share somehow larger than the others. The *balute* used to be a *yeng* (an armful of the harvested cereals alike a large sheaf), and 70 years ago measures (*pāyaḷīs*) of grains began to be given. Now, *balute* is given in both forms, with the *balute* showing an increase in the course of the past 70 years. Initially, it was two *pāyaḷīs*; in 1972, it increased to four-and-a-half *pāyaḷīs*; it increased again after 1972 to 10 *pāyaḷīs*. Since Sutārs and Nhāvis enjoy a higher status, better *yengs* are given to them, while those of inferior quality are reserved for other *balutedārs*.

Today, as a result, the Nhāvis get five to seven bags of grain each year. But a whole family cannot be sustained on this remuneration alone. They, therefore, have been granted a *vatan* in the village, against which the Nhāvis are expected to meet a variety of ritual needs of the village community.

On three particular occasions, the Nhāvi is expected to rush, on his own, towards a family without waiting to be summoned. His first duty is the ritual shaving of the baby's first hair (*jāvaḷ*); his second is at the time of marriage—the cutting of the groom's small lock, the *cuc*, and the trimming of the groom's moustache. Formerly, on marriage occasions, the Nhāvi used to be honoured by being presented with a kind of turban (*pāgoṭe*). The Nhāvi's third duty is the clean-shaving of a deceased person's close relative who carries the earthen pot (*śinkāḷe*) with live coals inside when the corpse is transported to the pyre. The Nhāvi is paid, in cash, an amount that is at the discretion of the family: coins are placed in the water pot that he uses to shave the carrier of the *śinkāḷe*. He may also be given some domestic utensils, or even a cow. Earlier, on the occasion of a rich farmer's demise, Rs 2 was given by the family to all the 12 *balutedārs*, who then shared the amount among themselves; a poor farmer's family would give just Re 1. On the occasion of *Nāgpañcamī*, when a wooden cobra is carved by the family, the Nhāvi's 'honour' is to take the cobra to the village temple: he is then given milk and stuffed wheat pancakes.

Starting with the lexicon, situations have changed but the Nhāvis' presence is no less significant. Nhāvis will no longer 'make the head', so to speak, but 'cut the hair' against payment—in cash. They will no longer come to the threshing ground but will

collect their *balute* from house to house. They will no longer come home to regularly cut hair and shave—one has to go to their shop. For any clean-shaving of a child or an adult, the *Nhāvī* is given a pancake of millet, a *bhākarī*. To cut hair according to prevailing fashion, payment must be made in cash.

The number of *Nhāvis* has increased following the national demographic increase. Two or more *Nhāvis* might now be required for the service of a single village. *Nhāvis* mark out their areas of service according to the number of families that they each plan to attend to. When a village remains deprived of *Nhāvis*, families in the village will appoint a *Nhāvī* residing in another locality as their family *balutedār*. In such cases, the appointed *Nhāvī* might be overburdened and find it impossible to come and perform his ritual duties on time. During emergencies, then, the *Nhāvī* appointed by the family will call another *Nhāvī* to help him out, but the family that he serves as its regular *balutedār* will not consider this occasional assistant as entitled to any *balute*. It could also happen that a *Nhāvī* could decide to discontinue serving as *balutedār* to a particular family. He would, then, inform the family that he will stop being its *Nhāvī* and set it free to appoint another *Nhāvī* of its choice as its new *balutedār*.

From *Mārgaḍīra* to *Phālgun* (December to March) marriages are arranged and weddings celebrated. A wedding is an occasion for differences among the villagers, the *gāvkī*, and the members of the family, *bhāvkī*, to be forgotten. Marriages are solemnized amongst kith and kin according to the traditional custom of strengthening relations already established between relatives. Kinsmen, *soyares*, therefore enjoy a place of honour at the weddings. But so do the *balutedārs*. Each artisan community is given a particular 'honour'—perhaps a function of some distinction to play during the wedding ceremony. The *Sutārs* erect the dais—four poles supporting a platform—for the bridegroom, where he will arrive with his bride after he fetches her from her parents' place. *Sutārs* are paid Rs 10–20 for the poles. The *Kumbhārs* are expected to bring and place pots around the four poles and assist the *Sutārs* in the construction of the dais.

It is then the 'honour' of a *Koḷī* woman to bring water to fill the pots and place green leaves in them, while a *Parīṭ* woman will break a stick from a tree and sprinkle with it drops of edible oil around the particular location, and then delineate the place with

decorations. For this service, each woman is entitled to a blouse and a sari. If the Telī is not there at the time of marriage, he gets his 'honour' at other festivals.

## Notes

1. Bahinabai Chaudhari (1880–1951) was a poet. She was a simple, illiterate woman from the Khandesh region of Maharashtra comprising Dhule and Jalgaon districts. Her son Sopan, also a poet, published a book of her songs in 1952.
2. Tropical African and Indian herbs.
3. The motive of 'the remains' is common in peasant oral traditions both as symbol and assurance of plenitude. For instance, in their grindmill songs relating to the visit of Lakshmi at twilight, peasant women transmit the rule of not sweeping the house, or keeping some cowdung in a corner of the *wada*, apparently for Lakshmi to recognize their hard work and reward it with prosperity. A ritual habit consists, accordingly, in keeping a symbolic token of cowdung in the corner of the stable, while collecting it is a sign of prosperity, as if a perfectly clean stable would prove inauspicious. This idiom of the auspicious 'small remains' is also found at time of grinding: a housewife should never sing, 'My grinding is over', but that a small quantity still remains in the winnowing basket.
4. The following are the commonest: to sweat, *ghām gālṇe*; to be weary, *rābṇe*, as to be greatly fatigued, *lāī thakvā*; exertion, *kaḍṭa*, tans one's hide, *rāpṇe*; legs feel like cotton wool, *pāy bharnṇe*; would such work be possible without wearing one's arms out? *Bhāyā rābavalāyā*; the spinal chord is finished; the head has become a box; life has gone; too much of work breaks the ribs, reduces the bones, etc.
5. The winnowing basket, *sup*, is similarly at the centre of many domestic rituals, at the exclusion of any other recipient or utensil: a peasant will give grains not in a tin but in a *sup*; during wedding ceremonies, the family totem, *devak*, will be placed in a *sup*, and it is with a *sup* that the rite of the *āratī* (waving of lighted *diyas*, or oil-filled bowls with a wick) will be performed to honour guests sitting down in a row for their meal; when somebody dies, the fire of the funeral pyre will be activated with a *sup*; and it is in a *sup* that grains will be ritually placed.
6. We observed that the family deity and the deity of the territory were both called by the same name, *kuḷdevatā*, without quite being able to explain this fact.
7. We thought that the purposive mention by P. Ghare of these other rituals would not prove out of place, although we leave to anthropologists the task of commenting upon the symbolic significance of ashes. We thought it worthwhile to emphasize the variegated functions of the symbolic communication the ashes perform, whatever that meaning might be.

8. *Bhagat* originally means a holy person who leads humanity towards God. He does not preach to attract supporters but to highlight injustices in various practices in the world.
9. The ritual is also known as *Vatsavitri*: the fast that accompanies the vow, the *vrāt*, is known as *vatsavitrivrat*. Women fast and implore *Vatsavitri* to protect their husband and ensure his happiness and prosperity; they ask for themselves the signal privilege of enjoying the protection; of the same husband for seven consecutive lives.
10. The *neem* (*Azadirachta indica*), or Margosa, is a botanical cousin of mahogany. It belongs to the Meliaceae family. The latinized name of *neem* is derived from the Persian: *Azad* (free), *dirakht* (tree), *i-Hind* (of Indian origin), literally meaning 'The Free Tree of India'.
11. The Pipal (*Ficus religiosa*), the Sacred Fig, is also known as Bo (from the Sinhalese Bo), the Peepul, or Ashwattha tree. A species of banyan fig native to India, southwest China and Indochina east to Vietnam, the Sacred Fig is sacred to Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. A significant part of its sacredness comes from the story that Siddhartha Gautama is said to have been sitting underneath a Bo tree when he was enlightened (*Bodhi*), or 'awakened' (the Buddha).
12. According to the Molesworth Dictionary, *pāmji* designs a rite of harvester, the sacrificing of a fowl or goat to the idol or evil spirits and fasting upon it; in general, an offering to a ghost, *bhūta*, to appease it and put it to rest.
13. *Prasād* is created by a process of transceiving between a human devotee and his god. A devotee makes an offering of a material substance such as flowers, fruits, or sweets, called *naivedya*. The deity then cursorily tastes the offering, temporarily known as *bhogya*. This now-divinely invested substance is called *prasād*, and the devotee receives it to ingest it or wear it or take it home. It is not imperative that *prasād* be the material that the devotee had originally offered: it could well be material offered by others, or every offering crunched together and then redistributed.
14. According to the Molesworth Dictionary, the word *śidhā* generally means undressed rice or corn ready at hand in the corn bin or at home, taken on a journey, sent to another's house, given to a mendicant or a guest, etc.
15. The plough is a wooden machine skilfully constructed with diversified parts, in particular the *pondhā*, 'the bolt or pin confining the *rumaṇī* or plough-handle; or the peg at the point of junction of the *hālīs* (pole or shaft) and *nāngar*, (the descending portion of a plough)'. (Molesworth 1831, 1857: 841). *Pondhyā* are nailed down to strengthen the plough. The *nāngar* consists of two parts, *śev* and *ākaḍā*. *Hālīs* is made of teakwood. The *rumaṇ* (*rumaṇī*) can be of any kind of wood in Ghare's area, but is of *āin* tree (*Pentaptera tomentosa*) in Khandbhor's area; *ākaḍā* may be made of such trees as *hirḍā* (Yellow Myroblan, *Terminalia chebula*), *śisam*, *bābhul* (*Acacia arabica*), etc.
16. Female family or clan deity.



17. The ritual consists for huge human pyramids of youth climbing upon the shoulders of one another to reach and break earthen pots (*handī*) of curds (*dahi*) and popcorns kept hanging high at the top of a make-shift scaffolding erected for the purpose. This is nowadays more and more organised in cities by neighbour associations as competitions between teams of youth with a reward for the winning team.
18. The word *jagaran* generically means 'aware' or 'awake', but it has long acquired the meaning 'worship', as in *ratri jagaran*, the tribal people's nocturnal prayer, song, and worship sessions.
19. Jangams were mendicant priests begging from the tribal Malas (most of whom are today Dalits). At night, the Jangams kept vigil over the graveyards.

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2.2

*Disruptive  
Challenges of  
'the Modern'*

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# 9

## VADĀR COMMUNITIES: Traditional Skills in Changing Times

DATTA SHINDE

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According to the 2004 Census of India, the current Vaḍār population is about four million (40 lakh) in the state of Maharashtra; and, day by day, Vaḍārs come in from the neighbouring states to work and settle in Maharashtra. I visited a number of Vaḍār communities<sup>1</sup> in villages in Maharashtra's districts of Pune, Osmanabad, Beed, Ahmednagar and Satara, and a few places in the Belgaum and Bidar districts of Karnataka. My investigation gathered momentum thanks to the enthusiasm shown by elder Vaḍārs in giving information about the history and former life of their community. I also benefited from the cooperation I received from young people and acquaintances from the Vaḍār community as well as that from my teacher friends and activists of the *Vaḍār Samāj Saṅghatnā*, the Vaḍār caste organization.

I shall focus here on the Vaḍārs' work culture, as garnered from listening to their testimony. My purpose is to understand how they perceive and articulate their own work experiences, taking into account the changes that nowadays affect their work context, in particular, and the social context, in general. I shall pay special attention to the rapport of continuity between the old and new work culture in terms of skills and experience, and the constraints of the present labour environment.

The importance of work is striking. Asked to introduce themselves, the elders simply refer to their traditional work, which is

also a social determinant: they distinctively identify themselves by their particular occupational skills and tools, and accordingly divide the members of the community into three subcastes of unequal status.

In ascending order, these are: 1) A Māti Vaḍār speaks in terms of picking up a 'field', which means digging the earth, *Māti*; 2) A Gāḍī Vaḍār speaks in terms of breaking a '*gāyṛāṇ*' which means breaking the stones and transporting them in a cart or a vehicle, a '*Gāḍī*', to the place of construction work; 3) The Pātharvaḍ Vaḍār speaks in terms of '*ghādaī*', which means shaping the stone as per the requirement—round grinding stone, flat crushing stone, '*pāthā*', stones for statues and temples.

The Vaḍār community significantly perceives and displays its existence in terms of its traditional work. It is no less significant that, today, the Vaḍār community does not introduce itself as Māti Vaḍār, Gāḍī Vaḍār and Pātharvaḍ Vaḍār, but only as homogeneously Vaḍār. The reason is that the former occupations of the Vaḍār community have tended to disappear. The Vaḍārs are now facing the challenge of changing labour conditions: accordingly, they make their presence felt in areas other than their traditional work. The point of relevance lies in how they perceive their former occupational skills and work experience, and whether they relate to them as assets or liabilities.

## Work, Livelihood and Occupational Dependency in the Past

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In the words of the Vaḍārs themselves, their traditional work was with earth and stone. The work of their ancestors was meant to earn a livelihood. They acquired their skills when they were children by accompanying their fathers:

I played with mud and stones as a child and learnt this work.  
This work is in our blood.  
The more work we have in the sun, the better we used to work—  
like the bellows of a blacksmith. What is ours is ours. Nobody  
else would understand the secret of it.

Says Chimappa, 90 years old, from Kurduwadi, (Solapur district):

From the early times, the Mātī Vaḍārs, Gāḍī Vaḍārs and Pātharvaṭ Vaḍārs used to pitch their tents outside the village and live. The whole day, the Mātī Vaḍārs used to work in the fields or in the village digging earth. The Gāḍī Vaḍārs would do construction work of a building or a well. The Pātharvaṭ would do the work of shaping the stones. Before sunset and in the morning, our women used to go and ask for a piece of *bhākarī* (millet pancake), and then we would all eat. This was our means of livelihood.

The Vaḍārs used to get two or four *annas* (in today's terms, an eighth of a rupee or a fourth of a rupee) for the work done, which the men would spend on drink. There was very little money.

Says Sandipān Bhosale of Sonari (Paranda taluka, Osmanabad district):

But we also could do without money. We used to pluck branches of *pāṅkaṅī* outside the village and make a hut. There were plenty of *pāṅkaṅī* available. If a person or an animal was ill, there were herbal medicines. When men and women used to work for a farmer, he used to give them a *dhoti* or a sari. The farmer would also give food. So we did not even need pots and pans. Formerly, the Vaḍārs used to roast a pig on the ground itself and eat. Money started coming in later, [when] there was more and more work, [and] villages started growing bigger. Then, women started cooking near a tent on a hearth made of three stones. Now, of course, our Vaḍārs build and live in concrete houses. But such were the olden days.

Bhosale feels proud and self-confident when explaining the reason for the continuation of a traditional occupation. Vaḍār work was clearly perceived—and performed—as being of crucial importance to the lives of local communities. The Vaḍārs had an indispensable role in laying the basic environmental infrastructure of the entire local survival.

Says Kondappa Dayappa Chavan from Tambevadi (Solapur district):

The open fields with stones, the *gāyrān*, did not belong to the people. Earth could be dug from anywhere and stones quarried from anywhere. Nobody would stop us. Stones and earth were used earlier to such an extent that no construction would be complete without them. Our ancestors have done the work of

building the village walls. Imagine the number of years that this work must have taken. In earlier times, farm irrigation was done only using water from wells. Water for drinking purposes was also taken from the well. Hence, [the Vaḍārs] used to have plenty of work with the farmers with regard to wells. In fact, people used to wait for us Vaḍārs. In short, earth and stones were used so much by the people that we never had to look for any other occupation.

Since earth and stones were plenty, never ending, our capital was also plenty. Quarry the stones and dig the earth—this work was difficult in the sun, and also continuous. No one else besides us was doing this hard work. In this work, our women, children, animals, old people were all useful. Nobody would sit idle.

My grandfather used to tell me that it was our privilege to build mansions [and] forts in former times. The work of building a trench around a fort would go on for 10 years. There were special Vaḍārs to do special jobs in the royal court, like Madanya Vadari in the court of the King of Atapadi. This is how our work continued, and there are people who continue to do this work.

Chavan describes the network of dependence and interaction that tied together the Vaḍārs and other occupational groups and communities on the basis of vocational and everyday needs. These bonds, however, are limited to those marked by the occupational roles and capabilities:

Whether it be the Māti Vaḍār or the Gāḍī Vaḍār, the farmer was our employer. He would see to it that we had enough, because he hoped that we would again go to work for him. We used to do all the stone and earthwork. If you look at it that way, it is the farmer who gave us the good fortune to have our own hearth of three stones. In the beginning, our women used to ask for food. But the farmer started giving us pulses on his own, and then we lit our hearth.

Because of our occupation, we used to come in contact with the blacksmith. The Gāḍī Vaḍār used to get his cart made from the blacksmith. He used to get his cart reinforced with iron strips from the blacksmith as he had to carry stones. The blacksmith also used to make the crowbar, the pickaxe, iron containers, the hoe, etc., for the Vaḍār. The Gāḍī Vaḍār used to have she-buffaloes and the blacksmith used to have a he-buffalo. So, we used to take the she-buffaloes to mate with the he-buffalo of the

blacksmith. Some people used to give the blacksmith a calf or the young one of a buffalo for the work he did for them. Otherwise, the farmer with whom we used to work would give him dry eatables in the same way that he gave us.

Sometimes, a dispute would take place with the *panchayat* people regarding the *gāyrān* from where we quarried the stones. Otherwise, there was no reason for us to come in contact with anyone else.

The bonds of practical, occupational interaction did not prevent social discrimination towards a community confined to manual and service tasks, on account of a system of values alien and contrary to the occupational self-appreciation of the Vaḍārs. The testimony of the Vaḍār community of village Vadashinge in Solapur district is typical of the basic ambivalence:

Breaking the stones in the sun—no one else was able to do this kind of hard work except the Vaḍār. This hard work was only to get something to feed ourselves. We could not go to the restaurant or to the shop, or mix with other people. They did not let us come near them. We were [also] very dark. If we went to eat at somebody's house, they would serve us in our iron containers.

Our wealth consisted of our iron container, pickaxe, hammer [and] crowbar. Once we pitched our tents in a certain village, we used to go around looking for work. Sometimes, people used to come to call us. Once we got the work, it was our custom to finish it and not to leave any work incomplete. Some of our Vaḍārs were well-known for their expertise in digging wells, [and] building embankments [and] field walls. People used to say in the nearby villages, 'Raghya Vadar has built our well.' This was real honour. As this was a difficult job, we used to get plenty of work. Not one day passed when we didn't have work. On the contrary, we used to work until 10 at night.

Our community has also felt the pangs of untouchability. Today, in Vadashinge, a Vaḍār family of six brothers is living in the midst of 35 houses. Initially, they had numerous difficulties [even setting] foot in the village. They were not allowed to take water from the well. They were not allowed to come within the boundaries of the village. People used to beat them. When asked why this happened, it was learnt that the Vaḍār community had starting entering the domain of farming. [Since] for generations on end they had worked with earth, tilling the land was also [their] occupation. Farming is the basis of our work.



Then why not go in for farming? With this in mind, and with great courage, Vaḍār families have built palatial houses and are living on farming in Vadashinge village today.

## Work Culture at Present

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Continuing with the Vadashinge narrative:

Construction work [and] digging and building wells could not be done without earth, stones and lime, and the implements had been handed down to us by our ancestors—pickaxe, crowbar, iron container, hoe—and our robust bodies. Hence, when it came to any work with earth and stones, nobody could do without us.

But today we see tractors on farms. There is a blasting machine for dynamite. There is POCK LAD for digging the earth. There is G.C.P. There is a truck or a tempo to transport the stones. All these machines do the work of 200 people in one hour.

Sand has replaced earth. Cement has replaced lime. Bricks have replaced stones. There are cement factories. There are stone-crushers to quarry and break the stones into small pieces. And these moneyed people have, thus, cut the umbilical cord that connected us to our traditional occupation.

Today's Vaḍār community is engaged in a variety of other occupations besides hard work with earth and stones. What is significant is that it has gone ahead and faced changing times and circumstances on the strength of its ancestral skills and competences.

Māti Vaḍārs now tend to engage in farming. Some buy a small piece of land and cultivate it. Their old knowledge about earth proves quite useful for farming activities. Even without possessing land, some take a piece of it for farming in lieu of half of the produce. In case this proves impossible, men and women work as farm labour.

The testimony of the Vaḍār families of Devkar hamlet in Indapur taluka is exemplary and typical:

We are no longer Mātī Vaḍārs—we have become farmers. People from the hamlets don't even call us as Vaḍār. They call us by our names—Kaluram, Sada... Our women and children do all the work on the farm. Our ancestors used to work for the farmers. Our earth now looks at us in the form of the soil in the fields. We had a hoe and an iron container in our hand. Now, we hold a plough. We used to walk behind a donkey before. Now, we have purchased bullocks. We used to work as labour before. We are now working in our own fields.

The work of the Gāḍī Vaḍār revolves around stone, but its nature has become slightly different. Now, stones are removed by blasting and transported in a tempo. Today, the Gāḍī Vaḍār might work as labourer or mason. Some have entered the construction business and become contractors, as they were already blessed with the knowledge of construction work. Stonework for road-laying has increased. They also work as roadwork labourers.

Says Mahadev Pawar, a Gāḍī Vaḍār from Pimpalner (Solapur district):

Now, we take contracts for roadwork. Some are engaged in selling cloth. In Osmanabad district, our people have purchased quarries and supply stones in tempos. This means that the Gāḍī Vaḍār still have a connection with stone. This resource was with them before and today, too, they are mostly dealing with the same resource. The only difference is that now a government licence is needed—[and] people from other communities have entered this business. Even then, the Vadar community gets this work [because] they live in groups.

Pawar speaks confidently about how masonry has now become their main occupation. Instead of a crowbar and a hammer, they now use a mason's trowel.

The Pātharvaḷ Vaḍār continue making millstones for grinding and crushing, and selling them by travelling around. Even though there are electric mixers, traditional stones are still in use in villages. The Pātharvaḷ Vaḍār, however, may similarly engage in roadwork and masonry.

Most of the Vaḍār community still makes a living through stone and earthwork. Only the nature of the work has altered, the tools are different, and all transactions are executed in terms of money.

The means of livelihood are secured differently, but the same self-confidence is in evidence.

Says Suryabhan Bala Chavan from Jamkhed:

Today, a Vaḍār gets paid for his work in cash. Transactions take place in money. The hearth made of three stones in the hut has gone, and now we hear the noise of the stove within our four walls. We cook different things and eat them. Some children can go to a school.

In fact, we feel that we are reaping the recompense of our hard work of yesteryears. For a majority of Vaḍārs, there is no anxiety as to how to live. Now, [the] Vaḍārs are striving to see how they can keep their businesses going. Those who have earned more money are striving more. The one who has to work hard and earn his bread is also struggling to get more money. But, today, in most cases, the problem of earning bread is not so severe. Our occupation still supports us enough to guarantee [us] two meals a day.

Chavan points to the forms and strength of community bonds. They have been maintained on the bases of occupational opportunities and modes of financial transactions:

The occupation of our community keeps us together today. You will never find that there is only one Vaḍār family in a village. Wherever we go, our community lives in a group. This is beneficial for our occupation. If we accept doing stonework on a road, the contractor takes at least one woman or man from each Vaḍār family. The contractor may or may not be from our community. [But] although he is from a different community, there is always some headman from our community who is knowledgeable and who supervises the work.

Another thing is that all our kith and kin are nearby. Our girls are married in the same village, as far as possible. Hence, any work that we take up goes to relatives irrespective of who accepts the work. So, the work does not go elsewhere. Nobody else does the work of breaking stones in the hot sun on the road. It is not possible to get people from other communities. We do the work from spreading the stones to spreading the tar. All these jobs are old—but with a slight difference. We work as labour on the construction of a Kolhapur-type bund. Earlier, we used to build lakes, but nobody was a labourer. We only worked hard. We decided what we would take for the work. Now, we work as labourers in the construction of big bridges. Our hard

work is still alive. Earlier, we used to work hard for food, now our work is paid in money. This is the only difference.

One more reason for whatever success we enjoy in our occupation today is the way we conduct our transactions. Even today, we do not keep any money in the bank. Our community says that money perishes if it is kept in a bank or kept buried in the house. We have a *bhiśī* every month or every week. We collect all the money together. We give the money to whichever Vaḍār family is needy.

There is nothing written in our financial transactions. They are conducted only on the word given and the word kept. Each one from the community repays. This [has been] our experience for years. However [much a] drunkard he might be, he gives the money back because of the feeling that the money collected does not belong to a single person but to the whole community. Also, there is faith. We know immediately what is happening in any Vaḍār family in the village—whose relatives have come, what are the problems, etc. There is a feeling for the community in the minds of all, from children to elders. It is the conduct of our transactions that continues our occupation.

There are some problems if a person from another community takes the work contract. But, as far as possible, no one goes to work with him, unless, of course, one does not have any work at all. Besides this, there is no shortage of work in our occupation.

In Chandrapur district, at the extreme east of Maharashtra, the Vaḍār community lives on the work that it finds in its surroundings. There are coal mines and stone quarries in the area. The Gondi<sup>2</sup> people help them in this work. They have other vocations in the Aurangabad and Ahmednagar districts. They sell cloth, trade in buffaloes, and engage in other new work.

One of the best examples of this occupational shift is the Vaḍārs selling cloth in Solapur district. They sit with bales of cloth by the roadside, and sell the cloth for less than the shop price. Even then, they make a profit. This led to a paucity of customers in the shops of the Marwaris in Solapur district. So, a criminal case had to be filed against the Vaḍārs because they did not possess a licence to sell cloth. It is a special aspect of this community that all the Vaḍārs always stick together in the face of any calamity.

Says Aurangabad's Shri Bandewar, an activist with the *Vaḍār Samāj Saṅghatnā*:

Today, we have proved our worth through our hard work. We are still observing the old custom of our community that any work once accepted will not be left half-done. That is why people have faith in us. It is thanks to this faith that we are making progress.

Shri Bandewar speaks of the space that, on the whole, the community has, by and large, conquered for itself.

Today, we are very strong in our occupation. We have money. On account of our occupation, our relations in our community, and among relatives, are becoming stronger. They are becoming so strong that intermarriages are taking place among the Māti Vaḍārs, Gāḍī Vaḍārs [and the] Pātharvaḷ Vaḍārs. Earlier, there were no marriage relations among these subcastes. But, today, when it comes to marriage, they are all considered only as Vaḍārs. That is why, in villages and cities, the community is [increasingly] coming together. On the other hand, [there are] politicians creating splits between us.

Earlier, we did not have education. Today, with the tremendous efforts of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, we have got an opportunity to [become educated]. Today, we have well-known doctors, advocates, police sub-inspectors, engineers, and high officials from our community. They give their cooperation to the community.

Ours was a community that did not have either shelter or enough clothes, worked very hard, and then got something to eat only when somebody else was willing to give it [to them] from his basket—a community that had to undergo tremendous hardships. Now, from the same Vaḍār community, there are *sarpanches* (village council presidents) in many villages in Maharashtra, Members of the Legislative Council and [Members of the Legislative] Assembly. There are certain villages where no decision can be taken without the Vaḍār community. When we go around from village to village, we find that our community is much more stable than the artisans, the *balutedars*. The reason is that the occupation of the Vaḍār is alive today under different forms. It is found that in certain villages, the Vaḍār community has a good backing of the people. The reason for this is that the Deshmukhs and the Marathas use intimidating methods. The Vaḍār community does not resort to such evil methods. There is no split in the Vaḍār community. That is why, today, we stand with our feet firmly rooted in society.

Earlier, we used to build temples and [give] shape [to] statues, but we were not allowed to enter the temples. Today, we give

donations to the temples, get temples constructed. In each city, the honour of pulling the chariot goes to the Vaḍār. We enjoyed the first honour in the temples at Pandharpur, Barshi, Solapur, Karad and Phaltan: this is still continuing.

## Conclusion: Third Generation Gap, Tradition in Jeopardy

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The above testimonies hold good for the second generation, which more or less continues to live in a rural environment, and have not been alienated from its traditional moorings by dint of education. It adjusted to significant technological and economic changes without cultural rupture and social alienation. Its past skills worked as an asset. Now, a third generation has grown up in a different educational and sociocultural environment. The overall context of the past has been significantly altered. Instead of adaptive changes, transformations occur, with a concomitant breach of continuity. The youngest generation entertains a radically different way of looking at the traditional work culture of its forefathers, which it simply finds itself alienated from. This, at least, is the elders' depiction and complaint.

While we were talking with the Vaḍārs at Loni (Shrirampur taluka, Ahmednagar district) about the changes that are affecting their community, an elderly person of about 90 years of age shared with us his vision of Vaḍār history.

Our grandfathers and great-grandfathers could eat half a roast pig alone. And once they had taken the crowbar in hand, they would dig 10 cartfuls of stones from the hollow in the ground. We had that much strength. We used to get plenty of work.

Now, everything is mechanical, and what our occupation requires is capital. Some enterprising people take [on] contracts for roads [and] quarries. Even now, they use a sledgehammer. One feels nice when we see that our youth are still doing this work with earth and stones. Men and women from the middle generation still work according to the old methods. The nature of work has changed. The tools have changed. But the hard work is the same. Today, the Vaḍār is still there in work dealing with sand, pebbles, and construction.

But these young boys of nowadays are no good. The parents work hard and they just go around dressed well. They do not want to work in the sun. They apply powder to their faces to hide their dark colour. They do not accompany their parents to work. They do not know the work. And they do not have the guts to work hard. That is why other people have entered our occupation. The young today open a cycle shop, a kiosk for betel, a restaurant or other such occupation.

I asked some youths about this and they said that their friends were from other communities.

We feel ashamed to break stones in the sun—and we do not have enough strength to break the stones either. That is why we have entered into other businesses. Some have taken up jobs. But it is not possible for all to get a job. Hence, we have gone into hotels, video theatres. Besides our parents, some other people also support us. But now we will not be able to do this work, which requires so much physical exertion.

## Notes

1. About the Vaḍār community, see the following studies: *Vaḍār Narratives: Dramatic Reappropriation of a Myth*, by Datta Shinde in this volume; and *The Donkey: A Mirror of Self-identification in Three Myths from the Vaḍār Community* in vol. 3 of this series.
2. The Gondī are spread over Madhya Pradesh, eastern Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, northern Andhra Pradesh, and western Orissa. With more than four million people, they form the largest tribe in central India. They are traditionally agriculturalists, with some practicing shifting cultivation, and others raising cereals or herding cattle.

# 10

## PARĪṬ COMMUNITIES: Occupation and Survival

SURESH KOKATE

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### Traditional Assignments and Dependency Relations

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Parīṭ is a community scattered all over India. The community is also known as Dhobi, Madaval, Rajak, Varti, Parit, etc. Parīṭs may belong to Hindu, Christian, Muslim or Buddhist religions. There are about 800,000 to one million Parīṭs in Maharashtra alone, where 80 per cent of them earn a living by laundering clothes, the rest living by farming and employment. Earlier, there used to be one Parīṭ family living in a group of five to 10 villages in rural Maharashtra. Parīṭs would collect and stack clothes on the back of a donkey, wash them, lay them flat, light a big hearth on a given day, and starch them. As far as possible, Parīṭs would stay near a river bank, because it would make water more easily available. But their residences were located inside a village's boundary.

Three kinds of traditional occupations are assigned to Parīṭs as regular daily work and during occasional ritual functions.

- 1) Throughout the year, on a daily basis, Parīṭs wash and iron the clothes of a village's higher caste families. In fact, they actually serve only the higher castes, mainly its Brāhmaṇs and the village Paṭīl (headman).



- 2) *Paṛiṭs* perform several ceremonial functions during wedding ceremonies. They apply oil to the bride and the groom. No wedding goes ahead unless that *telvan* ceremony is performed. Here, the *Paṛiṭs* are as important as the *Brāhmaṇs*. They tie a *kankan* (bracelet made of an areca nut<sup>1</sup> and a dry rootstalk of turmeric tied in sheep's wool) on the bridegroom's right hand. They spread on the ground lengths of cloth, or *dhotis*, for the groom's mother to walk on ceremoniously from the place where the groom and his party stay (*janavasa*) to the wedding *pandal* (decorated gazebos where the rituals are carried out), intended to prevent her feet from being soiled, while a music band plays. The *Paṛiṭs* also tie a *kankan* to the bride's hand. They sing *telvan* songs in which they wish the bride and groom a happy married, and also that the misfortune of being widowed pass her by.

On *Divāḷī*, *Paṛiṭs* have to go to the houses of the higher castes with oil lamps on a tray (a *Paṛiṭ* woman performs the ritual), and move it in circular fashion in front of the people of the house. That performance is considered an act of honour for the community.

- 3) Three other particular tasks are significantly assigned to *Paṛiṭs*. At the time of village religious festivals, *Paṛiṭs* have to wash the palanquins and the gods' clothes; they also spread cloth before the palanquin of the village deity, they paint the village temple, and so on. They are also expected to wash clothes during periods of mourning, as well as the clothes of confinement (childbirth).

As a consequence of these assignments, *Paṛiṭs* feel that they are somehow superior and deserve to 'take their bread' (*bhākrī*) as a right. It is considered the *Paṛiṭ*'s fundamental right to make a living on the basis of these assigned charges. The remuneration for this work used to be in the form of *baluta* (a measure of grains customarily given after the harvest), food on festival days, gifts on *Divāḷī*, meals (*vāḍhan*) on weddings and funerals, and millet bread (*bhākrī*) every day. Nothing resembling labour laws were applicable to the *Paṛiṭs*. Nonetheless, the *Paṛiṭs* think of demanding and taking their *bhākrī* from people not as begging but as a right to recompense for the work of washing clothes, for which they can easily enter the *Paṭiḷ*'s house.

No wonder that the Parīṭs thought of themselves as once having had a place of their own. Although their livelihood depends on other people, they consider themselves '*sui juris*'. Let us focus on that ambiguity of a system of representations at variance with the actual social state as they perceive it today—the Parīṭ had his own place in the village structure.

## Social Image and Status

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Three significant structural characteristics mark the ambiguous sociocultural position of the Parīṭs.

First, they locate themselves within the cluster of 12 castes that identify themselves as 'the kindred of the donkey': *gāḍav gota* (*gota* refers to a caste, relations or kindred considered collectively)—namely, those whose livelihood depends on the donkey, their animal carrier, and who consider one another kinsmen, most of whom are *balutedār* communities: *bhāvki*, *bhāvband*. The Parīṭs consider the Nhāvī (barber) and Kumbhār (potter) communities closest to them. In general, the Parīṭs used to think of *Karu-Naru* (*balutedar-alutedar*) as their kinsmen. However, they keep no relations with several *balutedārs* such as the Teḷī, the Mahār, the Māṅg, the Bhangī, the Ḍor and the Muslims. In fact, for the Parīṭs, all of them are untouchable castes; consequently, the Parīṭs' relations with them are marked by the usual rituals that attend avoidance of contact for since the higher castes consider any contact with the lower castes pollution.

Second, among the category of village servants or *balutedars*, a place of importance has been assigned to the Parīṭs by the high castes on account of their occupational services. The Parīṭs themselves perceive washing the Paṭīl's clothes a matter of distinctive superiority—generally, the act of being in daily in touch mainly with the dominant communities. It is no wonder that the Parīṭs call themselves 'Kśatriya Marāṭhā Parīṭ' (Kśatriya being a warrior caste second only to the Brāhmaṅs in the pecking order, and Marāṭhā being Maharashtrian warriors). They wash the clothes of Baniās, Brāhmaṅs and Pāṭīḷs, but do not touch the clothes of the Mahār, the Māṅg, the Cāmbhār, the Teḷī and the Ḍor. (In fact, all but the Teḷī would be treated as untouchable by everybody).

In case the untouchables offered them tea or meals, the Parīṭs would put charcoal embers in the plate, thus ‘purifying’ it.

Near the river, the Parīṭs have a delineated space to wash and clean clothes—the *Dhobi Ghat*. No other community washes clothes at that particular spot. The Parīṭs consider a stone idol, the *Ghatora*, erected at that place, their god, which they think sets them apart from the others: they clean clothes that have become unclean, which is why they are pure, *śuddha*.

Nonetheless, the Parīṭs have no other way of securing a livelihood than being at the mercy of the well-off families from among the higher castes in the village. For instance, they get their share of *baluta* only if the Pāṭiḷ gets a satisfactory crop. In effect, the Parīṭs can get bread only if there is prosperity in the Pāṭiḷ’s house. Since they are obliged to depend on the Pāṭiḷs, the Pāṭiḷs, accordingly, grant them a subaltern social status.

Third, the Parīṭs hated the dominant Brāhmaṇ and Marāṭhā communities, which observe the ritual practices that attend purity/pollution even with the Parīṭs. Within the village boundary, the Parīṭs are treated as untouchables. The Brāhmaṇs, for instance, wear the clothes washed by the Parīṭs only after purifying them by sprinkling water on the clothes. The Marāṭhās would not sit with the Parīṭs in the same row for the purposes of communal eating; nor would they eat food offered by the Parīṭs. They only mark their attendance at Parīṭ weddings but do not stay on for the meal; they do not even drink water at a Parīṭ’s house. The Parīṭs are considered permanently polluted because they wash the polluted clothes of others during periods of mourning, and the garments of a woman who has freshly given birth.

The Parīṭs these matters contrarily—they consider themselves pure because people get through the inauspicious mourning period thanks to their washing the people’s clothes through that duration. Similarly, the woman who has just given birth gets rid of pollution attending the event with their washing her polluted rags and clothes. The Parīṭ is clean and brings purity, and is conscious of his outstanding function of purifying society. This gives his work an importance surpassing all the services of the other *balutedār* castes.

Moreover, Parīṭs consider themselves superior to Rām himself. Rām brought Sitā back home even after she had spent many days at Rāvaṇ’s house. But a Parīṭ will never be willing to accept his

wife back into his home even if she spends a single day outside her house. He says, 'I am not Rām, I am a *Parīṭ*!' Rām himself had to listen to the strong objection that a *Parīṭ* took to his taking Sītā back to his palace and capital city, Ayodhya. Rām had no alternative but to repudiate Sītā although she was innocent, and send her into a forest exile that lasted 12 years—all to quench the rumours spread in Ayodhya against him by the *Parīṭ* and his wife, who was, by no means, any the less vocal. According to an oral narrative that has been circulating for ages in the community, she told whomsoever was ready to listen about her distinct displeasure regarding forgiving Rām's behaviour:

Rām, after his return from exile, sends his spies to find out what the people were talking about. In a *Parīṭ*'s house, the husband and wife were fighting. The wife was telling her husband, 'I am not like the Sītā of Rām. She stayed at Rāvaṇ's place for 14 years. Me, I am not like that!'

This incident, traditionally known to every practicing Hindu, is evidence of the *Parīṭ*s' moral uprightness, and lends legitimacy to their claim to a superior status. All others may consider Rām as the supreme god, but a *Parīṭ* entertains in his heart the conviction that he is somehow superior to one no less than Rām himself.

A *Parīṭ* is less afraid still of Kṛīṣṇa, as the following narrative circulated in the community tries to convince him:

Kṛīṣṇa is on his way to Mathurā to see Kaṇṣa. He meets a *Parīṭ* on his way. Kṛīṣṇa asks him for clothes. The *Parīṭ* refuses and abuses Kṛīṣṇa. He praises Kaṇṣa, which makes Kṛīṣṇa very angry. Kṛīṣṇa beheads the *Parīṭ*.

The *Parīṭ*s feel proud that Naradmuni is their ancestor, Naradmuni<sup>2</sup> standing as a superior figure in the *Puranas*.

Today, nobody overtly observes any ritual of purity to circumvent the pollution the *Parīṭ*s ostensibly cause. There are, however, indirect indications that the *Parīṭ*s might have become targets of jealousy and hatred—for instance, when a *Parīṭ* boy gets a job, asks for higher emoluments, or for a motorized two-wheeler or a bicycle for his work, or if he purchases instruments of entertainment. Higher caste people might grouse, 'Look at these *Parīṭ*s

(derogatorily called 'Dhobade' and 'Paratule'), they have started thinking highly of themselves!

## Changing Social Contexts of Work in Urban Areas

During the colonial period, rural communities became increasingly attracted to cities. In search of a livelihood, the Parīṭs migrated to the cities, where the white-collar population was burgeoning. The Parīṭs put up tin sheds for ironing clothes everywhere. Their work culture underwent a fundamental change. They had to adjust their traditional skills to contemporaneous technology. Earlier, washing was done in the open on river banks, where the Parīṭs had their independent platforms; today, since clothes are washed mostly at home, ironing is given more importance by the Parīṭs. There is also more profit in just ironing clothes already washed than in washing and ironing them. The Parīṭs now iron grooms' dresses for weddings. The context of work has been altered by changing times.

Earlier, the Parīṭ used *ritha* (soap-nut tree's fruit) and *hingana* (*Balamite Egyptiaca*) to wash clothes. In order to straighten clothes properly, he would keep them folded under his mattress. He used to fill *khair* wood<sup>3</sup> charcoal in a jug or a metal iron, and then iron the clothes. Today, a coal-fired iron has become outdated. In the Parīṭs' shops, we now find electric irons, show-cases, and cupboards. They use soap, soda, and bleaching powder. The method, and the skill that the Parīṭs' bring to their work, have changed. New means have arrived and old tools have been abandoned. Earlier, in the village work dispensation, Parīṭs had to work for *baluta*, *bhākrī* and vegetables, and the expectation of being served meals during weddings and sweets at Diwali in return. Today, they take cash in return for their work and, more to the point, do not entertain any of their former expectations.

Furthermore, the Parīṭs are more concerned today about middle-class clients, since there is a greater guarantee of receiving payment from salaried people. In the rural areas, the Parīṭs had to ask for clothes to wash and iron. Now, people bring clothes to the laundry shop. As far as is possible, the Parīṭs no longer go from door to door. They also accept work, although sometimes

with a drop in remuneration, from hospitals, lodging and boarding houses, and so on, because they expect lump-sum payment. They no longer have to ask for *bhākrī*, nor receive *vāḍhaṇ* meals. Replacing a life of humiliation at the mercy of the village higher castes, and dependency on the grains they would give is the hard cash payment that they received in the urban areas. The Parīṭ made economic progress through such reworking of vocational methodology and recompense, and began to lead lives of self-respect.

Soon enough, however, this shift resulted in the Parīṭ being caught in the vicious circle of internal competition. In rural areas, metaphorically speaking, a Parīṭ's mind would feel squeezed by exploitation in the same way that he was squeezing and rinsing clothes. Work was remunerated in kind, but there was no competition within the village. In the cities, finding himself in competition with his own caste brothers, he has to earn a living by reducing his rates for washing and ironing. For one, the burden of the shop loan on his head is in proportion to the heap of clothes in his shop. For another, he has become interested in alcohol, sacrificing a goat, and making vows—a kind of progress of aspirations. The Parīṭ community, thus, finds itself caught in the vicious circle of more work and less money.

Furthermore, in urbanized areas, a heavy capital investment is required to avail of the advantages of new technology. Over the past decade, while the number of washing and pressing machines has increased, it is not the Parīṭ community that has been provided with the capital necessary to acquire them. The higher castes, especially the trading castes with adequate capital resources, can invest in these machines; many Parīṭs, because they have been doing this work in a traditional manner, are confined to jobs like washing and ironing in the shops of the higher castes. In effect, the Parīṭs began to sell their manual skills. They had once left the villages to get away from humiliation and lead a life of self-respect by migrating to the cities—but they once again find themselves caught in a life of servility.

It used to be necessary to light the hearth to boil *khāḍī* clothes. Today, terylene, tericot, and polyester clothes do not need this. People no longer give clothes to the Parīṭ to be boiled—they have changed their habits regarding clothes. Moreover, in the cities, class IV employees frequently take up the work of ironing as a

side-business, in order to earn a little more than their salaries. Also, while youths from the lower castes might be ready to start their ironing anywhere by just unfolding a table, but most urbanites do their own ironing at home. They shave themselves at home; they polish their own shoes at home. This has been almost cataclysmic for the service communities that used to survive off them.

Will the Parīṭ community remain neglected and disregarded in the march of capital and modern technology? Will the hearth disappear altogether?

## Changing Context of Power Relations in Rural Areas

In some villages, thanks to the reforms brought in by the Panchayati Raj, the Parīṭs have been elected members of *gram panchayat*, the village council, or even its *sarpanch* (president). Now, they are gauging the manner in which the established community might accept them. While the Parīṭ does manage some respect, it comes at the cost of some insults. Villagers may derogatorily say that the *gram panchayat* has become a place for washing clothes. Parīṭs are ridiculed by being told that while on the Pāṭīl! understands work, the Parīṭs have no brains.

After the law of the Panchayati Raj system came into effect, a rift has formed between the Parīṭs and other backward communities. Earlier, the latter used to consider themselves united by some manner of commonality and sharing of similar interests as *balutedārs*, or the *balute–alute*, or as kinsmen in the same *gādav gota*. These were grounds for communicative interaction. Today, they tend to detest one another: the new political context has significantly affected how they view each other. A spirit of competition prompts them to attempt to show that they are superior to other artisans, or Backward Classes.

For example, the *gram panchayat* plays an important role in the affairs of the village. Today, it is more necessary to have control over the *gram panchayat* than to be the Pāṭīl!. But to keep their control over the village and use power to advance their own prestige, the Pāṭīl!'s aim is to see to it that the other village council members from the Backward Classes and other lower sections stay within their 'party' and under their influence—all within the

framework of the Panchayati Raj system itself. The Pāṭiḷs use all the lower rank communities for their own vested interests. In particular, this is why they bring the Parīṭs into politics.

As a result, the Parīṭs no longer consider the *gāḍav gota balutedārs* as close to them. The Pāṭiḷ still manages everything, with the result that, instead of harmony, discord prevails between the *gāḍav gota balutedārs* in village affairs. A new value system prevails: instead of deciding independently the nature of its own 'party' or mindset, the party of the Parīṭs is the one to which the Pāṭiḷ belongs. This is a great obstacle to self-determination.

'Who are our people? What is our culture?' Today, the Parīṭ is in two minds about this state of affairs. This crucial question is being faced not only by the Parīṭ community, but equally by the other lower social strata of society. The Parīṭ community has an urgent desire to do something by itself, for itself. But the threat from the established community leads it to eventually decide to shrink into itself and become insular. This is the reality. The Parīṭ community does not think beyond its own self. In that sense, it gives as much importance to relatives on the mother's side (*māṭṭr gota*)<sup>4</sup> as to relatives on father's side (*pitṭr gota*)<sup>5</sup>—Parīṭs think of their group holistically, to the extent of considering how to set up Parīṭs from their own family group at each street corner in the cities.

## The Youth, a Cultural Shift

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Parīṭ youth are today disturbed and confused about the traditional work of their parents. Still, many are apparently drawn to this hereditary work for want of other occupational opportunities. Children eat with heads bent down at home, feeling ashamed of not getting any other employment opportunity due to lack of education. One may feel that the Parīṭ youth have lost the desire to fight—young people with little education often take up their parental vocation.

However, there is an obvious change in the behaviour of educated Parīṭ youth. Two trends of thought and attitude are evident among them: 1) Boys with a little education, and those who fail to obtain a Secondary School Leaving Certificate cannot help but turn to the ancestral occupation, learn skills from their



parents, and find interest in their work. Instead of running after a job, they fall back on their traditional occupation; 2) Youth with some degree of higher education feel differently: they do not want to become 'beaters' and ironers of clothes. They consider the work done by their ancestors as *apaṭbār*, 'enough to bang one's head against a brick wall', probably a reference to the beating of clothes. They want to take advantage of their education and find other jobs, considering it below their dignity to wash clothes. The problem is that even highly educated Parīṭ youth cannot find jobs, while they have lost their traditional occupational skill set. They are caught in the grey zone between tradition and modernity.

They also face a financial challenge (a handicap mentioned before). Some educated youth feel attracted by the laundry business—provided it is carried out with new methods and modern equipment and has nothing to do with the traditional, old-fashioned ways. They are even willing to launch a big business and hire employees, expecting to sit in a chair and control the business. They feel that once the financial planning can be taken care of, they can exercise their intellectual skills in an effective manner. Along with honour and prestige, they expect good returns for, and from, their enterprise.

In brief, while the elder Parīṭs are completely engrossed in their traditional occupation, their children continue the same occupation out of necessity, not enthusiasm. The youth might nurture a dislike of this trade. 'Our ancestors died washing other people's clothes all their life. Should we also do the same?'

## Building up a Caste Organization

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The Parīṭ community is a neglected one and is less dynamic than other communities. Nevertheless, the Parīṭs appear to be active in their efforts to make the community progressive and enable it to face contemporary challenges.

Maharashtra registered the Parīṭ community in 1962 under the category of Other Backward Classes (OBC). In the Hindu social order, the community stands as low as Bhangis;<sup>6</sup> washing the polluted clothes of a woman who has just given birth is considered as dirty a task as carrying nightsoil on the head, as Bhangis do. Representations have been made to the government, and articles

written in newspapers, to show that the Parīṭ are 'backward' in the truest sense of the word. The younger generation insists that the community be included in the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST) category and treated as Backward Classes (BC, formerly 'the Untouchables'). The Parīṭs have lagged, comparatively speaking, far behind other castes such as the Dhānāgar and the Vanjārī, which are included in the schedule of Nomadic Tribes. The Parīṭs have long been plagued with dire poverty, but the Maharashtra administration remains indifferent; the Parīṭs are, for instance, not entitled to facilities offered by such institutions as the Economic Development Corporation. The reason behind this is that the Parīṭs are dispersed and unorganized in Maharashtra.

Nonetheless, the all-inclusive Organization of the Parīṭ Brotherhood was formed out of a notion of self-respect in December 1948 and was registered in 1960. Initial attention was given to tackling the problem of the general slide and deterioration of the community. Programmes were implemented to promote freedom from addiction, access to education, ban on dowry, etc. After 1980, organizations were formed at the district level. Today, there are organizations at the taluka and even the village levels. These organizations were formed in places where the Parīṭs lived in groups. There was a token *bandh* (strike) of laundries in Maharashtra on 1 May 1991. A procession of 10,000 Parīṭs went to the state government secretariat in Mumbai on 27 August 1992. Thus, attempts have been made to create awareness in the community through meetings and processions meant to articulate Parīṭ demands.

The community is becoming increasingly unanimous with regard to floating an independent 'economic corporation' meant to facilitate Parīṭ economic progress. Internal differences are becoming less acute, thanks to meetings and processions. As a follow-up to the New Economic Policy, a new Organization of Laundry Operators was formed in 1999. The Parīṭs bring out their own souvenirs, journal and weeklies to express their views and introduce themselves to others.

This organization was registered in Pune under Registration Certificate no. 3167 dated 26 May 1999 as per the Labour Union Act (*Shramik Sangh Adhiniyam*) 1926. Since the organization has adopted the principle of collecting no more contribution than necessary for covering its expenses, there is no dispute about

its management. But collecting money is not its objective—the will to organize is primary. The organization demands, in particular, a reduction in electricity rates. One page of the monthly magazine of the Parit community is devoted to reporting the activities and announcements of the organization. As it is registered as a licensed newspaper, the postage per copy is a subsidized 15 paise, which facilitates wide-ranging contact.

Seventy-five laundry professionals from Pune city have come together under the banner of the Unregistered Paise Fund. They collect Rs 500 from each member per month, and make loans for up to Rs 10,000 to members at the nominal interest rate of 1 per cent for various purposes: business expansion, domestic reasons, medical help, marriage, funeral, etc. They avail of contacts with those from the community who are employed in banks. Money is distributed on the basis of mutual trust. Priority is given to needs, not wants. Most of the laundry professionals have taken advantage of this loan facility, which saves them the hassle of dealing with the paperwork involved in bank procedures, looking for guarantors, and the repeated trips to and from the bank. The objective of the collective fund was to help those indigent from the community to make progress: that purpose is being met.

People from other communities also try to enter the laundry profession. To enable the Parits to face that challenge, the Laundry Bhushan Award is given with the aim of creating an entrepreneurial spirit among Parits in order to increase their occupational qualifications, establish relations of cooperation within the community, politeness with the clients, encourage prompt service, etc.—in short, to make the community competitive. This year, the award was given to Bindumadhav Joshi, a laundry professional, and to the laundry operator, Shri Bhosale, at Solapur, both of them from outside the community. The intention behind it is to make the Parit community take inspiration from the two awardees. To egg the Parits on to adopt fundamental coactive attitudes, the community envisages starting a washing cooperative in Pune. It is expected to provide employment to Parits and to enable them to retain their monopoly in the laundry profession.

The same spirit led to the creation, at district and taluka levels, of Parit Credit Societies. They are intended to lend a helping hand to weak Parits and to compete with banks, which are seen as being

in the hands of the higher castes and catering to them alone. Their main purpose of the credit societies is to provide loans for the laundry business. They also intend to create opportunities in other occupations for those in the laundry business, help their children to pursue higher education, collect daily funds for laundry families and put them in a deposit scheme, run a scheme for financial assistance to the helpless, poor and neglected women among those in the laundry business, and, in general, make purposeful efforts to increase the social and economic status of the laundry profession.

Earlier, it used to be a custom for parents to meet a prospective bride or groom at their respective houses prior to putting a seal on the marriage. Now, Parīṭ associations have been formed in cities to circulate matrimonial information, along with addresses, which allows prospective brides and grooms to meet each other and then decide their futures.

Work in an urban environment implies two particular challenges, which were unknown in the rural social situation. Take Pune city: there are seven *dhobi ghats* under the jurisdiction of the Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC). To use the ghats, the Parīṭs have to pay a tax and enter into an agreement with the PMC. Earlier, the *dhobi ghats* along the river were a free domain under the sole control of the Parīṭs. But those days are long gone: today, the Parīṭs are dependent on the whims of municipal corporators.

Another problem that affects the laundry professionals at Pune is that they are charged electricity bills at a commercial rate. (Sometimes, paradoxically enough, they receive electricity bills which charge them at the average rate, which is well below the commercial rate.) Migrant Parīṭs from other states, such as the Kamati and Telugu Parīṭs, have taken advantage of this. They use domestic electricity, for which the rate is lower. This also helps them evade the problem of paying rent for a proper shop. Moreover, they use a charcoal iron. They fetch clothes from the client's residence. While the laundry professional has to pay a professional tax, the outsider Parīṭs—Kamati and Telugu *dhobis*—have to pay no such tax. They all eat from one plate and have enough for their families; a laundry professional, on the other hand, can hardly make both ends meet.

Some Parīṭs recently got a shot in the arm as an unexpected consequence of the post-1991 New Economic Policy. The Parīṭ

community had become desperate over the past years due to mechanization in the washing occupation. But the clients realized the disadvantages of machine washing, mainly, (1) clothes smelt damp because of the damp steam in the machine, (2) clothes turn black over a period of time because of the use of acid on a large scale, (3) clothes tear quickly. The clients noticed these defects due to machine washing. On the other hand, there is no damp smell in our hand washing and the clothes become fresh. They do not turn black as there is no acid used. Clothes last longer. The rates for hand washing are less than for machine washing. Hence, our manual skill of *Parīṭ* is getting a renewed chance.

The main reason for hope remains the important symbolic asset of identity, prestige and social recognition that the whole community obtains from its *sant*, Gadge Maharaj,<sup>7</sup> whose commendable social development efforts and reforms show them the path of renewal. The *Parīṭs* have made *sant* Gadgebaba, who saw God in their community, an emblem of collective self-respect. Today, a photograph of Gadgebaba is a must in a laundry; the rate-chart must carry the words Gadgebaba *Prasanna* (Blessed Gadgebaba) displayed at the top. Gadge Maharaj revolted against caste discrimination, evil customs, idol worship and animal sacrifice, eventually building a home for animals. He built *dharamsalas* (caravanserais) at places of pilgrimage in Maharashtra to welcome devotees and passengers. He looked after the leprosy-affected. He started primary and secondary schools, and *ashramsalas* (boarding schools) for boys and girls. The institutions and organizations he founded did not admit *Parīṭs* alone. He emphasized village hygiene and cleanliness of the mind in his *kirtans*.<sup>8</sup> He spent all his life touring Maharashtra. He supported his contemporaries, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi, and Karmaveer Bhaurao Patil.<sup>9</sup>

*Parīṭs* keep a photograph of Gadge Maharaj in their homes, laundries and shops, at festivals and functions, in leaflets and publications, etc., because he was looking for God in humans. In his name, they give food in charity and make contributions. They regularly celebrate his birth and death anniversaries. This is their way to bring together all *Parīṭs*, who proudly tell others that there was a great saint in their community. The *Parīṭs* take collective decisions on these occasions and try to implement them.

To conclude, three visuals might exemplify how the Parīṭs have changed over time, and help us measure the difference with the past, as has been described at the beginning of this chapter.

**First:** The Parīṭs organize welcoming programmes such as oblation of meals, tea and snacks to the *dinḍīs* of *vārkarīs* on their way to Paṅdharī on the occasion of *ekadaśī* in *Āṣāḍ* and *Kārtik*. They have their own *dinḍī*<sup>10</sup> etc.

**Second:** The Parīṭs used to receive a meal with sweets offered by a village's established higher castes on festive occasions. In the cities, the Parīṭs do not follow the same practice, where their rich clients come to their shops and give them a box of sweets on Divālī.

**Third:** Earlier, the Parīṭs used a donkey to carry bundles of clothes. Today, they use bicycles or scooters for transport.

## Notes

1. Also called betel nut—areca nut (*Areca catechu* L.), the seed of the betel palm, is chewed with betel leaves, lime, cardamom and flavourings as a mild intoxicant. Eating betel leaves carries great significance in the wedding rituals in much of India.
2. A sage known for his wisdom and his cunning, the latter of which often manifested itself in his devious arbitrations.
3. *Khair* (*Acacia catechu*) is a deciduous tree with rough dark grey-brown bark. Among other things, *Khair* wood is used to make quality charcoal sought by goldsmiths, silversmiths and blacksmiths.
4. *Māṭṛ gota* comprises all male and female relatives from the mother's side—*māvśī*-aunt (mother's sister), *kākā* (aunt's husband), *māmā*-maternal uncle (mother's brother), *māvas bhāu* (aunt's son), *māme bhāu* (son of aunt, uncle), etc.
5. *Pitṛ gota* comprises male and female relatives from the father's side—*culatā*-uncle (father's brother), *culat bhāu*-cousin (uncle's son), *ātyā*-aunt (father's sister), *dājī*-brother-in-law (sister's husband), etc.
6. The Bhangis form the segment of Indian society that has been traditionally relegated to the filthiest and most unpleasant jobs: even within the Dalits, once collectively known as 'the Untouchables', Bhangis were considered the lowest of the low. Bhangis are sometimes referred to as 'sweepers', but the word hardly conveys the appalling conditions under which they usually work.
7. Gadge Maharaj (1876–1956) was born in Runmochan village in Amaravati district of Maharashtra. Although his father was a *dhobi*,

Gadge Maharaj became a mendicant and then an ascetic-revolutionary-folk hero of sorts. The *Gadge Maharaj Swacheta Abhiyan*, started in September 2000 in his memory as a one-time programme, has evolved into an annual event and has helped, among other things, to electrify 33,000 of Maharashtra's 42,000 villages.

8. *Kirtans* are devotional songs deeply rooted in the Vedic tradition.
9. Dr Karmaveer Bhaurao Patil, a Padma Bhushan and a renowned social worker and philanthropist, was born on 22 September 1887. He was inspired by the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi, the ideologies of the Indian National Congress, and the many social reformers in Maharashtra, where he was actively engaged.
10. See the study on the Vadār in vol. 3 of this series: *On the Way to Pandhari*, which specifically mentions the Gadge Maharaj dindī.

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Part 3

BONDS OF

HEALTH PRACTICES

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# INTRODUCTION: Symbolic Forms and Signs

GUY POITEVIN

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The biological dimension of human life provides society with one of its main signifying sensible material to construct its systems of symbolic communication. The human body is the signifier of an immense range of meanings, values, customs and practices. It is primarily through control over bodies that society signifies and keeps up its symbolic order. Society as a complex system of symbolic relations expands and reinforces itself, as it handles, manages, and rules over bodies with an increased expertise (Lévi-Strauss 1960: xi-xiv). Here is the most comprehensive sensible sign through which society operates its systems and achieves its ends (Mauss 1960: 365–75, 384–86). Human biology is the first place that society invests, even before the signified might be known and articulated. Here is a topical example where indeed ‘the signifying precedes and determines the signified’ (Lévi-Strauss 1960: xxxii).

Chapter 2 had given us a lesson in dis-alienating deconstruction of the symbolic form of health, and health care as instrumentalized at the macro level of institutions of knowledge and drug markets to build up social systems of health relations, thus meeting the theoretical and practical ends of medical power systems in the world at large. Part 3 of this volume focuses on particular health care practices as symbolic forms today, at the level of local communities, with a double purpose. The first is to show how local collectives may attempt to reappropriate some control over that symbolic asset. The second purpose is to observe how the same

medical power operates equally at this level, though with different operational modalities, adjusting its discourse to local communication idioms.

The five essays in Part 3 point in particular to two discursive strategies of dominance, already seen put to use by power contests in other processes of communication analyzed in this book. The first one is the alleged dichotomy of Modernity raised against Tradition as a cover-up and a mediation of domination processes. Similarly, a second dichotomy—which often overlaps with the first one and strengthens it—is a demarcation of the Underdeveloped or Backward and the Developed or Progressive. Both actually signify and proclaim the right of the Developed to rule over the Underdeveloped by authoritatively spreading modern health expertise.

Mainly since the 1960s, the misgivings of modern health techniques and the conceit of 'scientific' medical power bring back the attention to health practices which are referred to under various names such as 'traditional', 'domestic', 'popular', 'native', 'local', 'indigenous', and the like. These are reconstructions in the modern world, of health care systems based on know-how handed down by communities of practitioners, and occasionally textbooks. Their characteristic feature is their embedment in networks of personal and collective human bonds of assistance and reliance.

These bonds specifically differentiate the form of health relations obtaining in local health care systems from those constructed by delocalized modern health care protocols. In the latter, human rapports have become increasingly mediated by strictly medical, technological devices, ranging from chemical or biological techniques to instrumental and administrative manipulation of bodies. Consequently, medical practice is restricted to a 'scientific' and possibly highly 'specialized' link between a patient and a professional expert, both cut off from their environment of human and social rapports. Health has become a 'medical act' defined by authorized procedures and availability of medical commodities or equipments, while the right to administer or monitor them has been exclusively, and increasingly with the so-called Development, reserved to those institutionally vested with that power. Traditional and local practices such as those studied in the essays

in Part 3, on the contrary, operate as symbolic forms which sustain human bonds and weave forms of social relation.

The rehabilitation of community-based, traditional or local health care practices are of particular relevance still for another reason, considering that the horizon of our concern is that of those in the Third World whose heritage of knowledge and expertise is denied legitimacy by the 'new world order'. This order projects a collective representation of developing countries as 'a lost and hopeless Third World' in which 'emergency has become a founding principle replacing, and even devaluating, cooperation and assistance to development' (Grandbesançon 1996: 116). The power parameter hides itself here under the argument of absolute dependency of the Third World, construed as totally deprived of innate potentialities and capacities of self-reliance and innovation.

The testimonies and essays in this Part 3 are meant to falsify this assumption in the field of primary health care. They expose this approach as misinformed, ethnocentric, blindly parochial, self-complacent, short-sighted, offensive, insulting to the heritage of health knowledge of the so-called Third World, unless a mere lazy ignorance may account for them. Whatever be their reasons, these attitudes give legitimacy to practices which under the name of development destroy networks of symbolic communication and cover up detrimental and exploitative forms of operations.

The following studies come from that 'hopeless Third World' with a purpose, namely, to turn the tables on the offender. While dealing with health issues and medical practices, they actually focus on communication and self-reliance set-ups, namely, treat health care as a matter of collective or community relations. People's health practices are webs of human bonds. This is their common qualitative and operational feature. The studies equally reveal how modern medical professionalism in health care ruins those intricate health communication networks that contribute to building up local communities. These networks and their symbolic forms are substituted with modern doctors and their paraphernalia. Modern health professionals appear 'scientifically' invested with the authority to divest local agencies such as traditional midwives or experts in herbal medicines, of locally recognized ancestral rights and competence to properly attend birth or treat common diseases. Accumulation and abuse of power in single hands

destroy bonds of collective self-reliance and symbolic relational set-ups.

The first two write-ups in the subsection 'Between Yesterday and Today' display modes of self-reliance by two different local communities, by inventing indigenous health care practices to face the constraints of their own environment, and devising the means to circulate them orally within the community. Chapter 11 'The Slum Dwellers of Chennai: Indigenous Health Practices' by S.A. Samy deals with urban proletarian communities in a modern context of deprivation. Chapter 12, 'The Vaidu: Traditional Practices and Social Status' by Chandrakant Kokate, deals with a community of traditional healers in rural Maharashtra. Both studies testify to the inventiveness of common people meeting the challenge of their environment through acute observation and with bare hands. The spirit of self-reliance cannot be dissociated from the texture of human relations, which are as much created by these practices as well as being dependent upon them for their effectiveness. When human beings first confronted the failure of nature or, when nowadays face man-made adversity, it is simultaneously as know-how and a social link. Communication and culture stand abreast.

Last but not the least, the possibly most striking observation is suggested by the attempt made by a group of young educated Vaidu practitioners of 'unscientific' medicine to seek a social and economic recognition—by handing over their knowledge to the cosmopolitan medical system and claiming in return their share of medical power. The validation of a traditional health system which got and still gets, its credentials from its own efficacy attested by the confidence of rural population is begging recognition through a certificate of validity to be delivered by modern 'scientific' institutions, co-opting their knowledge into their system on equal footing. This attitude is logically homologous to that of the first nationalist thinkers presented in Chapter 1. They were already claiming legitimacy for their traditions, including medical traditions on the strength and supreme authority of modern science.

With the Vaidus' expectation of inclusion in the prevalent relations of health, we come across two logical communicational processes that we have already pointed out. First, instead of a dichotomic opposition of tradition and modernity, we have the

mixed idiom of a negotiation heading towards a compromise. Second, instead of an unambiguous reappropriation of one's heritage, on one's own terms of firm and autonomous assertion, we have a wish of co-optation within the dominant system. This process is fraught with the danger of eventually losing sight of one's specificity, unless the will to be accommodated is to be seen as the effect of a loss of identity already accomplished. Inclusive assertion may then figure as a form of delayed surrender. This is the process that the movement of self-empowerment of traditional birth-attendants may still consciously set upon to avoid.

The three elaborate studies of the second subsection 'Inheritance of Knowledge' deal with the immense and ancestral heritage of traditional midwives in India. They intend to identify a mode of appropriation of one's heritage of symbolic forms and social communication which keeps clear from the pitfalls of inclusive assertion while resolutely refusing to be washed up, subdued, marginalized or sidetracked. Their claim is for a third alternative of interactive communication, based on a realistic and critical owning of one's inheritance. This model totally departs from either negotiated compromise or imaginary let alone ideological 'invention' and reiteration of the past against challenging novelties.

In Chapter 13, 'Birth Attendants: Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea,' Bernard and Andréine Bel present a cross-cultural survey of attitudes towards child delivery and the role of birth attendants, setting the broad horizon in which the two subsequent case studies stand out in relief. Midwifery, as a profession, has been reconstructed in the urban-industrial world, often coping with, and occasionally restraining the interference of medical procedures in the natural process of birth. Today the definition of the social status and protocols of birth attendants calls for an in-depth investigation of cultural and socio-economic values at stake, for which responses in the industrialized world are far from being identical, ranging from assimilation to various types of confrontation with the dominant medical system.

The first essay on midwifery in rural India, Chapter 14, 'Popular Culture and Childbirth: Perceptions and Practices in Rural Rajasthan' by Tulsi Patel brings a wealth of accurate observations in comparison with hospital deliveries and with reference to the context of social, cultural and economic issues. The second essay, Chapter 15, 'Traditional Midwives on the Move in

Maharashtra' by Hema Rairkar addresses the same topic, though in a different perspective. The context and the method are those of a programme of social intervention for the valorization and revitalization of rural midwifery in a hilly area of Western India.

Most NGOs attempt to reform traditional midwifery, aiming either at instilling the basics of modern obstetrics care or at accommodating it with the ideology of 'natural childbirth' imported from affluent countries. The intervention advocated by Rairkar's paper does not aim at strengthening the 'market prospect' of professional birth-attendants by creating a midwife-patient relationship in which the former is invested with a professional legitimacy to control birth. There is a misgiving in granting midwives with a 'birthing power', as if it were not biological evidence that this 'power' belongs to all women. The tragedy is that it has been long appropriated by medical practitioners for the sake of controlling women's sexuality and reproductive system.

The focus therefore ought to be on collective self-reliance rather than empowerment of individuals. The attempt is to promote a form of self-assertion of delivering women and their attendants within the whole context of community life and human relations. Here, the individual finds its strength and foundation in the bonds and links which s/he belongs in, and which are thus internal to its own growth. In Rairkar's paper, these collective bonds appear essential to the process of women's assertion and social integration in Third World societies.

This very significantly contrasts with the foundations of Western bioethics, that is, notions of 'autonomy, rationality and rights' as advocated by western liberal ideologies.

This notion of autonomy in bioethics carries with it a corresponding understanding of culture and society as an external environment of use values, epiphenomena as it were, ontologically and morally secondary to the rational individual. (Jennings 1998: 258)

The assessment of the age-long tradition of self-reliant village midwives in remote areas and among 'backward' populations in India reveals more than its undeniable practical validity—to which Mauss (1960: 376) was among the first to draw the attention of scholars seventy years ago (Mauss 1936). It mainly establishes

and defines its universal anthropological relevance. The latter habituates traditional birthing to act as a potent critique of the human loss which goes with some unwarranted claims, and obvious dead ends of modern medical power in respect of midwifery. This is vividly brought home in both the case studies which expose the contempt mechanisms and the commercial use and abuse to which modern practitioners submit traditional midwives in India, with an increasing damaging success.

It is particularly relevant to explore, in a perspective of action-research, strategies aiming at disempowering those agencies, which, under cover of science and technology, tend to reduce human subjects to mere objects of their machinery. In this regard, while highlighting the importance of birthing as a shared labour, the essays point in many ways to the communicative set-ups which, in the family and village, make birthing a community issue. The midwife appears as a connecting link between several networks of human rapports, a significant human knot, as it were, which holds together the members of a local collective. This status should definitely prove a strategic keystone of birth-attendance policies based on midwives instead of professional medical doctors.

Another strong case is made out against modern broken epistemological mappings, that of the integrative structural characteristic of traditional systems of creation and transmission of knowledge. For sure, these essays bring us back to a sane and safe scientific principle, which modern medical knowledge would be well advised to abide by, and thus regain scientific as well as human credentials.

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**3.1**

*Between*  
*Yesterday*  
*and Today*

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# 11

## THE SLUM DWELLERS OF CHENNAI: Indigenous Health Practices

S.A. SAMY

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### Objectives and methodology

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It was my long cherished desire to study the cultural life of the slum<sup>1</sup> dwellers of Chennai. Many socio-economic and political studies of slum people have been carried out by in various circumstances, but I doubt very much whether a profound and complete study on the customs, habits, beliefs, arts, etc. has ever been done. Such a preliminary study might enable me later to take up full-fledged research on the cultural life of the slum dwellers.

Slum dwellers are often treated as untouchables or as uncultured people by the other sections of the urban population. The reason for this attitude may be due to many social factors, like the caste system. Like elsewhere in India, the caste system is very much prevalent in Tamil Nadu. The majority of the slum population includes Dalits and other backward castes. It is important to note that a particular version of Tamil in the city is still considered as slum Tamil. The 'Khana songs' sung by the slum dwellers during their household functions have gained entry into Tamil cinema and have hit the records of cassette companies. Hence it is not true that they do not have a culture.<sup>2</sup> As collective members of the slum they have their own elements that constitute their culture. It may be expressed in their way of dressing or in

the language they speak, or in any other form that contradicts the popular version of city people. The economic plans for the development of slums should also consider the need of cultural pride of the slum people for their wholesome development.

The objectives of this study were:

- 1) To find out whether the slum dwellers have any indigenous health practices to treat their common ailments.
- 2) To find out if they have invented any new methods of health practices out of their environment and their dwelling conditions or out of their slum character.

The nature and scope of this study is limited to the enquiry level in a particular slum in Chennai in order to find out whether the residents have some indigenous health practices or not. The next step is to look into the practices among the slum dwellers that result from their occupational and living patterns. The third level of this study is to interrelate the health practices and common factors that qualify the indigenous nature of these practices.

The methodology adopted involved interviewing the slum dwellers. Thirty families were directly interviewed by me in an informal manner, often probing in nature, to elicit answers. Sometimes they could not apprehend my questions. The major handicap of this method was that the interviewees could not recall their practices at one time, and therefore could not provide all details.

## The Slum

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### The Name

Chennai has 1,700 slums that together constitute 21 lakhs of slum people in the city. The particular slum where this study was based was the Tank Bund Road slum and it is known as Kulakarai slum in Tamil.

### The Location

The slum dwellers of Tank Bund Road live in the southern side of Loyola College. The total population of this area is 659,

including 241 children. The dominant family size is between four and six members (77 out of 131 families).

Among the adults (15 years and above) 163 are illiterate—71 males, 92 females. It is encouraging to note that 98 adults have had high school education. There are about 139 school going children and 102 non-school going children.

Construction work is the major occupation of the people with 74 (M 69, F 5) members involved in it. The dominant female labour force is the maid servant (63). The total workforce is 249 (M 165, F 84). The mode of travel to the work spot is mainly on foot.

Regarding the number of earners in a family, single-earner families are about 50% (58 out of 131); their monthly income is between Rs 401 and 500 per month. It should be pointed out that more than 10% of the families have a monthly income of above Rs 1,000. Adidravidars constitute 60% of the total population.

## Diseases and Treatments

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### Clarification of Diseases

The slum dwellers have their own names for diseases that do not always correspond with allopathic names. For the ones that have allopathic equivalents, the allopathic names are used.

The most widespread diseases among the slum dwellers are elephantiasis, cholera, dysentery and malaria. But these diseases are invariably treated in hospitals. Based upon their health practices, I have classified common diseases into six categories. For the sake of convenience I have included pregnancy though it does not fall under the category of diseases.

### Causes for Diseases and their Treatments

The surveyed diseases may have many causes for their occurrence in slums. But the causes are specific when they are restricted to the environment, occupational patterns, sanitation, malnutrition and poor living conditions of the slum dwellers alone. The latter themselves are also aware of it. This study does not propose to find out the causes of the surveyed diseases.

## Diseases and Treatment Practices as Mentioned by the Interviewees

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### 1. Headache

- Applying a paste made out of the mixture of chillies and onions on the forehead;
- Applying kerosene on the forehead;
- Applying a hot juice made out of garlic camphor mixed with coconut oil on the forehead;
- Heating three small pieces of brick on the fire and putting them in hot water along with eucalyptus leaves or *nochi* leaves (*vitex negundo*, five-leaved chest tree), and inhaling the steam after covering the patient with a blanket;
- Applying the juice of raw garlic on the forehead.

No. of Families Practising This Method of Treatment

| Applying garlic juice or camphor with coconut | Brick and eucalyptus steam | Kerosene | Other | Total |
|---|----------------------------|----------|-------|-------|
| 4   | 7                          | 4        | 15    | 30    |

### 2. Fever with Cold, Cough and Throat infection

- Mixing the *kuppaimeni* leaves (*acalypha indica*) and *nocchi* leaves and drinking the juice;
- Grinding the leaves of horse radish tree, mixing the lime mortar and applying it on the throat;
- Applying the paste made out of *kuppaimeni* leaves on the throat;
- The *khashayam* concoction<sup>3</sup> made out of garlic, pepper, dried ginger and mustard is consumed. Proportions of the mixture may vary from family to family, but the formula and components do not change.

| Drinking <i>Khashayam</i> | Horse radish tree and lime mortar | <i>Kuppaimeni</i> leaves | Others | Total |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|--------|-------|
| 5                         | 15                                | 1                        | 9      | 30    |

### 3. Gastric Trouble (Stomach)

- Making a dish (curry) out of the bark of the horse radish tree, asafoetida, dried ginger, garlic, pepper, and dried fish and taking it along with cooked rice;
- Eating raw garlic;
- Dried ginger and pepper *khasayam*;
- Drinking the water mixed with the powder of dried ginger and pepper;
- Keeping a ten paise coin on the spot of the body where there is pain, and burning the camphor on the coin. After two seconds, cover the coin with a tumbler placed upside down. The tumbler is removed from the body only when the pain is relieved. It may take three to twelve hours to remove the tumbler. It cannot be removed till the gas is released from the particular spot.

| Drinking <i>Khasayam</i> | Eating raw garlic | Burning camphor | Other | Total |
|--------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------|-------|
| 13                       | 3                 | 3               | 11    | 30    |

### 4. Dysentery

- Giving the juice made out of the horse radish tree leaves along with the seeds of dried chillies;
- Drinking buttermilk along with rice;
- Drinking the water mixed with sugar or salt

| Buttermilk drink | Juice of horse radish leaves | Water with sugar or salt | Other | Total |
|------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|-------|-------|
| 1                | 1                            | 4                        | 24    | 30    |

### 5. Wounds (cuts caused by knife or other objects)

- Dried chillies are fried in oil and kept over the wounds;
- A piece of cloth is burnt and the ashes are mixed with lime mortar and pasted on the cut;
- Cobweb is mixed with lime mortar and coconut oil and is kept over the wound;
- Talcum powder is mixed with coconut oil and kept over the cut;
- Applying lime mortar;
- Applying the snuff.



6. *Prolonged Wounds*

- Applying coconut oil

| Burnt cloth and ashes | Cobweb mixture | Paste of lime mortar | Coconut oil | Other | Total |
|-----------------------|----------------|----------------------|-------------|-------|-------|
| 1                     | 5              | 6                    | 1           | 8     | 30    |

7. *Pregnancy (Hour of delivery)*

When the labour pain comes, the juice of horse radish tree leaves mixed with salt is given to the woman. After consuming this drink the pain may increase. If the pain does not increase, it is diagnosed that the hour of delivery has not yet come. If the pain increases, they rush the patient to the maternity hospital.

8. *Pregnancy (After delivery)*

A medicine known as *chelavoo marunthu* or *kayamarunthu*, is sold in grocery shops. The slum dwellers buy this medicine and make a curry by adding vegetables or mutton to it, and feed it to the new mother. This *kayamarunthu* consists of herbs and various barks of medical trees, etc. They say that it increases the strength of the hip and also cures the wounds of vagina and womb.

| Horse radish tree leave juice before delivery | Other | <i>Kayamarunthu</i> after delivery | Other | Total |
|---|-------|------------------------------------|-------|-------|
| 18  | 12    | 22                                 | 8     | 30    |

## Distribution of Family Size

| No. of persons | No. of families |
|----------------|-----------------|
| 1 to 3         | 7               |
| 4 to 6         | 18              |
| 4 to 9         | 5               |
| Total          | 30              |

## Distribution of Interviewees by Age and Gender

| Age 20–25 |   | Age 25–40 |    | Above 40 |    |
|-----------|---|-----------|----|----------|----|
| M         | F | M         | F  | M        | F  |
| 0         | 8 | 0         | 13 | 1        | 8  |
| Total     |   |           |    |          | 30 |

Distribution of Families by Occupation

| Type of occupation       | No. of males | No. of females | Total |
|--------------------------|--------------|----------------|-------|
| Construction workers     | 8            |                | 8     |
| Servant maids            |              | 3              | 3     |
| Vendors                  | 3            |                | 3     |
| Tailors                  | 1            |                | 1     |
| Carpenters               | 1            |                | 1     |
| Cobblers                 | 1            |                | 1     |
| Painters                 | 3            |                | 3     |
| Scavenger                | 1            |                | 1     |
| Drivers (rickshaw, auto) | 4            |                | 4     |
| Others                   | 5            |                | 5     |
| Total                    | 27           | 3              | 30    |

The term 'indigenous' medicine is used in the context of

1. Local knowledge
2. Local maintenance
3. Local implementation
4. Local supplies
5. Local administration
6. Medicines easily accessible to the slum dwellers
7. Resources cheaply available
8. Use of traditional knowledge
9. Consistency with local cultural values
10. The local world view
11. Production for local consumption
12. Benefits that go to the local people
13. Nil taxation

'Indigenous' can also mean whatever medical practices that are born in the slums. Some of the practices that are dominant among them can be related to their occupational patterns.

Consider for instance the practice of heating three bricks on the fire and putting them in hot water along with eucalyptus leaves or *nocchi* leaves and inhaling the steam in case of headache and cold. Though they are unable to trace the origin of this practice, I assume that it is the result of their occupational pattern. The survey of their occupation reveals that majority of them are construction workers and the use of bricks in their work is unavoidable. Hence, this practice probably emerged from their

occupational character. This practice might seem very peculiar to those who use the same method of inhaling the steam of eucalyptus leaves but do not add the bricks. The reason they give for adding the bricks is that the heated bricks make the water hotter. It is clear that the bricks do not have any medicinal value but are used as an extra element in the process of healing.

The easy accessibility to the resources for treatment practices is related to their living conditions. Their earning pattern shows that most of the families are earning below Rs 200 per month. The allopathic treatment in the hospital may not be feasible for those who earn below the marginal line of survival. But a treatment that is derived out of a resource which is easily available is possible for them.

As an example, the use of horse radish tree leaves is almost unavoidable in most of the treatment practices. For sixteen families out of the thirty surveyed, it is the only green plant that is dominantly found in the slums. Apart from their medicinal use, the tree leaves and drumsticks are often used in their meals.

## Conclusion

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The survey reveals that in matters of some health practices the slum dwellers of Chennai are self-sufficient enough to cure their common diseases without waiting for external expertise. These rural practices may have been carried out for generations in their families since many of them are migrants from rural areas. In a way, they are lost people in an alien situation, caught up in their attraction to the popular version of urban life. It is, perhaps, out of poverty and deprivation that they are forced to carry out these health practices, or perhaps they do not trust the allopathic system. Whatever it may be, they are able to continue their tradition in the given environment.

## Notes

1. The Socio-Economic Survey of Madras Slums (1971) defined *slums* as 'hutting areas with huts erected in a haphazard manner without

proper access, without protected water supply and drainage arrangements and so congested as to allow little free flow of air to get in.'

2. The word *culture* is used here to denote the 'ideological system' consisting of physical, intellectual and emotional aspects that give meaning either to evaluate or to keep the status quo.
3. A hot drink made from herbs and other ingredients.

# 12

## THE VAIDU: Traditional Practices and Social Status

CHANDRAKANT KOKATE

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### Acquaintance with the Vaidus

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In earlier days, nomadic people would go from village to village and shout: 'If anybody is sick, we are here to give medicines, *jadībūṭī!*'<sup>1</sup> Hearing their shouts, people would say: 'Vaidya has come!' The word 'Vaidya' was later distorted into 'Vaidu', which became their common name. They call themselves *Mañloḍ*, a Telugu word meaning 'those who give traditional medicines.' Now they shout and say that they would also repair tins, trunks, sieves, etc. Women Vaidus are found moving around villages, carrying herbal medicines needed by women, as also thread, needles, combs, cutlery and the like. In return, they would get bread or grain. Earlier, people used to wait for Vaidus to come and pitch their tents in the grazing land near the village. They would immediately inform them as to who is ill in the village, and bring them to their homes. 'Previously, some people used to bring Vaidus on horseback, and keep them in the village for two-three days. The Vaidu would treat the patient. In return, people used to give them food,' says Janu Shinde, from Shrirampur. This was the tradition.

Vaidus are said to be originally from Hyderabad, the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh. They are believed to be so because of

their language, Telugu. But Kashinath Mhaisappa says that they came to Andhra from Madras, and from there moved to Maharashtra. As they wander from village to village, Vaidus are registered as 'wandering tribes'. Having wandering through Maharashtra for years, they also use certain Marathi words, though with a peculiar intonation. Telugu as a language is particularly useful when they do not want to let others know about their family or personal life, or share knowledge about medicines. They are never heard speaking Marathi among themselves. They have preserved their language despite their regular contact with Marathi-speaking people and in their dealings with them in day to day life.

My first contact with this nomadic community took place when I was going around in the taluka of Shrirampur (district Ahmednagar) to collect grind mill songs from local peasant communities. I found Vaidus in the riverbed at Devpur, in Dhule district. They had come from Khambala (taluka Hingoni, district Parbhani). They had pitched tents supported by *besarama* sticks with sack-cloth stitched as its roof. Another tent was made of tarpaulin, tightly tied to a bamboo support with a cord. Each one of them had fixed wooden blocks in the soil, at a distance of two feet between two blocks and five feet away from the tent: pieces of wild cat meat were kept to dry on them. To the east of these tents was a hearth made of three stones on which meat was kept in a pan to cook. *Bhākrīs* (millet pancakes) were being prepared in a tray. The moment the pan was removed from the hearth, the iron plate *tawa*, commonly used for making *bhākrīs*, was placed on the fire. Their belongings consisted of two pans, one *tawa*, one pot for water, a glass, and one trunk. In a bag they carried cutlery, medicinal herbs, etc., and in the trunk were tools for making tins, sieves, etc. One person had three dogs as well as one cage for hunting; he told me that one could catch a porcupine with that cage. This in all made up for their baggage. They said that they had concrete houses in their village but were compelled to wander to earn their bread.

My first real visit to them was in the Vaidu hamlet, Vaiduvadi, of Gondhavani. Since this hamlet is located near Shrirampur, the houses were built in concrete by *Bhairavnath Sahakari Grihanirman Sanstha Ltd.* Four to five dogs were tied in a covered verandah in front of a house. Inside the house, tins were lying all around; in a tin trunk were kept tools needed for making tin boxes, sieves,

tin covers, etc. There was a cot and an aluminium sheet against the wall, a TV set on a wooden table in one corner, and in another corner, the typical bag stitched like a quilt that one finds in every Vaidu's house. In this bag were kept goods that women bring to sell: threads, needles, beads, combs, as well as some herbal medicines (like bibba, murudsheng, etc.). Some logs of wood were lying outside. There was a hearth inside the house. Some logs of wood were also lying near the hearth. On one plank in the same kitchen, there were three to four steel plates and glasses, and on the other, two-three aluminium boxes. About 80% of the households had a small black and white TV and a radio for entertainment.

According to a rough estimate, about 1,700 families and approximately 11,500 population are scattered in the talukas of Shrirampur, Sangamner, Rahuri, Nevasa, Pathardi, Jamkhed, Akole, Parner, and Kopergao in Ahmednagar district, and Sinner taluka in Nashik district. My report is an account of their traditional practices.

When I began visiting them, some people wondered and tried to discourage me: 'They are dirty people, vile; they know nothing. They will just pick up a quarrel with you. What information can they give you? Do not be obsessed with them. Don't be a fool!' Many people consider Vaidus as thieves who just roam about to find something to steal, and live in filth.

Initially, nobody from the Vaidu community was ready to give me information of any kind. I started to develop contact by visiting them twice a week. These visits resulted in friendly relationships with a few Vaidus. They then began to trust me. It is because of this confidence that I could collect various information regarding their medical knowledge and practices.

## The Knowledge of *Jadībūṭī*

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### An Exclusive Community Heritage

Living in the proximity of nature, right from the beginning, led the Vaidus to acquire knowledge about herbs—which would be useful for which disease or illness. Their knowledge of medicines is

hereditary. It descends from father to son or from a knowledgeable individual to an emulator. They take their son or disciple along while going to collect medicinal herbs. After gathering the herbs, they tell their son/ disciple how to prepare the medicine, the exact proportions in which what ingredients should be mixed. They tell them to observe the experiment and then learn to do it by themselves. All this is revealed secretly and only when they are alone together.

Vaidus are conscious that their knowledge of herbs traces back right to the days of the *Ramayan*. Shebrao Vaidu from Pathardi gives a 'historical reference' as ground to this conviction: In the battle between Rama and Ravana, Lakshman was wounded with an arrow. Rama then asked Maruti to fetch the *Sanjivani* herb from a mountain. Maruti could not recognize the herb and so he brought along the whole mountain. At that time, one Vaidu recognized the *Sanjivani* herb. The Vaidus, therefore have knowledge of herbal medicine since that time.

Each medicinal herb has its peculiar characteristic. For example, for a person bitten by a mad dog, the roots of three different trees have to be mixed and the person is asked to drink their juice, says Suresh Shinde (Shrirampur). Once somebody hands over his knowledge to another person in whom he has confidence, he abandons his right over it. If the same person, who has already parted with his knowledge, gives again a medicine to someone, it will not have any effect. For the medicine to be effective, it has to be taken only as per the prescription of the person who has received it and is entitled to administer it. All these reasons explain how the knowledge of the Vaidus is passed on from one generation to another generation only through practice.

## Rituals to be Performed Prior to Collection

Only men go to collect the herbs. Even a woman's shadow is not allowed to fall on the medicinal herbs. Every year, the Vaidus go to collect herbs during the lunar mansion called *uttarā nakṣatra*.<sup>2</sup> During this period, the plants have grown just about right to be used as medicines. Men go out on the first day of the *nakṣatra*. Before setting off, they take a bath and go to the temple of Maruti to take his *darśan*. Then they take the names of the medicinal



plants that they seek and pray that they are able to find them all. They also pray that instead of having to wander on several mountains, they may be able to find them on one mountain. Then they proceed on their journey. When they find the plant, they first take the name of the god, and then pluck it. Early in the morning on the first day, they take care that nobody sneezes. Because if anybody sneezes, the work does not get done; they will not find the plant, says Sahebrao Vaidu (Pathardi).

There is an insect called *rājkiḍā*, which, it is said, if eaten cures all the diseases and illnesses in the body. They catch hold of this insect after performing a *puja* to the goddess Ambabai. They perform the ritual after searching for an ant-hill in the forest.

They offer *haḷad-kumkū* to it, take its *darśan*, and start digging around in a circle. Sometimes a cobra comes out of it, and sometimes a *rājkiḍā*. The cobra goes away with the chime of bells. At the place where one finds this cobra or a *rājkiḍā*, one makes a hood of the cobra with mud. The circle in the earth around the ant-hill is plastered with cowdung. The *darśan* is taken after offering *haḷad-kumkū* to the ditch, says Ramabhau Sherkul (Solapur).

Another insect is found on a jujube-tree (*Zislyphus Jujuba*) inside a cotton like cover. When the cover is cut, the live insect comes out. A dead insect is poisonous and is thrown away. The live insect is boiled in cooking oil and a decoction made. The insect is then thrown away. This is the Ghosala insect. Like the *rājkiḍā*, it is useful for all diseases. When this insect is found, a *pujā* is performed after breaking a coconut and only then it is taken, says Janu Govind Shinde (Shrirampur).

Some herbs are obtained by performing a *pujā* to Mother Nature in this same manner. Also, if one comes across a temple of Maruti or Mhasoba while looking for medicinal plants, one proceeds only after taking a *darśan*.

## Places of Collection

These medicinal plants are generally found in the forest, in valleys, and in mountains. The Vaidus generally do not tell others where a particular plant would be found. They have mainly two types of medicines: 1) plant-based and 2) animal-based. The main

places where both types are found in Maharashtra include Chaturshringi hill, Vani mountain, Madhi hill, Kalsubai mountain in Bhandardara, Bhimashankar, Mahabaleshwar and Konkanbar (Sahebrao Vaidu, Pathardi). As all the plants are not found on one mountain, the Vaidus have to wander through different mountains to collect them.

Wild animals are also present in such forests when they go and search for medicinal plants. Vaidus would hunt them for their food as well as for medicinal requirements. For example: tiger's nails, tiger's meat, skin and head of the fox, porcupine thorns, oil of the wild pig and iguana (*ghorpad*), tortoise shell, sea-shells, ivory, hair of the mongoose, etc. have medical values, says Maruti Shinde (Rahuri).

## Collection and Preservation

A big bag is made and taken along to collect medicinal plants. This big bag also contains some small bags. It is hung on a four-to-five feet long stick, carried on the shoulder. Medicinal plants are collected either through plucking, digging (to extract roots), or by removing the bark from a tree. They are then stored in the bag.

The Vaidus carry in the bag a curved instrument (resembling a large sickle) for plucking plants, and a pointed iron instrument with a wooden handle (resembling a spear with a sharp iron point) for digging the earth. They remove the bark with the curved instrument and dig out the roots with the pointed one. They do not cut all the roots of the same tree. They dry the gathered plants, some in the sun and some in the shade; tie them up in different bags, and then keep them in one corner. They take care that the medicinal plants do not get mixed. Some medicinal plants have to be used while they are still fresh and as such cannot be stored, adds Maruti Shinde (Shrirampur).

## Preparation of the Medicine

While preparing the medicines, the Vaidus take great care so that no one comes to know how to do so the preparation.

They dry all the medicinal plants collected—herbs, fruits, bulbs and roots, barks—and grind, crush, rub them to make a fine powder. Barks of some trees are burnt to make a powder. Some roots, barks, leaves are boiled with water in a pan to make a decoction. Only one person from the Vaidu's family has the skill to prepare the medicine. That person prepares the medicine and fills it in bags or bottles or in pieces of paper. The quantity of medicine to be prepared is already decided, and they do not make the whole quantity at the same time. They prepare it in small measures at a time. From its colour, smell and taste, they recognise which medicine is useful for what purpose.

Medicine is also prepared from the meat, skin, horn, head, thorns, tooth, etc. of animals. For example: a quantity of tiger's meat is dried and kept, a cap is made from a fox's skin, porcupine thorns are burnt to make a powder, some animal fat is heated to extract oil. All medicines are stored in a variety of bags and bottles.

## Treating Patients

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### In Search of Patients

Before going to see a sick person, Vaidus prepare all types of medicines and carry them in their bags. Along with their bags and small paper packets, they also carry *bībbā* (marking nut-clay, Pterocarpus Narsupium), strings, *śendūr* (red lead), blue vitriol (*morchud*) and sulphur, says Bapu Lokhande (Ashoknagar). They also carry five or six small *tūṁbaḍī* (long brass pipes resembling the shape of a small smoking pipe or carrot) for performing small operations, a sharp razor (a blade with a small sharp point), and cotton wool. Some also have shells from the river and leeches to suck impure blood.

The Vaidus go around shouting, with their bags hanging on long sticks that they carry on their shoulders. They spell out loud the name of the diseases and then shout 'Medicine!' For instance, they shout, 'For women, for paralysis, for spleen, for asthma—Medicine!' 'For piles, for eyes, for ears—Medicine!' 'For rheumatism, for stomachache—Medicine!' 'For women, for excess bleeding, for ovaries—Medicine!'

## Examination of the Patient and Diagnosis

When they hear them shout, everybody in the village comes to know that the Vaidu has come. People call him inside their homes, and show him the patient. The Vaidu examines him/her. He diagnoses the illness in a manner as follows.

He takes the wrist of the patient in his hand and takes the pulse count. He comes to know whether the blood is rushing fast or running slow from the speed of the pulse. He presses and feels the stomach. He touches the patient to see if he has fever.

Vaidus look also at the skin diseases to know which medicinal plant has to be given. For example, in cases of itching, ringworm, *isabgol*, piles, says Bapu Dhasarjogi (Nipani). They also examine the mouth, tongue and eyes. Some Vaidus also test the blood, says Maruti Shinde (Gondhavani). They have the belief that blood becomes black with weakness.

## Cure for Diseases

Once they have diagnosed the illness of the patient, they decide which herb to give. If the herb has a bitter taste, they ask to mix it with jaggery and then give it to the patient. For small children, they tell people to give the herbs mixed with milk. They give medicines in different forms, like ash, powder, oil. Some Vaidus know how to fix a fractured hand or leg by rubbing it in a particular way. For sprains, they ask to apply a layer of a special powder, says Maruti Shinde, (Rahuri).

Some Vaidu women are experts in attending deliveries. They do the work of a midwife. If the delivery of some woman is found to be difficult, they tuck the stem of a particular plant in her hair or place it on her stomach. However difficult the delivery may be, the patient is sure to have a natural delivery, confirms Jaibai Piraji Shinde.

## Operation

Vaidus may perform small operations to cure certain illnesses. They have a special skill for doing such operations as, for example, (1) removing the spleen, (2) removing piles, (3) removing

*lasur*, (4) removing *avala*, (5) removing abscess, (6) removing corns. For all operations, they make a small cut with a razor and remove all the dirt by applying *tūmbaḍī*. After opening the wound and cleaning it, the big end of the *tūmbaḍī* is pressed hard on the wound and all air removed through its small end. So all the dirt, puss, impure blood from the wound comes into the *tūmbaḍī*. They apply this *tūmbaḍī* twice or thrice.

My friend, Naganath Chavan, had some stomach infection and could not take any food. Even after spending three to four thousand rupees for a treatment which continued for over a period of three years, the doctors could not make a diagnosis. The X-rays showed nothing. My friend had become very weak. One day, a Vaidu came to the door of his house: they told him everything. The Vaidu applied the *tūmbaḍī* five or six times, and gave him a herb to eat on an empty stomach. Within eight days, Naganath Chavan found great and complete relief.

## Ways of Prescribing Medicine and Diet

The Vaidu sees to it that the herbal medicines are not wasted while treating patients, as they have been collected with great effort. To ensure that the right quantity of medicine is taken, the Vaidu gives the patient the medicine in tablet form, or asks him/her to use a shell from the river as a spoon, indicating the right size of the shell, explains Bapu Lokhande (Ashoknagar). While giving the medicine, the Vaidu informs the patient that 'The herbs had to be brought from a great distance, they are rare and no more easily available.'

The Vaidu's medicines are mostly given on an empty stomach (immediately after emptying the bowels early morning). They ask the patient to take certain medicines a spoonful in the morning, afternoon, and at night. Patients are also told to observe different diets for different medicines. For example, for piles, the patient should not eat meat, fish, chicken, brinjal, *val* (a sort of peas), *gawar* (a kind of a bean), *bajari* (pancakes of millet). If a cap made from fox skin is worn at night when one sleeps, the headache stops.

Rajaram Shinde (Pathardi) says that 'Nobody ever died after taking medicine from us, but these doctors kill a lot of people.'

## With Due Respect to *Jadībūṭī*

The Vaidus look at *jadībūṭī* as a means of livelihood and a means to accumulate merit. 'Because we give medicine to people, God sees to it that we have sufficient food to eat.' A Vaidu cannot exist without *jadībūṭī*. That is why they break a coconut and perform a *pujā* to the plants on the ground or as soon as they enter the fields. A Vaidu never uproots a plant. If he wants a root, he slowly digs around the plant and takes out only two or three roots. If he wants a bark, he takes it only from one side. If the whole bark is taken, the tree dies. That is why he never takes out the whole bark. He never plucks from the top of a tree. He always prays to God so that all the plants would grow on one mountain where they can find them. They say, 'May we find the medicinal plants on the same mountain!'

## The Vaidu and Local Communities

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Earlier, when the Vaidus used to go around the village shouting 'Medicine!' they would ask for *bhākrī* (pancake of millet) as a right, from every household. And people would call them inside and serve them meals. People believed that the Vaidus come to them only to cure the sick in the village. As they come for their good, it is therefore their duty to give them food, says Maruti Shinde (Shrirampur).

The Vaidus had a direct access to people's houses. There was, at that time, a relationship of affection between them and the people that they treated with medicines. They gave them lovingly, with a human touch, and the people would also receive it in the same spirit. 'For instance, when we were applying *tūmbaḍī* to the anus,' says Durgasheth Shivaral of Solapur, 'we used to apply *tūmbaḍī* to piles and remove them.' The Vaidu used to go to see the patient until he got well. He would pursue the treatment and give courage to the patient.

Besides the village people, the Vaidus had close relations (as among family members) with the people belonging to those communities whose means of living was a donkey, those calling themselves the 'donkey family', *gādhav gota*, says Kashinath

Shinde (Rahata). Sayabu Gurappa Vaidu (Vaiduvadi, Satara) remembers the myth which gives a ground to this fraternity:

Once upon a time, when there was no land but only water on the earth, Jamarishi was the first man who lived here. He made a cradle out of the rush-like grass for him to live on water.... Seven drops of God Ibhishta's urine fell on Goddess Anjana and she gave birth to seven sons. A cradle of palm leaves was made for all these seven sons. Jamarishi looked after all the seven sons. These seven sons are: Vaidu, Kolhati, Vadar, Kaikadi, Dhanagar, Brahman and Mahar. This illustrates how the Vaidu community was created.

The Vaidu women would tell the village women that they will have a son, as strong as a wolf, and would give them a little medicine. They had medicines for abortion too. They also worked as midwives. They would exchange needles, combs, a string of black beads, *bībbā* for a *bhākrī* and eat it. Sometimes people used to give grains. People in the village never thought that they were giving alms. The villagers did not benefit from the other tribes as they did when the Vaidus pitched their tents. So when the Vaidus came visiting, people would feel happy. For sure, the people of the villages had great faith in the Vaidus.

## Medical Power and Occupational Challenges

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Nowadays, though they appear to have settled down, the Vaidus from Ahmednagar district on the whole have not done so in the true sense of the word: both men and women are away from home, and keep roaming from place to place with their medicines. Some of them roam around in Mumbai to give medicines, while others wander in other districts for the same purpose. Those who make tins, sieves, lids, trunks, also move from place to place. The women go around in Mumbai as well as in villages to sell cutlery. This wandering seriously affects children's education: from a population of 10,000 Vaidus in Ahmednagar district in March 1998, only ten to twelve boys had graduated, while not a single girl had studied beyond class VII. One, moreover, gets a feeling of

tremendous uncleanliness in Vaidu homes, be it a tent or a concrete house.

The Vaidus' medicinal tradition is a very old one, and even though country people have respect for Vaidus, today they do not resort to them very often. And it is mostly out of expediency. When doctors become helpless and prove unable to find an effective treatment, then people approach the Vaidus. The number of such people remains very small. Malu Shinde, from taluka Shirampur, district Ahmednagar, said,

Still, there are a few people who come to us for treatment as they have not been cured in spite of the treatment taken from a doctor, even though they have gone upto Mumbai for this. Then they turn to god-men (mantriks) but again without success. Finally, they think that there is no harm in trying a Vaidu's treatment. And so, they come to us. They do get cured with our *jadībūṭī* and ash.

In the post-independence era circumstances changed, and the dominant castes did not pay attention to the Vaidus' indigenous knowledge and occupation. The established society does not believe in Vaidus and object to their medicines. As a consequence, Vaidus tend to move away from their traditional occupation. Apart from preferring a doctor's treatment to the Vaidu's medicines, the former bonds of affection between Vaidus and their patients have also disappeared with changing times. There was a feeling of consideration when the Vaidus were giving medicine. The doctor has modern knowledge, but lacks this affection. The Vaidus all the time thought as to how the disease can be cured; they were constantly behind it, visiting the patient on their own. On the other hand, the doctor is interested only in business; it is the patient who has to go to the doctor. While taking treatment from a doctor, some patients even die, simply because they have an allergy to a certain medicine or negligence. A patient treated by a Vaidu does not die of any such reason. Today the Vaidu's medicine is cheap and very effective, but still people go after modern pills, take expensive treatment, and consider Vaidus as a 'mendicant tribe'. Some Vaidu women were expert midwives: 'When doctors want to exploit pregnant women they practice a Caesarean section, while Vaidu women can manage safe natural



deliveries instead,' says Sitabai Shinde (Pathardi). 'Vaidus' *jadībūṭī* medicine was disregarded after Independence,' says Tulshiram Jadhav (Pune), 'and Vaidus as a consequence, were compelled to find some other means of living. Hence, they took up the work of repairing tin boxes and sieves. As a result, the new generation is getting gradually deprived of the traditional *jadībūṭī* knowledge and the Vaidus are slowly forgetting their own knowledge day by day.'

Today, the Vaidu youth naturally tends to shift to farming, which they had adopted after 1950, giving up their traditional occupation with herbal medicines and the repairing of tins boxes and sieves. The testimony of Shamling Shinde from Gondhavani is a typical, though as a success story, a rare example of the kind of recent occupational initiative on the part of a few determined Vaidu youth.

We are also trying to engage ourselves in farming like the Marathi people, because we are ashamed of begging as our occupation requires. Thus we can also live like other people in the world. We have left a life of humiliation and now, we live our own life.... Since I was a child, my relatives treated me very badly. They used to say, 'What is this child going to do? Finally, he will do nothing but beg.' Because my relatives were well off—their business was of making button-holes—I made up my mind that 'I will study and become someone.' I have lived on empty stomach but I completed my education and got a B.Com. degree.

Shamling recognizes the fact that he has benefited from education. He manages a kerosene agency, does farming himself, and together with his brother Ashok, looks after a brick kiln. He says that he has dealings worth lakhs of rupees per month, and all the credit for this goes to grit and education. He has worked in Mula Pravara Electric Society for twenty years. But now, he has resigned from this job and has several other business interests of his own.

However, a few Vaidus who keep giving herbal, plant and root medicines carry letters of recommendation received from the people who have been cured by them, and show them around. Some of them also present a certificate from the Maharashtra Regional Medical Association (*Maharashtra Prantik Vaidya Mandal*), Mumbai, formed as a branch of the All Maharashtra Organization for the Service of Vaidu Society, *Akhil Maharashtra Vaidu Samaj*

*Seva Sanstha* (AMVSSS).<sup>3</sup> The latter was created to represent Vaidus engaged all over Maharashtra in traditional occupations, create awareness among them to fight for their rights, and support initiatives for the overall betterment of the community. The association had till now a fragile existence, with an image of the precarious life of the community and its collective weakness. But today three young men with vision and determination have decided to help their community face the challenges of changing times. They registered the association at Pune in 1999. While the development of science and new research taking place everyday, prompts us to consider and discard as outdated the traditional medicine of roots and herbs, the purpose of the AMVSSS is to work for the educational improvement, economic development and social progress of a non-privileged community, obtaining and circulating information about various government schemes earmarked for the upliftment of nomadic tribes, and avail of their benefits. In this respect, its various objectives resemble those of any other lower caste organization.

But the particular intention of Mohan Pawar (29, education class X), president, Gangaram Dhangar (22, education class IX), treasurer, and Tulshiram Jadhav (38, B.Com. and MLL and LW), secretary, deserve special attention. They wish to upgrade the traditional medical practices with the support of scientific research and modern techniques as to meet modern requirements, without forgetting or denying the relevance of traditional knowledge. The three of them, seconded by friends present with them that day for the interview (Shivaji Jadhav from Pune, and Suresh Shinde from Dhangarwadi), articulate their views as follows, speaking out in the name of a new self-assertive consciousness arising in the Vaidu community.

The Vaidus possess knowledge of *jadībūṭī* and know how to prepare medicines out of them. They moreover know how to make it more effective by preparing it in a particular way. But the Vaidus' method of preparing medicines remains traditional; they use a pestle and mortar or a grinding stone if they have to extract juice from roots, bark, trunk, leaves or flowers as also for preparing *jadībūṭī* ash. Today all these methods are outdated as they require a lot of time, and though these medicines are prepared and kept ready, they do not last long. Hence, the Vaidus want to do research in their *jadībūṭī* tradition and get

scientific recognition for this traditional medicine. They want to establish factories to manufacture their medicines, and obtain due recognition for such factories, as it happened with Ayurvedic medicines. They similarly want their tablets, medicines, oils, etc. to be properly packed and duly recognized. For propagating *jadībūfī*, the Vaidus are going to ask the Government to give them fallow land in mountains and valleys. They will put forth their demands through the AMVSSS.

Now the Government insists on Vaidus showing certificates of graduation to be allowed to submit a demand for a production license of any medicine by modern methods. But Vaidus do not possess any such degrees. They are therefore denied the permission to prepare and sell medicines. While the Food and Drugs Department refuses permission to Vaidus, it gives license to those people who have only degrees and no knowledge. Then those holding a license often resort to modern technology for appropriating the very traditional methods used by Vaidus. This is the way the exploitation of Vaidus continues.

Young Vaidus say that our Vaidu caste should itself be accepted as a degree by the Government and permission granted to us to start factories to prepare medicines. The Vaidu organization is making efforts in this direction. The Vaidus are in reality *Manḍū Loḍ*, that is, 'people who give medicine.' That is why they strongly feel that in their case no such formal degree should be required.

In former times, when abortion was not legally permitted, people used to go take medicines from the Vaidus for abortion. Now that the Government has made abortion legal, people no longer go to the Vaidus. They prefer to go to hospitals for abortion. Thus it is clear that the medical power of the Vaidus is going into the hands of the medical establishment. Formerly, Vaidu women used to go around selling needles, thread, beads, marking nut, drawing *rāṅgoḷī* (decorative motives made with powder on the floor). Women used to make *rāṅgoḷī* at home by breaking and crushing soft white stones into fine powder. But today one has just to empty a sackful of stones at one end in the machine and get a sackful of *rāṅgoḷī* powder at the other end.

In this way, technology results in a loss for us. Today, we cannot sell *rāṅgoḷī* powder because we do not get a price matching the hard work that we have to put in. It is now available at a very cheap price in the market. It is the same case as with our *jadībūfī* medicine. That is why we are going to try and use modern technology.

In former times, we made use of animals like porcupines, monitor lizards, cobras, snakes, wild bulls for medicinal

purposes. Oil is made from monitor lizard and wild bull was a cure for rheumatism. We used to make medicine for skin diseases from the slough of a snake. But today we are even forbidden to catch snakes or animals. So how can we prepare medicine? On the other hand, huge and established capitalist concerns are permitted to make medicine from snakes. For example, vaccine for snakebite is made from snake poison. Then why is this prohibition only for us? We also want to make medicine like these big manufacturers, by using our knowledge of herbal medicine and modern technology. We want to prove that our medicines are more effective than the medicines made by other pharmaceutical companies. But we need to be given a chance, and an opportunity. We are also going to make medicines, and try and sell them in attractive packing with proper labels.

The Vaidus are becoming slowly aware as these young spokesmen reveal how others are making use of them. They try to share their conviction and make other young Vaidus realize that something should and can be done so that they may retain and use their knowledge for themselves, instead of others making use of them. They are bringing young Vaidus together for this purpose in AMVSSS. They entertain a clear concrete vision of the process whereby medical power and capitalism jointly appropriate their knowledge and brush them off, with the active cooperation of the State and thanks to unchallenged cultural representations:

If we look closely at the problem of the means of living of Vaidus in present times, we notice that the medical power is going into the hands of those who have capital and requisite formal medical qualifications, as the Government is publicising only such people. The only message that reaches the common man is: 'From a simple wound to a dreaded disease like AIDS, go and consult a doctor, then take his treatment.' Such publicity contributes to the neglect of Vaidus' traditional occupation and their administration of *jadībūṭī*.

Today, all doctors compel people to use medicines made with modern technology. Big capitalist firms with financial resources start different pharmaceutical companies and manufacture allopathic medicines by using chemicals. They advertise these medicines thus: 'Patients get cured immediately with one injection!' and ask doctors to recommend them. As a result, the traditional *jadībūṭī* of Vaidus is getting neglected because such treatment takes at least two days to show its effect.

This is the way Vaidus' medical power disappears, the capitalists' medical power gets established, and Vaidus are dispossessed of their occupation. When a person is taking treatment from a Vaidu, he is questioned: 'Why are you taking herbal medicine in today's scientific age?' Since pain-killing medicines providing relief in barely half an hour are available today, people are using them to keep pace with their hectic life. The doctor tells a person who has taken medicine from a Vaidu: 'People are going on the moon and you are eating herbs?' When the doctor speaks with such ridicule and contempt, people will as far as possible avoid using *jadībūfī*.

All this process makes it quite clear that through the use of Vaidus' knowledge, and substantial profit, on the strength of their capital, the established forces have snatched Vaidus' medical power and taken it into their hands. While on the other hand, they exploit the Vaidus by luring them with a worthless job or money.

One business organization from Satara asked our Vaidus to do the work of cultivating medicinal plants. They obtained information about which plant is used for which medicine. And as our people knew how to conserve those medicinal plants, they got them to plant a maximum number of such plants. The organization prepared medicine in their pharmaceutical company and kept our people only as salaried employees.

## Appendix

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The following types of oil and ash were found with Maruti Mallu Shinde, (Gondhavani). She continues practising even today and confidently tells us how she specifically prescribes and administers each of them. The list of names of vegetable and fruit oils include: (1) Almond oil; (2) Mendi (*Lawsonia Inermis*) oil; (3) Chameli (*Jasminum randiflorum*) oil; (4) Papaya oil; (5) Safed bhopala (pumpkin gourd) oil; (6) Kadulal Bitas oil; (7) Pumpkin oil; (8) Kadulimba (*Melia Azadirachta*) oil; (9) Pimpal (*Ficus Religiosa*) oil; (10) Vavading (*Embelia Rives*) oil; (11) Safed Kanda oil; (12) Gokharu (fruit of *Tribulus Lanuginosus*) oil.

## Notes

1. *Jadībūfī* is a Hindustani word of Persian origin. According to Molesworth's Marathi-English Dictionary (1831, 1986: 304), *jadī* means a root or a ramification; the word is commonly understood as a medicinal root. *Jadībūfī* means roots, herbs, simply put, the word generally refers to plants and roots of medicinal value.
2. The region of the sky that has been displaced by the moon's eastward movement in one day is called a *nakṣatra*. In English this is known as a lunar mansion. There are 27 such mansions in the 360 degrees the moon travels in one lunar month. In the Hindu Almanac each of these lunar mansions is named after a star or group of stars in each region of the sky. Here, *uttarā* refers to sigma *sagittarii*.
3. The aims of the *Akhil Maharashtra Vaidu Samay Seva Sanstha* are stated as follows: (1) Implement the Social Development Programme as per the government regulations or assist in realizing the said development programme. (2) Create a desire among the youth for participation in the domain of sports and arts. (3) Keep the social and national objectives in view, make provision for *balvadi*, primary, secondary and college education, and follow it up by action. Also start boardings for boys and girls. (4) Implement all government programmes for separate provisions for girls and women, wherever there is a Vaidu settlement in Maharashtra. (5) Start centres to make articles for home consumption and various small industries in Vaidu settlements in Maharashtra. Run these small industries with the support of the aid received from the government centres. (6) Take note of the urgent needs of the men and women in Vaidu families and their financial matters; help solve their financial problems for their small industries or other urgent needs. For example, education, health, construction of the house, etc. (7) Implement collective marriage programmes. (8) Help families affected by illness, death or any other natural calamity, act of God, or man-made problems in all ways possible. (9) Acquire land from the government and build *ashramshala*, boarding, *dharamshala*, etc. for the community at places of pilgrimage like Madhi, Jejuri, Dehu, Alandi.



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3.2

*Inheritance*

*of*

*Knowledge*

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# 13

## BIRTH ATTENDANTS: Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

BERNARD BEL AND ANDRÉINE BEL

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- Whenever we fall ill we seek help from the *Amchi* lama (doctor monk) up there in the monastery. [...]
- What about child delivery? Do you have traditional midwives in the village?
- There used to be. But the hospital is so near, only an hour bus ride. So, why should we bother? My wife delivered five kids in the hospital, and everything went fine!

This conversation took place in 1997, in a peasant family living near Leh (Ladakh). Commenting on current birthing practices in this mountain area, a traditional doctor (*amchi*) observed:

- Unlike the rest of India, Ladakh does not have traditional midwives (*dais*)...
- So, how do women manage to deliver babies in isolated villages? Do they stay on their own?
- No, indeed, they call an older woman, one who is experienced...
- But, well... This is what we call a 'midwife'!

These statements by a 'layman' and an 'expert' belonging to the same society contain basic assumptions about birthing which

reflect recent changes in the practice and status of birth attendants. These were unexpected because of the geographical situation in Ladakh. As many villages do not communicate with the outer world during nine months of cold climate, villagers still rely on the local health care system which they share with Tibetans.

A survey of childbirth practices in rural India, mainly Ladakh, Bihar and Maharashtra (Bel A. 1998), highlights cultural biases which seem to be relevant to other places in developing countries:

- 1) Birth knowledge is 'universal'—Since birthing is 'natural' it is expected to follow standard physiological processes. The classical opposition between 'nature' and 'culture', and a superficial understanding of birthing procedures in remote cultures, lead to the ethnocentric view that unorthodox practice is driven by cultural factors (myths, taboos, superstitions...) whereas the dominant model is based on consensual—rational—knowledge of biological processes. However, Simkin (1996) points out great discrepancies in 'routine' birth procedures of the North American hospital—typically a place where a unified approach would be expected given its alleged reliance on scientific observation.
- 2) Birthing without 'assistance' is a high-risk option—The idea of birthing without the support of medically trained attendants sounds like an indicator of underdevelopment, cultural backwardness and absence of care for 'those poor women left alone delivering babies in the fields or forests....' Few observers are aware that non-medical childbirth is also an option in affluent societies due to favourable sanitary conditions and the proximity of medical emergency facilities (Shanley 1994). Being familiar with home birth in privacy (Bel A. 1999), the authors were not surprised by women in rural India taking pride in delivering babies with minimum assistance. Midwives, women would claim, are called when needed (often for primiparae), and a good midwife is one helping the mother to build up self-reliance in her innate birthing knowledge (namely, to become a 'great soul'), to the point that she may not need her technical assistance in the next childbirths. An anthropological study of unassisted birth practices among women of Botswana and

Namibia (southern Africa) is found in Bieseles work (1997).

- 3) 'Invisible' midwives—In rural areas, people feel reluctant to acknowledge the existence of skilled birth attendants unless these are given particular names and status (midwife, *dai*, *suin*). In Bihar, for instance, social workers in Hindu communities reported that the neighbouring tribals 'do not have *dais*', which seemed to imply that most births are 'unattended', with disastrous consequences. It is unlikely that this population survived over centuries without developing some sort of midwifery knowledge; an eradication of this knowledge would occur in a population facing displacement or radical social changes. What happened to tribal 'midwives'? What if they were an off-record segment of the population?

In many circumstances, the mother or a relative stays with the woman in labour. However, unless she is designated as a 'midwife', observers tend to overlook the fact that she might have acquired knowledge from her own personal experiences with birthing and attending births. The distinction between a traditional birth attendant (TBA) and a professional *dai*, as suggested by Patel (see contribution in this volume, *infra*) seems to be more one of licensure status than technical competence and experience.

- 4) 'Nobody learns'—In many parts of the world (including, till recent dates, Western Europe and North America) medical practice has been the exclusive privilege of men (Ehrenreich & English 1973). At the same time, men were denied the attendance of deliveries. In France, the profession of midwifery lost its gender specialization in 1991. Consequently, birth attendance in the 'dark ages' (before it was medicalized) appears as a business of 'granny midwives', here implying a non-technical meaning: one of moral support, magic, superstitions and rituals. In the modern world, a recognition of technique implies technology with all its instrumentalization (see the invention of forceps, *ibid.*: 20).

In a society firmly established in the certitude that 'we learn from being taught', the transmission of domestic knowledge is rarely acknowledged. It is taken for granted that women 'naturally' know how to cook and perform household duties. There is no

recognition of 'training' unless it is provided in a formal set-up with the legitimacy of recognized teachers. When village women in Maharashtra are asked about their monumental repertory of grind mill songs, they sometimes reply: 'Nobody taught us these songs. We always knew them!'

## Resuscitation of Birth

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### The 'Birth Machine'

The image of technology rescuing lives is a commonsensical imprint of the modern psyche. Marsden Wagner (1994) introduced the metaphor of the 'birth machine'. A search for French language web resources on '*accouchement*' (delivery) yielded a page with the following introduction:

The necessity of medicalizing deliveries is no longer challenged, as it ensued an important decrease of mortality rates as well as maternal and foetal morbidity, in comparison with so-called 'natural' deliveries. However, medicalization faces a certain number of taboos and dogmas in the public and some doctors, with respect to birth coaching, labour pain and the very idea of induction.

This is to say that the induction of deliveries under epidural analgesia, which cumulates all sensitive issues, may be difficult to uphold and calls for a change in modes of thought. Still, a few medical teams such as mine deliberately make use of this technique.<sup>1</sup> (Fossat 1999)

In the absence of explicit references to scientific data (e.g. Goer 1995, 1999; Keirse 2000; Tew 1985, 1998), one is warned that being suspicious about medicalized birthing amounts to joining the camp of an anti-progress and close-minded populace under the effect of obscurantist forces—'taboos' and 'dogmas', admittedly including 'some doctors....' Going a step further, that is inducing deliveries for reasons other than medical, will indeed call for 'a change in modes of thought.' With this type of argumentation—the dominant discourse about birthing in France—any skeptical mind is granted *la péridurale* (an epidural) in the very first sentence.

Leave alone cultural factors—with reliance on control and technology rather than on undisturbed human physiological processes—hospital birth finds its own *a posteriori* justification. In Indian hospitals, women with a high economical status have caesarean section rates near to 50%, a percentage that may reach 90% in a few Brazilian cities. As a matter of comparison, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that a percentage above 15% reveals too much interference in the natural process. In France, the current statistics is close to 20%, and hospitals claiming a better management of deliveries boast rates down to 15%. Still, the average C-section rate of midwives attending home births in Western Europe is less than 2%.

A low C-section rate (6–7%) was achieved in the 1970–80s by the Pithiviers clinics near Paris under the direction of Michel Odent, a surgeon who became a pioneer of less-medicalized birthing after realizing that most C-sections were unnecessary and harmful to mothers and babies. The Pithiviers example is of great relevance because the team handled many high-risk deliveries (Odent 1994: 94–ff). Cases that turned pathological were often referred to them in emergency by a neighbouring hospital with no surgical facilities.

C-sections are claimed to ‘save lives’ regardless of the fact that the risk of maternal death is increased for women choosing to give birth under C-section, even after the exclusion of cases with medical disorders or life-threatening complications (Lilford et al. 1990). Admitting that the very small number of C-sections in a birth-friendly environment contribute to saving the lives of babies, the higher rates reveal a radically different approach of birth attendance.

The three countries with the highest cesarean sections performed are also the three with the highest number of obstetricians. Doctors are trained to look for trouble, diagnose it, and treat it. [...] In bottom three countries with the fewest cesarean sections, over 70% of pregnant and nursing women are seen by midwives and never seen by a doctor. And they lose fewer babies than the top three. (Giraldo 1997)

With the diversification in the healthcare market, most obstetricians now have demanding peripartetic work schedules. Private maternity patients are a lucrative source of income. The obstetrician is committed to attend these private births in per-

son, and the 'programming' (or scheduling) of births is a common time management strategy. (Murray 2000)

In a lay person's mind, a high C-section rate is a 'proof' that more lives are saved, much in the same way technocrats evaluate the quality of health service in terms of *per capita* expenditure on medical treatment. In other words, spending money on drugs and medical technology proves *a posteriori* that patients are better taken care of. DeVries and Barroso (1997: 268) reveal the extent to which this naive logic perverted the practice of hospital-based midwifery:

In an exposé of nurse-midwives in public hospitals in New York City, midwives at one hospital were faulted for having a Caesarean Section rate of 12.9 per cent, far below the city average of 23.1 percent.

## A Persistent Drift towards Technology

The routine use of obstetrical technology, where available, is a threat to the transmission of midwifery skills. For instance, breech presentation is becoming an indication for Caesarean section on the basis of random trials comparing infant mortality with vaginal births and C-sections (Hannah et al. 2000). Discussions of the Hannah study object that the vaginal breech births under study had been handled with the most interventionist approach.

The women attempting hospital vaginal breech births were also used as teaching fodder for medical students. So create a mental image of these women in the Hannah trial: rigorously observed because they are part of a huge medical trial; induced or 'augmented' by powerful drugs; confined from normal, healthy movement by monitor straps and tubes; most likely denied food and drink; medical students 'observing' them (and their cervical dilation) intensively; their birth sensations and instincts deadened by epidural and other painkilling drugs. Not surprisingly, about half of the women attempting vaginal breech births were sectioned for 'failure to progress': the very nature of these hospital vaginal births precluded easy, smooth births from happening. Even in cephalic (head down) presentations, the medically managed mode of birth makes giving birth normally very

difficult for many women. But a woman trying to give birth breech?... with extra fear added to the already inhibitive stew of iatrogenic birth difficulties?... normal birth may well become impossible. (McCracken 2001)

Due to the systematic instrumentalization of birth attendance, the know-how of natural birth (e.g. vaginal breech birth) is quickly disappearing. In contrast, Hema Rairkar (see contribution to this volume, *infra*) points out that the Maharashtrian rural midwives interviewed by VEDA animators 'do handle difficult cases like transverse babies, breech presentation, twins, still-born babies, etc. with complete success.' The necessary immobilization of women for electronic foetal monitoring, sterile conditions preventing the application of poultice, oil or herbal preparations, the absence of bath tubs, all contribute to reducing the possibilities of effective support by midwives, thereby inciting their clients to accept artificial measures—drugs and epidurals—endangering the natural process.

Public health regulations are also responsible for a drift of midwifery practice towards more interventionism. A typical example is with the birth of the placenta which occurs on its own after an undisturbed delivery, although with an unpredictable delay ranging from a few minutes to several hours. Waiting for the natural expulsion is obviously incompatible with the rationality of hospital planning and the anticipation of a bad scenario. Even in a home birth, the midwife may be unwilling to wait for a natural termination of this process. For this reason, midwives often induce the placenta expulsion using chemical or mechanical ways which may be painful or dangerous. In a recent birth, the authors noted that the visit of a midwife provoked needless anxiety about the placenta expulsion (Bel et al. 1999: 56). The midwife came on visit two hours after the birth, as she had not checked her answering machine and hence did not get the message recorded at the onset of labour. Though this intervention was mostly necessary for her to claim a fee for the entire delivery, she tried to push it with the argument of 'safety'. The mother refused her intervention and the placenta was delivered on its own, as expected, a few minutes later.

Artificial placenta expulsion is so much part of routine procedures that in some places it has been made compulsory by law. Shanley reports online:



[...] the fact that midwives are in too big a hurry should not be glossed over. My friend Diane gave birth last year with just her husband. The birth was great, although they had planned to have a midwife there. The midwife arrived minutes after the birth. She insisted that the placenta come out 'NOW'. According to Colorado law, the placenta must come out within an hour of the birth. It had only been fifteen minutes and Diane knew it had not yet detached. But she allowed the midwife to reach inside her. The midwife removed half the placenta. Diane haemorrhaged and spent three days in the hospital. I've heard from many women who have taken hours to birth the placenta. One woman I know birthed the placenta twenty-five hours after the birth. No problems. I get letters all the time from women who feel their midwives messed up their births. I understand that many midwives are simply doing what they legally must do—interfere. But the fact is, interference causes problems in birth, and there is no need for it. (McCracken, Lemay & Shanley 1998)

## Birth in a Cage: The Hospital Culture

Midwives working 'among the machines' (DeVries and Barroso, op.cit.) and their parturients are becoming captive of a self-proclaimed medical rationality:

Why do the machines of obstetrics have this effect on midwifery? It is because these machines expand the notion of risk and increase uncertainty. Ultrasonography and other means of prenatal diagnosis turn every pregnancy into a risky pregnancy, supporting the idea of many American obstetricians that 'a pregnancy is low risk only in hindsight.' Because the technology is available, women are forced to make a choice: should it be used or not? Their choice is often influenced by their placement in a 'risk group', thus, normal pregnancy ceases to exist and uncertainty over the outcome of pregnancy grows. The wealth of information produced by the technology of obstetrics also increases uncertainty. Electronic foetal monitors, for example, produce an unending stream of data, all of which is subject to different interpretations, each leading to a different clinical decision. Increasing risk and uncertainty means one of two things for a midwife: either she, as an expert in normal birth, is no longer needed, or she must become more technological.

[...] In a technological culture it is unthinkable not to use the

latest technology; this is one reason many midwives in the Netherlands were anxious to bring ultrasonography into their practices. But if midwives adopt obstetric technology, they set in motion a process that changes their profession so drastically that it becomes subsumed by, or indistinguishable from, obstetrics.

According to many scientific surveys (Goer 1995: 131–53, 1999: 85–98; Tew 1998), the only observed effects of monitoring and vaginal exams during labour have been an increase in C-section rates. Commenting on ‘active management of labour’, a protocol developed in the 1970s at the National Maternity Hospital in Dublin, Ireland, Kitzinger (1990) wrote:

The medicalization of birth denies and suppresses female sexuality, which obstetricians perceive to be dangerous, threatening, and disruptive. By viewing women as defective machines to be managed on the foetus’s behalf, by draining the warmth and sensuality out of the experience, by converting it to a time-table-driven mechanical process, by becoming the central figure in the drama and controlling every aspect of the mother’s behaviour and activities down to the sounds she may make, birth comes to feel safe to the doctor.

Incidentally, the use of the electronic foetal monitor is being discontinued in North America, though not for the reasons advocated by natural-birth activists:

Why, you ask? Because it has just dawned on the doctors that the very foetal heart strip of paper that they thought proved how careful and conscientious they were and which they thought was their protection in court has actually been their worst enemy in a court of law. A good lawyer can take any piece of ‘evidence’ and find an expert to interpret it to his own ends. (G. Lemay 1999: 34)

Fear of litigation is but one of the visible parts of an iceberg that may be labelled ‘hospital culture’. Gloria Lemay (personal communication with B. Bel, Sept. 2001) further brings to light an insider’s perception of its power structure:

The [hospital] environment includes the thoughts, fears, social needs, pressures, pecking order, logistics, etc. that are racing

around in the minds of the attendants. What we never speak about is the divided mind of a person working in a team in an institution. Rather than deep focus on the mother/baby unit and their well-being, we have the practitioner's head full of such concerns (fears) as: 'What if the administration chastizes me for having this woman in the bed too long, what if the nurses are laughing about me out at the nurses' station? What if I mess this up and the patient complains about me to the College of Physicians & Surgeons? What if I look stupid? What if I get sued? What if I lose my house, etc.? What if I lose my hospital privileges? What if? What if? What if?' This is what really leads to intervention—the fear of the practitioner and the fact that what is valued and admired by his/her peers is aggressive/decisive action. In the particular culture of a hospital setting, speed and action are the most coveted attributes in order to be applauded and approved of by peers. Peer appreciation is more important to humans than appreciation of others (patients, in this case).

Thus Dr Odent says the two qualities of a good birth attendant of any kind are (1) she has had a natural, sexual experience of giving birth, herself, AND, (2) she doesn't give a damn what anyone else thinks of her (ref. talk at B.C. Women's Hospital 1985). In order for a physician or midwife to serve a birthing woman's needs in hospital, he/she risks ostracization. He/she will be ridiculed (he's one of those crunchy granola types), thrown out (lose privileges), mocked (overhearing gossip, giggles, and looks), and damned (other professionals will testify against in court).

There are a few cases where certain strong individuals have risked all this and gone on to enroll others in having a humane birth environment but these cases are rare and usually small units in rural places, not the institutions where scientific research is carried out. I think we need to concentrate more on this society that hospital birth creates and less on the birthing woman who is an insignificant player within the walls.

Unassisted birth defies conceptualization in the same way it would be vain to propose a trans-cultural model of sexuality encompassing its physical, psychological and social dimensions, with precise borderlines between the territories of reproductive behaviour, physical gratification, religion/philosophy and various inexplicable states of mind. The reader should therefore be warned against sweeping generalizations of culturally determined ideal types of birth rituals and attendance.

## Resurgence of Midwifery

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The practice of birth attendance may be approached from two angles. In urban-industrial places, midwifery defines itself in either a submissive or dissident relation to scientific medicine. In the rural areas of developing countries, support to birthing women is less commonly integrated to community-based health care systems. Practitioners of the major high-brow traditions of health care (namely, in India, *Ayurveda*, *Unani*, *Siddha*...) have little or no practice of birth attendance as described in their old treatises. Therefore, knowledge about birth attendance is carried over in an autonomous manner. 'The "naturopaths", probably influenced by high caste notions of the impurity of women's bodies at the time of childbirth, switched to an allopathic model when dealing with women's procreative functions' (Chawla 1994: 1-ff).

### Midwives in Industrial Countries

English language has retained the image of the midwife (literally 'with woman') as a mediator between the birthing woman and the techno-scientific environment of birth. In French, '*sage-femme*' ('wise woman') evokes the image of a woman with great intelligence and experience. However, French language has no specific single word for 'midwifery', often translated as *obstétrique*, which reflects the current training and status of midwives as medical practitioners. In Belgian French, 'midwife' is translated *accoucheuse*, which tends to reduce her role to a mere technical assistance during labour. These language limitations point at cultural and technical problems with midwifery practice in the West.

In a medical set-up, a 'nurse-midwife' may work as a guide for the parturient and a facilitator for medical interventions. She is trained to perform certain interventions which may include local anaesthesia. Midwifery in this context is basically a medical profession even though, admittedly, midwives are also involved in health counselling and education: antenatal check-ups, training prospective mothers, postnatal supervision and guidance on breastfeeding. To a great extent, the skills and assignments of nurse-midwives overlap those of obstetricians, paediatricians,

nurses, anesthetists, lactation consultants, psychologists, etc., thereby implying a frequent restatement of their professional status (Boyer 1990).

In people's minds, midwifery is generally associated with the attendance of physiological, unproblematic deliveries. In reality, whenever labour is induced, boosted by drugs and the parturient insensitized by analgesics, spontaneous labour is inhibited to the benefit of interventions. In the best case—as the situation borders on the pathological—the midwife is active coaching the prospective mother for the best use of physical resources in compliance with a planning aimed at optimizing chances for the baby, or rather ensuring the completion of her delivery within the hospital's time schedule. This is what passes for 'natural birth' in a medical environment. If the parturient loses her self-control, if her 'performance' is estimated poor, if her medical attendants lose patience and confidence, the latter may resort to more drugs, extraction tools, and ultimately surgery.

The relationship between nurse-midwives and obstetrical doctors lies somewhere between submission and competition, dating back to the invention of forceps by a British barber-surgeon in the late 16th century (Mitford 1992: 24). Ehrenreich and English (1973: 20) discuss the quick acceptance of extraction technology in the middle-class, contending that it radically reshaped the profiles of birth attendants:

Non-professional male practitioners—'barber-surgeons'—led the assault in England, claiming superiority on the basis of their use of the obstetrical forceps. (The forceps were legally classified as a surgical instrument, and women were legally barred from surgical practice.) In the hands of the barber-surgeons, obstetrical practice among the middle class was quickly transformed from a neighborly service into a lucrative business, which real physicians entered in force in the 18th century. Female midwives in England organized and charged the male intruders with commercialism and dangerous misuse of the forceps. But it was too late—the women were easily put down as ignorant 'old wives' clinging to the superstitions of the past.

With a more (and more) technical approach of birth, Western midwives are bound to disappear from the scene of hospital deliveries unless they occupy part of the neighbouring territories

of health care professions. This trend of legitimization was observed among hospital-based Certified Nurse-Midwives (CNMs) in North America, and it still dominates the French scene (see CNOSF 1999). In many French hospitals, a midwife may conduct the entire delivery with the optional assistance of an anesthetist; the doctor is called when necessary for specific interventions outside her/his domain of competence.

Defiance with 'the establishment', notably cosmopolitan medicine, in the North American counter-culture the 1960–70s, led to a bifurcation of midwifery with the emergence of 'traditional' midwifery within the 'alternative birth movement' (Mathews & Zadak 1991).

The rhetoric of traditional midwifery, as suggested by the name itself, stressed the need to recreate midwifery in its *true* image, forswearing any connection with 'medicine'. Traditional midwives saw themselves as being a genuine response to a new generation of clients with a healthy distrust of technology and believed that hospital-based nurse-midwives 'co-opted' women, promising a midwife birth but doing regular obstetrics. [...] To avoid being co-opted themselves, traditional midwives rejected formal training in favour of apprenticeship and self-education. (DeVries and Barroso 1997: 256)

Increasing pressure on the medical side led to an institutionalization of traditional midwifery under the banner of the Midwives' Alliance of North America (MANA) founded in 1982. Although MANA opened its membership to nurse-midwives, 'because they had recreated midwifery in two different ways' it proved difficult for MANA and the American College of Nurse-Midwives (ACNM) to work together. Each of them went on competing for representing 'the true tradition of midwifery' in the United States (*ibid.*).

For economical reasons, many traditional midwives graduated as CNMs during the 1980–90s. Conversely, CNMs developed new methods of training, e.g., the Community-Based Nurse-Midwifery Education Program (CNEP) and promoted autonomous institutions (Free-Standing Birth Centers) as an alternative to hospital-based practice (*ibid.*). Although FSBCs were not well accepted by physicians, they became popular with health insurance companies because of their cost-efficiency. DeVries and Barroso (1997: 259) concede that these strategies resulted in a

small but steady increase in the midwife's share of maternity care after 1970.

Today, North American states have diverse regulation systems regarding direct-entry midwifery (a generic term for midwives who are not formally trained as per the ACNM). In some places the practice of midwifery is unregulated, in other places direct-entry midwifery is tolerated 'by default', and a few states explicitly ban it. A midwife in Oregon stated:

In Oregon midwifery is absolutely legal. It is a separate and distinct profession—as completely separate as carpentry or bricklaying. The laws describing medicine prohibit things such as oxygen, medications, injections, suturing, etc.—the state law defines these as medical practice and NOT midwifery. I can legally deliver a baby in this state. I cannot legally carry O2 or IM medications. Oxygen is considered outside the practice of midwifery.

In states where midwifery is illegal, it is only because the state bureaucracy (medical licensing agencies, etc.) have arbitrarily defined pregnancy as a disease process or medical condition requiring medical care. This allows them to then figure that midwifery is 'practicing medicine'. Yet these states are open to challenge on that premise. I don't think ANY state can legally justify calling pregnancy a 'disease condition' rather than a 'natural condition'. I think this is where lawyers should concentrate their arguments. [...]

Childbirth is not a disease. Midwifery is not medicine. This is a clear distinction and we only muddy the waters when midwives say we want to be outside the Medical Practice Act yet we also want to carry medical tools, equipment and prescriptive medications. Either midwifery is a medical profession or it is not a medical profession. If it's a medical profession then the state can define and control it [...]. If it is not a medical profession then we are free to do midwifery as long as we do not venture into the medical field.<sup>2</sup>

In several states, direct-entry midwifery is regulated by licensing laws. Licensure claims to guarantee quality and protect public health, and its supporters take pride in the specific competence and high morality of their profession. For instance, the Midwifery Task Force in Canada declares:

A midwife views childbirth as a normal physiological process. She is the guardian of normal childbirth and a skilled and compassionate attendant if complications arise. She realizes that all of a woman's needs—physical, emotional and social—must be met for her to make the often difficult transition into parenthood.

However, dissidents (and a few scholars) argue that licensure is mainly 'protective of a restrictive monopoly over practice' (DeVries 1996: 7). The main argument against regulation is the parents' fundamental right to decide over their birthing place and attendant. In November 1998, a mother of three kids wrote to the authors:

I live in Tennessee, USA, and here midwifery is perfectly legal and thankfully unregulated. In two neighboring states it is not so free. Yet the 'official' midwives here, those with CPM designations and offices in MANA and NARM, wanted to 'legalize' it—that is, regulate it—primarily in order to collect welfare money from poor mothers (insurance). It did not pass probably because it was vigorously opposed by the Tennessee Medical Association. It was such an ill thought-out move on the midwives' part that I was left shaking my head.

Another phenomenon that has consistently been happening is that if a midwife will not submit to these 'midwives in power', the non-submissive midwife is talked about, bad mouthed, lied about, and generally run out of practice. I personally know three who will do a few births but refuse to participate in the 'midwifery community' because it is so vindictive. I recently attended a midwifery conference, and swear I have never been in a room with more whiners in it in my entire life.

The point of this last is that I think that there are at least two communities of lay midwives even now. It is not the old CNM vs. lay split, but a CPM vs. woman-centered-spiritual-midwife split.

In Sweden, midwives hold a relatively strong position often 'accounted for by reference to their authorization to use obstetrical instruments, including sharp tools, in 1829' (Romild 1997: 38). A midwife is a registered nurse (three years in University) with one year experience as a nurse and one and a half more years at the University to get the midwife registration (Mellander 1999). Home birth is considered an irresponsible act which no midwife should



encourage. Mellander (ibid.) tells the trouble she ran into when, still a student of midwifery, she got involved in a home birth:

[...] my good friend wanted me to stay over to help with her children one evening. I was not asked in any way to come as a midwife to the house. She was due any day with her fourth child. And quite suddenly, she was ready to give birth! The situation was calm, and the birth came easily. I have never, ever delivered any woman with so little bleeding during and after birth! Not a drip until placenta came! Then a small bleeding. The baby was just fine after the birth. My biggest mistake was to not convince them to take the ambulance, at least AFTER the quick birth. I did suggest that to the father, but the mother was so happy and peaceful and refused. I left the discussion with that.

This woman was totally responsible for her own birth, and my presence was more of a technical use. But after this home birth I am considered to be an irresponsible midwife, especially because I have no regrets for being at the birth. How can I when it was so easy, and peaceful?

Now there has been a huge riot about my future existence as a midwife. My ward will probably never let me work there. That is sad. But perhaps I would die there, where you can have three women in active labor. The only way to comfort so many women is to give a lot of heavy pain killers and drip, so you can manage to 'run' the births. But I know the BEST way of getting a good healthy birth is to BE THERE!!

In France, a small number of midwives under liberal status currently deliver antenatal and postnatal care, but few of them do attend deliveries at home or in hospitals. Midwifery (liberal or other) being a medical profession, midwives are not allowed to advertise nor make use of their skills 'as a commerce' (CNOSF 1991, article 10). Further (ibid.) 'any public performance dealing with midwifery with a purpose other than scientific or educative is prohibited....' This *code de déontologie* makes it hazardous for a French midwife to promote unorthodox methods and she might face prosecution for using procedures not 'sufficiently scientifically validated' (op.cit., article 14).

The Dutch model of midwifery is unique in that it grants the midwife an autonomous status in the primary care system of the Netherlands. Midwives attend most deliveries without a medical supervision, and they are recognized as competent in making the

decision to refer their clients to obstetricians when anticipating a pathological case.

Although home birth remains popular in the Netherlands [31.5% in 1992 with a small decline rate], more clients are choosing to give birth in the 'polyclinic'. Polyclinic births are short-stay hospital births attended by midwives or general practitioners. They are favoured by parents who wish to have '*alles bij de hand*' (everything, i.e., medical equipment on hand). Midwives supervise the majority of these births, but the trend is troubling because it reflects a growing faith in obstetric technology and because, in the polyclinic, not only do midwives feel less free to exercise their profession, but there is a higher rate of transfer to specialist care. (DeVries and Barroso 1997: 261)

The study by Wiegers et al. (1996) confirms this tendency. The authors further declare (ibid.: 262–63):

The consequent debates over whether new technology should or should not be employed weaken the image of the profession in the eyes of a public convinced of the value of technology. By way of contrast, the more eclectic and experimental tradition of physicians allows them to 'own' new technology. They may discuss its appropriate and inappropriate uses, but they never suggest that technology itself is undesirable.

G. Lemay (personal communication, Sept. 2001) underscores the split between providers of medical care and the real birth attendants:

What most people do not realize about the Dutch system is that the midwife is not in the home for very long. The maternity nurse is the REAL midwife. She makes sure the mother is not disturbed and that the birth is progressing smoothly and calls the midwife at the last minute. So, if the midwife is there it is probably because there is a problem.

Whenever you get high-priced training of the *accoucheur*, you find they want to spend less time with women and will replace themselves with maternity nurse, doulas, coaches, etc. It indicates that the ego massage that catching a baby entails is more important than rubbing the mother's back at 8 cms dilated. This is why there is no real satisfaction in the work for so many medical people and why they are such victims and whiners.

## Doulas

In affluent countries other than the Netherlands, about 99% births take place in hospitals. These are attended by obstetricians and midwives in various numbers. In the USA, midwife attendance is slowly increasing and reached 7% of hospital births in 1997 (Curtin & Park 1999). The difficulty of continuously coaching a birthing woman fostered the emergence of the *doula* (a 'servant' in Greek), another category of voluntary or professional birth attendants. Doulas need to be well informed about hospital procedures as their role is not restrained to moral support. When necessary, they help women in making informed choices and see that these are understood and complied with by hospital staff. This mediation between the providers and benefactors of labour care requires particular communication skills.

Recognizing that different belief systems form the basis of the various approaches to labor management, and that there is little she can do to change these belief systems while supporting a client, the doula needs to find ways to remain effective, even when she believes many of the customary practices are unnecessary or even potentially disadvantageous. (Simkin 1996)

The efficiency of doulas in appeasing medical interventionism is assessed by statistics, for instance:

- 50% reduction in the cesarean rate
- 25% shorter labor
- 60% reduction in epidural requests
- 40% reduction in oxytocin use
- 30% reduction in analgesia use
- 40% reduction in forceps delivery

(Klaus, Kennell & Klaus 1993)

It would be misleading to ascertain how much of the performance of doulas may be attributed to their technical knowledge, communication skills, or the quality and continuity of their moral support. Does 'coaching' mean being interventionist? In the study by Klaus et al. (ibid.) better results were achieved by a control group in which the doula had been replaced with a woman silently sitting behind a curtain. Thus, in this experimental set-up, birthing

women (and arguably, medical teams) seemed to be more receptive to the silent presence of a non-family member than to the potentially distracting verbal interference of a supportive attendant.

## Cooptation within the Dominant System: The Case of Quebec

In the Quebec province of Canada, the practice of midwifery had not been under control until it became the focus of pilot projects monitoring the activity of newly created birthing centres (Gouvernement du Québec 1997). In September 1999, licensure became mandatory and a legal status was granted to the midwives whose participation in pilot projects had been satisfactory, irrespective of the way they had been trained. Thus, self-trained midwives (including a few migrant French nurses) could be recognized as professional practitioners under a uniform status. Further, training in midwifery is being standardized and will be hosted by universities.

Nonetheless, home birth attendance was not on the 1999 agenda, with the perverse effect that (in Summer 2001) birthing centres are the only places left for the licit practice of midwifery, in contrast with the Ontario province in which almost 40% midwife-attended births take place at home. Thus, Quebec is perhaps the only region in the world whose citizens have been denied professional attendance in home births—a breach of their constitutional rights. Hospital care, for which there is currently no agreement for the attendance of midwives, is the only option for those who live far away from a birthing centre, or women with allegedly problematic pregnancies: twins, breech presentation, post-term above 42 weeks, an antecedent of caesarean section, hypertension, gestational diabetes, etc. (a total of 120 risk factors).

In June 2001, the Quebec midwives' college drafted a proposal for the regulation of midwifery in the attendance of home birth (OSFQ 2001a). The document emphasizes informed choice as a prerequisite for making arrangements with midwives regarding a planned home birth, and it validates this option as a safe and satisfactory one on the basis of a survey conducted in British Columbia. In spite of this, candidates for a home birth are expected to sign a form of informed consent. The fact that no such

procedure is envisaged for hospital births implicitly designates it as the 'natural' (lowest-risk) option. Moreover, the contractual procedure itself displays strong undertones of anticipated clashes between women's expectations, beliefs and birth experience, on the one hand, and the scientific/medical knowledge of their midwives on the other hand.

The fact of exposing options places the midwife in an ethics of communication (as neutral as possible) and information (as complete and as scientific as possible), which does not imply a personal commitment. Ultimately, the woman only needs to be literate ... This negates the importance of a relation of support and accompaniment that the woman seeks from her midwife.<sup>3</sup> (C. Lemay 2001)

The move of Quebecer direct-entry midwives towards licensure is perceived by radical activists as surrender to 'community bureaucracy' under the yoke of the medical establishment. Supporters of regulation argue that this compromise is a necessary first step for potential users of midwifery care whose confidence would be strengthened by the certification of its practice. Still, there is no statistical evidence that regulating the practice under uniform medical protocols will provide a reliable basis for successful birth plans: despite the careful selection of eligible parturients (see *supra*), the global transfer rate of mothers from birthing centres to hospitals reached 25% in 1995–96 (OSQF 2001b).<sup>4</sup> The same document mentions that this transfer rate is comparable to the ones measured in the USA or in the Netherlands. A Canadian activist quoting this rate compared it with the statistics of the traditional midwife who had attended her 'post-term' (43-week) delivery: one single transfer in 400 home births.

## Ideological Drives of Birth Activism

Birth attendance in the Western hegemonic medical context lies somewhere 'between the devil'—midwives as executives of medical procedures—and 'the deep blue sea'—midwives as 'guardians of eutocia'.

DeVries and Barroso (1997: 267) report that many Dutch midwives who feel 'an increasing need to subvert culture' tend to

refuse this compromising situation and follow a personal strategy of advocating birth at home or in home-like set-ups. However, subverting cultures implies a restatement of midwifery 'taking into account innovative approaches to illness and normality, as well as the relational aspects of birth attendance' (Bel A. 2000). In other words, many conflicts between professional birth attendants do not challenge the medical system itself, but rather the sub-altern position of midwives in that system.

Submissive integration or cooptation, as exemplified by steps for the regulation of midwifery in Quebec (see *supra*), may be viewed as a 'process of semantic acquiescence' of the system of dominance (see the introduction of Part 2 in this volume). It could be critically apprehended as an instance of ambivalent attitudes towards authority rooted in local cultures. For instance, it is arguable whether the strong commitment of Quebecer traditional midwives as guardians of moral values reflected their resistance to the medical system or their submissiveness to a dominant Catholic moral order, as implicitly exposed by Desjardins, 'When medical power subverted religious power, midwives became obedient of medical ideology. For the sake of some recognition, a few midwives may have given away the richness and originality of their practice<sup>5</sup> (1993: 130–31).

Birth activism, as a communicative process, strongly relies on the types of symbolic representations that its actors perceive as conducive to social change in their place and time. For instance, the icons of 'nature', 'tradition' and 'spirituality' are emphasized across the multiple trends in North American midwifery. Viewing midwifery as 'a vital partnership with women' (Davis-Floyd 1999), 'returning birth to women, midwives and nature' and promoting 'traditional-spiritual models' of midwifery (IAM 2001; Tritten & Southern 1999, eds.) express a common desire to reinstate midwifery in a system of shared moral values—love and compassion—rather than lingering with divergent views on its practice and training. It is important to realize that these images have been nurtured by the experience of happy home births over several decades, and extensively disseminated via the electronic media. While Europeans may resent them as naive projections of the American psyche, they too are in search of images for the reconstruction of their own birth culture(s). It is expected that visual testimonies (e.g. Seaman 2000) and electronic communi-

cation will play an estimable role in conveying birth images and concepts across barriers of languages and language-specific symbolic representations.

Birth activism, when driven by midwives, is often openly woman-centric. A prominent society in the South West of France (FSF) proudly asserts: 'In birth, all women are accompanied by midwives.' When the emphasis is put on the active coaching of birthing women, fathers are rarely granted better roles than supporting the backs of their companions while midwives—in their own words—'catch their babies'. Since there are very few men in the profession, overstating the role of the midwife contains an implicit assertion of gender specificity in birth attendance. This contradicts the modern trend towards responsible shared parenting (as exemplified in 'birth as a gratifying event', *supra*), with the effect that the advocacy of woman-centric midwifery is sometimes castigated as an attempt of the fringe population of birth activists to 'ride the horse' of feminist movements.

In France, the scarcity of home-birth midwives makes it difficult for families to hire birth attendants with matching views on childbirth, security, responsibility and social commitment. People's expectations are changing, due to the broader amount of literature and discussion material in circulation, but the pathological perception of birth remains the dominant discourse conveyed by mass media. A reason for this may be that too many medical practitioners (midwives and physicians) rely on their hospital training experience rather than becoming aware of scientific publications (usually in a foreign language). Today, their ability to provide relevant and up-to-date information is being challenged by lay citizens whose approach of birth is not restrained to its medical aspects.

In this process, the leadership of midwives in birth activism is also challenged. In the 1970–80s, supporting liberal midwives (*against* doctors) was advocated as the only way to preserve birth freedom. This strategy of cooptation failed when a majority of midwives surrendered to a normative security discourse produced by the very system against which they claimed to stand as an alternative. The libertarian discourse of the hippy generation is being replaced by a justified one, according to which a high antenatal transfer rate on planned home births shall be a proof that midwives do care for the security of their patients.

In this context of fear of a dramatic outcome on one side, and fear of litigation on the other side, it is becoming fastidious for informed parents to negotiate reliable birth plans with their birth attendants. In the long run, the statistics of antenatal transfers in all affluent countries are likely to reflect the ones of pilot studies in Quebec (see *supra*). Indeed, the fact that one out of four planned home births with low-risk pregnancies will end up as a (unprepared) hospital delivery seems to be the price to pay for safety protocols based on the medical model of birth attendance.

A positive outcome of the awareness of conflicting stakes is that there is a growing concern for the reconstruction of a 'birth culture', a web of social interactions allowing families to share knowledge without the mediation of health professionals (official or 'alternative'). In other words, birth may return to where it belongs: birthing women and their close relatives. Parent action groups and non-profit societies, informal encounters, innovative books, web pages and internet discussion lists bringing together people from several French-speaking countries play an increasing role in this process.<sup>6</sup>

## Midwifery in Rural India

Whenever urban health activists start looking favourably at traditional health systems, their immediate concern is the 'validation' of indigenous knowledge. In a technocratic approach, validating means isolating concepts and practices amenable to scientific proof, so that irrelevant practice and 'superstitions' may be eradicated. However in this process, indigenous knowledge is gauged against a self-proclaimed universal system of reference—allopathy and hospital-based medical practice (see B. Bel's contribution to this volume, *supra*, and DeVries 1996:12). When *Ayurveda* is used as a reference (e.g. Bajpai 1996) it is also reduced to a set of symptom/prescription associations—'herbal allopathy'.

This approach unavoidably discards the empirical knowledge of veteran rural midwives based on their observations of the physiology of birth in a non-intrusive set-up. As suggested above, individual stories defy any attempt to reduce the process to a set of standard procedures. According to Prof. Barua, an obstetrician



in Pondicherry (personal communication), no more than 10% deliveries could be estimated 'normal', that is, following a predictable schedule. The remaining 90% comprise 'natural' deliveries in which problems are solved without medical help (Bel A. 1998). The confusion between 'normal' and 'natural' is a major cause of normative attitudes regarding birth attendance.

When pregnancy and birthing are experienced as ordinary life events, not in the least a pathological situation to be handled with 'men's idealised notions of reproductive efficiency' (McCracken 1999b), deliveries may not be placed under the responsibility of birth attendants. Conversely, in a medical set-up, responsibility is transferred to the doctor or midwife as depositories of knowledge and experience. However, this transfer induces a deep feeling of frustration due to a contradiction: one cannot surrender the legal and moral responsibility of one's health to somebody or to some institution, and in the same time claim to retain a decision power (Bel A. 2000).

In rural India, a good midwife is one who helps inexperienced women to build self-reliance in such a way that they may not require assistance in future births.<sup>7</sup> Thus, traditional midwives explicitly acknowledge the fact that birth *attendance* by close relatives (or any person providing a moral support) is the major factor of success, whereas the *assistance* of skilled attendants may be restricted to complicated situations. Indeed, in places very remote from medical facilities, the competence in anticipating problems and making quick decisions for a hospital transfer is much less beneficial than the ability to build a climate of self-confidence. The iatrogenic<sup>8</sup> influence of the proximity of medical facilities in low-risk births has been accurately measured by Wieggers et al. (1996) in their study of midwifery practices in the Netherlands.

Literature on the Indian *dai* (e.g. Chawla 1994) tends to focus on the symbolic, ritualistic or religious dimensions of birth, thereby disregarding a non-dramatic, altogether sensitive approach of this event. In the daily life of village women, the sacred and the profane are so entangled that setting them apart would reduce them to frozen museum pieces. Besides, many (though not all) birth attendants belong to low-caste communities whose task is not to perform religious ceremonials; they are appreciated for their sensitive hands, good skills and ability to deal with unexpected

complications. Conversely, a few high-caste women do attend deliveries regardless of pollution with blood, body fluids and contact with lower-caste women.

Indeed, cultural factors play a role that is inseparable from the work of nature, however, less in the prescription of certain procedures than in nurturing images which affect a mental state conducive to the birthing woman's reliance on her intuitive resources. Vincent Priya (1992: 56-ff) describes many instances of 'symbolic preparation' in traditional societies, by which the prospective mother avoids 'do[ing] anything or plac[ing] herself in a situation which implies a closing up or the making of an obstruction.' Similarly, in Maharashtra, when labour begins, all locks in the house are opened, and knots untied; the mother sets her hair loose, unfastens the belt of her *dhoti* and places herself in alignment with the ridge of the roof. Symbolic preparation in Rajasthan is described in similar terms in Patel's contribution to this volume (*infra*).

Birth does not fit into rigid conceptual frameworks, neither technological (medicalized) nor cultural. The glorification of 'natural birth' and its reconstruction in 'pagan rituals'—grotesque parodies of oriental mystique—is an instance of the evasion from its primary sensations (see 'Empowerment versus Self-reliance' in the appendix). The most experienced *daïs* insist on the art of listening to one's own intuitive signals. Zahida Sheik, a Maharashtrian Muslim midwife (whose father was attending deliveries with folded eyes), says that before she attends a birth with a complication she gets a warning from a premonitory dream which contains clues about dealing with it.

In a community-based health system, the evaluation of practitioners is done by the community itself. Unlike itinerant doctors and 'quacks' (an obsession of modern witch-hunters), the practice of local healers and midwives is directly sanctioned by their village and community. A traditional midwife with death or trauma records would not be hired again for birth attendance. For instance, many families in the slums of Mumbai reverted to home births with their own community midwives in attendance, being appalled by the poor performance of hospitals and ill-treatment inflicted on women with low economical status.

Because of the informal way birth knowledge is transmitted—which stems out of its resistance to conceptualization outside the

reductionist medical model—it would be hazardous to portray the ideal midwife in rural India. The most experienced ones are reluctant to talk. They need to build up confidence with interviewers who expect them to exhibit a practical experience (with ‘sensitive’ hands) and clarify their motivations.

When I met Bhusya Devi in Gomoh, she asked me to lie down and she explained her technique manipulating my belly. A year earlier I had noticed her in the ‘Matrika’ workshop: when prompted to introduce herself, she stood up, looked around ... and sat down. (Bel A. 1998)

Another reason for the heterogeneity of traditional midwives as a knowledge-holding population is a preference to vertical transmission ‘within the house’. Bhusya Devi (*ibid.*) declared, for instance, that she would rather teach her daughter-in-law, than her own daughter, as the latter is bound to live under a different roof.

Young midwives are at the same time less self-confident and more willing to participate in surveys, interviews and workshops. Because of this, large-scale surveys mostly emphasize ignorance and malpractice, overlooking the most relevant technical points. For instance, Sabala and Kranti’s (1996) survey by 26 NGOs is so replete with contradictions (partly due to communication gaps) that it might have a reverse effect on the cause it is supposed to promote. Similarly, Smith acknowledges that the groups of midwives she met in her training workshops in India, who expressed their need for ‘upgrading skills and education’, did not include the knowledgeable ones. ‘Others remain unprofiled, don’t reveal their practices and are secure in their wisdom and autonomous in their remoteness. I have yet to meet these women’ (1998: 50).

Still, the title of her paper—‘Working with the Traditional Indian Village Dai’—grossly misleads readers about its content. Her approach is analogous to that of a foreign lay person who would publish on Western medicine after taking interviews of beginner students. This approach is commonplace among social scientists dealing with ‘popular culture’, as they focus on quantitative, rather than qualitative information, practice by amateurs, culture-specific beliefs, ‘rituals’ and ‘taboos’, taking for granted that all informants are qualified when only willing to talk.

Midwifery in rural India is under the threat of a miscommunication process in its inevitable encounter with a dominant urban culture, which in turn carries a dominant fear-based model of birth (see part 1). Our study (Bel A. 1998) and Hema Rairkar's contribution to this volume (*infra*) suggest that veteran midwives might be the depositories of a wealth of knowledge matching, and arguably surpassing, the last word in birth attendance in affluent societies.

A solid argumentation in favour of certain practices that prove better than those of classical obstetrics would increase their self-confidence, with positive effects on their recognition and social status. If it were understood that their knowledge has an important role to play, not as folklore, but for the very revitalization of the art of birth attendance in modern societies, research *on* Indian midwives would give the way to research *with* Indian midwives.

## Appendix

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### Empowerment versus Self-reliance

(An excerpt from Bel et al. 1999: 57):

[...] the leitmotif in homebirth literature is more 'empowerment', self assertion, militancy for the freedom of choice and ownership of her own body, than 'self-reliance' which involves a long-term sensitisation.

If a woman claims a fundamental right to choose her way of birthing in uncomplicated cases, she needs even more self-determination when she is in real danger. Why should her empowerment end suddenly when there is a life threatening complication? This paradox is striking evidence that the commonsense attitude toward danger is affected by the 'allopathic mind'. It sets up an insurmountable barrier between the physiological and the pathological, whereby symptoms are failures of the normal regenerative processes. Hence, testimonies of women feeling that their bodies 'betrayed' them at the time they faced the anxiety of medical assistants. This turn of mind contaminates the entire landscape of therapies, both official and 'alternative'.

There is an inherent contradiction between the respect of birth as a natural process and the non-respect of body signals, which include all sorts of 'symptoms' and 'diseases'. We often hear that birthing should not be handled as a disease. However, this statement contains

an implicit apprehension of disease as an inescapable failure. If disease were perceived as a normalisation process—the pathological being part of the physiological—it would be understood in an utterly different way. For disease, like birth, does not require to be controlled, but accompanied, understood and fulfilled (Bel A. & Bel B. 2000).

Scientific medicine is conditioned by the negation of death, the ultimate failure. It is significant that many women in rural India do not follow this thought pattern when the question of fatal issues is evoked.

The industrialized world is one of increasing dependency. Bankers, politicians, doctors and insurance companies vociferate: 'We take care of you!' Advocates of natural birthing rarely question this dependency. Instead they try to create an environment that would facilitate self-reliance if it were not confined to a closed space and time—a sand castle on the border of 'real life'. To make it hold together, birthing women and their attendants develop a new sort of addiction to strong emotional drives: romantic glorification of birth, pagan rituals, faith in Mother Nature, the inner self or religious icons, positive superstition and so forth, aimed at enforcing the belief that they are protected by irrational forces—empowerment, again, at the cost of self-reliance, cheap substitutes for chemical or herbal pills.

The discourse on natural birthing as 'non-pathological' contains all the ingredients to awake fears of pathology, thereby initiating a dependency process that ends up with surrender to medicalization. In front of so weak and irrational arguments, it is not surprising that more and more women rely on complete medical assistance and even claim it as a fundamental right.

## Notes

1. *Personne ne conteste plus la nécessité de la médicalisation de l'accouchement qui a permis une importante baisse de la mortalité et de la morbidité maternelle et foetale par rapport à l'accouchement dit << naturel >>. Cependant, cette médicalisation se heurte à un certain nombre de tabous et de dogmes dans le public et chez certains médecins concernant la direction de l'accouchement, la douleur d'enfantement et le principe même du déclenchement. C'est dire que la programmation de l'accouchement sous analgésie péridurale, qui cumule tous les points sensibles, peut être difficile à faire accepter et nécessite un changement des mentalités. Et pourtant, certaines équipes, dont la mienne, mettent en œuvre systématiquement cette technique.*
2. Gail Hart, in the RMA midwives discussion list, Sun, 27 May 2001.
3. *Le fait de présenter des choix possibles place la sage-femme dans une éthique de communication (la plus neutre) et d'information (la plus*

*complète et surtout la plus scientifique), ce qui ne demande aucun engagement personnel. À la limite, cela demande seulement que la femme sache lire... Cela nie l'importance d'une relation de soutien et d'accompagnement que la femme vient chercher auprès d'une sage-femme.*

4. 10.7% antenatal, 15.8% during labour, 0.4% postnatal. Plus 3.2% for newborn babies.
5. *Lorsque le pouvoir médical a déclassé le pouvoir religieux, c'est à l'idéologie médicale que s'est conformée la sage-femme. Pour un peu de prestige, des sages-femmes ont parfois délaissé ce qui faisait la richesse et l'originalité de leur pratique.*
6. Access to resources in French language is centralized on the 'Naissance' web page <<http://www.naissance.ws>>.
7. Patel (see contribution in this volume, *infra*) rightly deplores that the statistics of unattended births were not included in the National Family Health Survey of Rajasthan 1992–93.
8. Iatrogenesis refers to a complication caused by medical practice, here it includes the monitoring of a physiological process and the preventive treatment of anticipated problems.

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## POPULAR CULTURE AND CHILDBIRTH: Perceptions and Practices in Rural Rajasthan

TULSI PATEL

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### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

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Data from the National Family and Health Survey 1992–93 (NFHS 1995) show that only one-fourth of the births in India take place in medical institutions (hospitals or nursing homes), considered essential for reduction in maternal and infant mortality rates. Each year nearly 600,000 women the world over, die from pregnancy related causes; 99% of these deaths occur in the developing world (WHO estimates). Considering that over 26% of India's population is urban, most of the quarters of births in modern medical institutions are likely to be comprised by the urban population. On the other hand, almost all of the childbirths in rural India are therefore likely to be conducted at home.

One clear, often suggested, strategy to reduce the overall number of maternal deaths is to improve the availability of high quality family planning. However, it is important to understand that family planning does nothing to reduce the risk of a maternal death once a woman is actually pregnant. That is, it does not reduce the problem of maternal mortality because it does not help to

ensure that the woman who chooses to have a child can do so safely. Greenwood (1987) and Maine et al. (1996) are of the view that the most reliable way to increase dramatically the likelihood that a woman will survive childbirth is to make emergency obstetric care widely available. If women with complications obtain prompt, adequate emergency obstetric care, the vast majority of maternal deaths can be prevented. One is not contesting this view here. The focus of this paper is to see how people in Mogra perceive this view. Nor is one overlooking that there is also an epidemiological perspective to maternal mortality. The paper tries to see why and how is this view translated quite differently by people in Mogra in their routine and popular practice of childbirth at home (home births) rather than in a hospital. I am not seeing it as a terrain of struggle; it is rather one of difference and hierarchy. The term 'popular' in this paper is understood to mean the terrain of practice which is widely prevalent, is at variance from that of the practice of the powerful or what the allopathic minority considers to be the right kind of practice. In the parlance of popular culture, home birth is a practice of the mysterious 'other' who is natural, instinctive, and rooted in the soil, so to say (cf. Burke 1981). Popular here means an ethno-medical account, the meaning and understanding of, and dealing with the process of childbirth and care of the baby, and the mother thereafter. In this light, Seeberg (1998) aptly refers to Klienman's (1980) distinction between popular and professional systems of health care. The popular sector comprises the individual, family, social network, and community beliefs and activities and takes care of the majority of all illness episodes in most, if not all, societies. Closely connected to this distinction is that between illness and disease, where illness is the lived experience of monitoring bodily processes. Disease, on the other hand, is the problem from the practitioner's perspective. In childbirth the accent is on the sufferer's perspective—not the patient's since being a patient implies some kind of relationship with somebody else who is treating the ailment. As those helping with home births have the same perspective as that of the sufferer's, the practice constitutes popular culture.

This paper elaborates on the active aspect of the culture of home births as 'lived experience' of people in rural Rajasthan. Aspects of difference and hierarchy about this popular culture emerge through people's perceptions and practices about home

births and their views on hospital births. Whether people's knowledge is perfect or not does not concern the paper. Nor does it counterpoise indigenous in a competitive manner, the indigenous with allopathic knowledge. In fact, it does not focus on the technical superiority of either of the knowledge systems. It is however worth asking why allopathic knowledge, believed by the minority in power, is generally considered superior. If knowledge is power then why is indigenous knowledge about childbirth not assigned that power, while the allopathic knowledge of childbirth, usually possessed by the better off and the influential, is so? Also, the status, power and confidence in childbirth knowledge are assigned very differently by those in power and those out of it. How the power dynamics operate in matters of knowledge systems is an issue requiring another paper.

The data for this paper is taken from anthropological fieldwork (Patel 1994) conducted in Mogra, a village located in the semi-arid desert area in Jodhpur District, one of the 26 districts of Rajasthan state in North West India. The fieldwork lasted for over a year, besides an earlier brief period of fieldwork and follow-up by a few post-fieldwork visits, including one study of the elderly in the village and a couple of neighbouring villages. Data were obtained mainly from intensive fieldwork based on the participant observation method. The study included a census of the village, retrospective fertility histories of all ever married women in the village, genealogies, and case studies of men and women. The study includes a dense description and interpretative account of childbirth practices.

## Child Delivery at Home (Home births)

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The vast majority of births in rural Rajasthan, as in most other rural areas in India, take place at home. According to the National Family Health Survey of Rajasthan (NFHSR) 1992–93 (1995), 92% of live births in rural areas during the four years preceding the survey occurred at home, while 6.5% occurred at a public health facility/institution and 1.1% at a private one. This pattern largely remains across social and economic divides; over 76% of births among literate women (both rural and urban) who started but did not complete middle school education, occurred at home.

Meanwhile 42% of all live births were attended by a Traditional Birth Attendant and 39% by a relative or other person, while 7% were assisted by a doctor and 10.4% by a nurse or midwife. The above figures add to 98.4%. My guess for the remaining 1.6% of the births is that these might be the ones conducted by the labouring women themselves with no one to assist them at that time. But the question is also relevant as to why this information has not been included in the NFHSR. Is it either because birth on one's own is not worth noting or even not worth a question, let alone being accounted for in the statistics, especially in a countryside survey? If so, an important piece of data is lost owing possibly to *a priori* expectations of the survey. However, the magnitude of home births speaks of the popularity of this vibrant practice. No data is provided in the NFHSR concerning the level of maternal deaths, although there is a section that deals with complications in pregnancy, as reported by the interviewees. This, however, deals only with complications which did not result in a maternal death given that the woman had to be alive to be included in the sample. Mari Bhat et al. (1995) use a regression model to calculate indirect estimates of maternal mortality by state. They give a figure of 627 deaths per 100,000 live births for Rajasthan for 1982–86, a figure above their 580 given for India as a whole, and slightly below 638 for rural India. It would be interesting to contrast these figures (Patel 1994) with those from Mogra. The Mogra data is based on retrospective reproductive histories of all births to ever married women of Mogra (ages obtained: 15–90). The study included all births to even those women who were no longer living by including births to the wives of all widowers. This was done by using sisterhood and other indirect methods. There were a total of 3,011 births to 713 women. Seven of these women died in childbirth, i.e., during or soon after. Though this information is not adequate to calculate meaningful maternal mortality figures, Mogra is likely to have ratios today somewhat dissimilar to rural Rajasthan as a whole.

## Indigenous Childbirth Knowledge

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Knowledge about childbearing is derived early in life in the patrivirilocal society of Mogra. It is common for children to see

domestic animals like cows, buffaloes, sheep and goats giving birth. Children around the age of ten often assist their parents in attending to cattle that are about to calve. Children growing up with such experiences attain some basic understanding of biological reproduction. Adolescent girls are often permitted to remain in the vicinity of labouring women. Such exposure provides first-hand knowledge of the process of arranging and organising for child delivery. Young married girls may get a chance to see a child delivery, and frequently overhear adult women discussing pregnancies and child deliveries occurring in the neighbourhood. Though the young married girls listen to such conversations with great attention, they show obvious indifference as a mark of modesty. In a way, the learning is quite subtle and indirect.

## Birth Attendants

In the light of the commonly interchangeable terms '*dai*' and 'traditional birth attendant' (TBA) in literature, it is important to distinguish between them, at least in the case of Mogra and adjoining areas in Rajasthan. *Dai* is one who is seen as a professional birth conductor and works for payment in cash as well as in kind. She is generally a middle aged and older woman from a lower caste. The training of a *dai* is transmitted from a mother-in-law to a daughter-in-law or from a mother to a daughter. A great deal depends upon the daughter or daughter-in-law, who has the aptitude and interest and is more adept, dexterous, and intelligent in assessing the birthing body. It is a fairly long drawn process combined with practice and self-experience. I was informed about a *dai* in Jodhpur city who was blind and yet popular and renowned for being gifted in her skills. Though knowledge and skills are seen to develop with practice, warmth, care and efficiency are believed to be personality traits ordained to the lucky ones. Nevertheless, as childbirth is regarded as polluting, little prestige is attached to the occupation of a *dai*. Considering the low status of a *dai*, it is unlikely that many of them would undertake such work if there were no economic incentives involved.

On the other hand, a traditional birth attendant is one of the middle aged or older women, a kin, relative or neighbour whose

archive skills are akin to those of a *dai* by sheer interest and experience. She is adept at handling births and is well known in the neighbourhood as a wise woman in matters of child delivery. Very often she is requested to be present for a childbirth in a relative's and/or neighbour's home. Unlike a *dai*, she does not usually do the defiling tasks of cutting the cord or clearing up the after-birth. Other female relatives in the house (especially sisters-in-law) would undertake it if a *dai* were not to be called or was not required. However, a TBA from a middle or upper caste would not conduct the birth of a lower caste (untouchable) woman. They have TBAs from their own caste. A *dai* is usually called for the first one or two deliveries. Later, she is invited only if the woman or her household members cannot handle it on their own, or even with the help of the TBA, which is rather rare. Only for a somewhat difficult or prolonged birth, a *dai* is called, while for a quick and easy birth a TBA along with other women to assist her, is considered quite a normal practice.

Actual child delivery in Mogra is an exclusive women's affair. Care is taken to see that men do not participate either by way of knowing or by being present near the woman in labour. The attendants and *dai* manage the delivery together. A *dai* is rarely considered to be an expert whose every advice has to be followed. In certain difficult cases, such as when a woman's life is in obvious immediate danger, a professionally trained nurse is summoned, but such cases are very rare. The nurse resides in the village and is employed by the village dispensary. There has been only one occasion in the past few decades in Mogra when a doctor was summoned to conduct a child delivery. This was generally considered to be a case that exhibited the excessive wealth and urban ways of the husband who lived in Jodhpur city. Biomedical (allopathic) help is not quickly and naturally resorted to. People's attitude is to wait and see. When the woman in labour is perceived to be in grave danger by all attending to her, people do occasionally resort to biomedicine. This happens only when local birth conductors have failed to handle the complications. Since child delivery is almost always considered to be normal, and rarely to be dangerous, the waiting period is usually lengthy. In many conversations with gynaecologists in Jodhpur city, I have been often told of the ability of *dais* to assess a complicated case rather swiftly and suggest a hospital visit.



Rambha, a young Raika woman, was brought to Mogra from her natal village after having labour pains for a few days without delivery. Her parents-in-law in Mogra were in a quandary. Several others soon got to know about the case. On the advice of a few influential persons she was taken to a hospital in Jodhpur city. She delivered a baby soon after reaching the hospital. Upon getting to know about the normal delivery, her relatives reiterated that it was merely a matter of time and the panic was unnecessary. (Patel 1994: 111)

Though difficult home births are largely contained locally, and there is the usual reluctance to go to hospitals, it is not completely ruled out. Rambha's case reveals that the culture of home births is not of pure isolation. Nevertheless, such exceptions reveal the norm and not a break in the continuity.

## Childbirth at Home: Not a Personal Matter

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For the first confinement, called *pani pavano* or *japa mate lavano* (literally, to serve water, or bring the girl for confinement) a woman is brought to her natal home during the last trimester of pregnancy. The first delivery in the natal home is believed to be more congenial for the young pregnant woman as it requires greater emotional care. In the conjugal home, on the other hand, a young wife has to observe *gungto* (veil) and cannot communicate directly with the senior relatives as a mark of respect, which is a serious inconvenience during her first labour experience. In her natal home she can be frank, which is considered to be a prerequisite for successful childbirth. The mother and other female relatives are believed to be far more caring and concerned, which is crucial to endure labour and deliver the first child. In addition, it is socially and religiously meritorious for the natal kin to help a daughter deliver her first child. All the expenses of conducting the first childbirth and *huavad* (the rich herbal sweets meant for a post-partum woman) are borne by the natal kin. Only an orphaned woman, with no one in the parental home, has to deliver her first child in her conjugal home. Through the custom of the woman's first confinement is in the natal home, and subsequent ones in the conjugal house, the two households effectively share the

expenses, in addition to providing physical, social and moral support to the expectant woman.

Though it is the woman who delivers a baby, childbirth in Mogra is rarely seen as her sole responsibility, nor is it the responsibility of the couple, i.e., the woman and her spouse. On the contrary, the husband has little direct role to play in the organization of his child's birth. This is largely due in part perhaps to the belief that childbirth is a woman's domain and men should not interfere. Men's involvement is seen to hamper the childbirth process whereas the household women, kin and neighbouring older women are expected to play active roles in conducting childbirth. This belief and the practice of gender segregation explain the fear of exposure to male medical staff in a hospital during childbirth. In line with the prevailing notion of childbirth being a woman's domain, most of the gynaecologists in Indian hospitals are women. If the household women do feel the need to look to biomedical care, then the male folk would be consulted and expected to make arrangements. It is at this stage that their role becomes more crucial. Throughout the process of labour, and even prior to it, the woman is rarely left on her own to make any decision. In other words, it is not her personal prerogative or choice to decide where the birth will take place. It is customary for the household to be actively involved in matters like these rather than leave the woman to make her personal choice as an autonomous individual. It is also a kinship affair, let alone a household one.

As the entire household is geared up around the woman in labour, she feels immensely important. During labour, any female member of the household or the neighbourhood can assist in the numerous tasks related to organizing childbirth. (Assisting in childbirth is believed to bring *punn*, literally, religious merit). At this point, the usual allocation of roles in the household based on seniority and kinship are relaxed liberally. Women do their best to carry out whatever task is required for a successful delivery irrespective of her status vis-a-vis the woman in labour and the nature of the task. Senior women usually do jobs which are not expected of them during normal times, especially in relation to junior members, including daughters-in-law. Relatives senior to the woman may hold her legs, feet, and give her a massage. She can relax her *gungto* and often strikes her first direct conversation

with her mother-in-law, an ice-breaking point in a culture where a young daughter-in-law refrains from speaking to her mother-in-law directly to show respect.

The absence of males from the scene is a reflection of the strong household bond, especially during childbirth, as against the conjugal bond (see Patel 1994 for elaboration). Tensions that may exist between mothers/sisters- and daughters-in-law rarely surface during the process of child delivery, particularly in the first couple of cases. Even in case of subsequent deliveries, these tensions are more visible in post-partum care, both for the woman and in the running of her household rather than during labour. Post-partum duration can get quite difficult in some cases. Reluctance to pitching in to help the post-partum mother usually results in reduction of her rest period. But one should not overlook the institutional provisions to provide care during the first two births. As the first birth takes place at one's natal home, comfort is provided on the initiative of her mother. Also, as the second baby is born in the conjugal home, but happens to be the first one to be born there, tensions, even if they exist, are rarely allowed to surface during post-partum care. As women from the neighbourhood, especially TBAs and other close relatives drop in for the customary inquiry of the woman's and the baby's health, the woman cannot be left in the lurch for fear of social disapproval. This does not mean that tensions remain buried; they do surface in more subtle ways, and more openly as the parity increases.

In childbirth a woman assumes either the supine (also partially reclining against one of the TBAs) or the squatting position. Modesty demands that she be fully clothed except up to the knees. The *gagro* (long skirt) is lifted up intermittently for examination of the baby's passage. If a woman has an awkwardly positioned foetus she is made to stand on her head and given mild jerks to position the foetus, or given a massage to guard against a breech birth. But she is not considered to be in any danger. She is rarely permitted to lie side ways or change sides, though she may be helped to take a walk holding the walls or someone who is present there. Some massage is given on the stomach or spine and even some pressure is exerted on the abdomen, but it is not hard as it is believed this could damage the foetus. The umbilical cord is not cut till the placenta is out, for two reasons. If cut otherwise, first, it is believed to poison the mother, and second, it delays the extrusion of the placenta itself.

Though people have knowledge and experience of conducting births, there is little that reveals absolute carelessness. There is an apparent confidence about the frequent occurrence of childbirth, but there is often a slight lurking fear at the back of women's minds. And it is thought appropriate not to mention that fear in the open, especially for women in labour to hear. Open and loud statements about premonitions and untoward consequences are strongly dissuaded, remonstrated and silenced at all times and more so during labour. Rather the stress is on being positive about the outcome of pregnancy throughout the gestation, and during labour. Thus, despite genuine fears, especially during the first birth, people consider that there is little that is unpredictable about child delivery in Mogra. The common expression for wishing easy delivery for a pregnant woman conveys a mixture of hope and anxiety about her wellbeing: '*Kaule kheme chhut palle vai jo*' (literally, may she happily and safely be free of the entanglement). The matter of fact attitude towards pregnancy and child delivery does not mean that there is no fear of maternal mortality at all in Mogra. The baby does not pop out of one's ear. This saying implies that though delivery is easy, it is not easy enough to be neglected. It deserves some care.

## The Woman in Labour is Not Passive

By the third and subsequent child deliveries, the matter-of-fact attitude towards childbirth becomes more marked. By repeated births, women acquire more knowledge and courage to deliver babies. At times they may even give birth all alone at home before an attendant arrives. A couple of mothers had delivered while working in the fields. As the emphasis is more on post-partum care of the mother and infant rather than pre-natal care, women are expected to keep working until labour begins. It is not unheard of for a woman to deliver her baby all alone in the fields. Phooli delivered her fifth child all by herself in her field, a kilometre and a half away from home. She described her experience:

The pain was bearable and irregular. I thought the delivery was a few hours away. I continued to chop *bajri*. Suddenly the pains shot up. I could hardly move to a smoother ground. As I squat-

ted, the baby was born. I cut the umbilical cord, buried the effluvia there itself, tore a piece from my *orno* (wrap), wrapped the baby and returned home. I felt a strange courage to face it all, God was kind enough to make it all so smooth for me.

The manner in which child delivery is conducted in Mogra prevents it from being an experience only of travail and trauma. The attendants take every care to comfort, support and reassure the woman in labour. Their indigenous skills and the emotional framework they provide boost the morale of the young women whose strength intermittently flags. Eventually she gains enough confidence and skill to handle it by herself, if need be. She is in the privacy of a room and the focus of attention. The attendants are involved intensively with her. Their lively movements, sounds, gestures, pauses, talk, and even facial expressions are in accordance with the woman's rhythm of pain, and give her the much-needed strength and encouragement. Their serious involvement conveys that the baby is desired by all of them and that she is performing a heroic personal and social ordeal. The women around provide an atmosphere, including both warmth and matronly vigilance, that effectively prevents her from turning hysterical or even losing her calm. The warmth and emotional care is in sharp contrast to that experienced by women in British hospitals which affects them adversely, reports Kitzinger (1982) while comparing births in Jamaica and Britain. She describes the feeling of alienation from their bodies and the deprivation of autonomy that women in labour experience in British hospitals. Stephens (1986) gives spine-chilling examples of Indian female gyneacologists and obstetricians, often humiliating and insulting women who submit to their professional supremacy at the cost of their own psychological wellbeing. She argues that an absolute non-recognition of the emotional framework or elimination of the woman's effort at child delivery (encapsulated in the medical jurisdiction) makes childbirth inadequate and robs the mother of a sense of achievement by minimizing her participation.

In Mogra, there exist an atmosphere of reciprocal help. Mental notes are kept to reciprocate help during child delivery. As the household becomes a unit of reciprocity, a TBA may be summoned to help conduct a delivery in another household at any time. Usually as a senior wife, this woman would have others in her

household to take on a bit of extra work and manage the daily routine. Similarly, the woman in labour may have other women to take over some of the chores she performed to keep her own household going. Although the mother suffers the physical pain of childbirth, her neighbours and the wider community pool in their resources. These resources consist essentially of mutual help and sharing provided by people through their physical presence and willingness to help. However, a *da's* services are not reciprocated; her skill is not seen as supreme to require a passive submission. Instead, there are frequent questions raised and suggestions offered to her regarding her moves. Her knowledge is not seen to be dominating the whole scene, unlike what Kitzinger and Stephens have reported above.

## Symbols, Rituals and Cosmology

It is not only the knowledge and skills of the birth attendants and the active participation of the woman in labour, but also what meaning people assign to the process of childbirth, which sustains the popularity of home births. Several religious beliefs and rituals are practised for successful child delivery. For instance, when a daughter-in-law proceeds to her natal home for her first confinement at around the seventh month of pregnancy, a *mauli* (a sacred and protective thread believed to bring wellbeing) is tied on her wrist. Her mother-in-law performs the ritual of *khol bharavano* (literally, to fill the lap). She places some sweets, a coconut and some money in the pregnant daughter-in-law's *pallo* (one end of the *orno*, the half-sari wrap) spread across her lap. The latter carries the sweets and other items to her natal home. After placing them before household deities, they are distributed among children (see Douglas 1960 for discussion on people's perception of the efficacy of religious beliefs and rituals). Other beliefs include the avoidance of eclipses by pregnant women and certain foods considered to be hot in character, such as papaya. Hot humoured foods are feared to initiate miscarriage, hence the avoidance.

Pregnant women are encouraged to give alms and be kind to others so as to avoid complications during child delivery. Even during labour they are advised to take vows and declare that upon successful delivery they would give as alms some amount of grain

to birds, *Saads* and *Saamis* (mendicant castes) and Brahmins, and some fodder to cattle. Taking such vows is believed to be an aid in child delivery. The belief that a generous and good woman has an easy labour is so deeply internalized that labouring women consciously suppress their anguish to avoid being labeled as bad. They set an example of courage and fortitude. Even summoning any outside help is avoided as long as possible. Calling in a *dai* is considered the first signal of difficulty, while calling a nurse is a strong indication that the woman is not noble. After a few childbirths many women prefer to deliver their babies even without a *dai*'s help, perhaps also to demonstrate that child delivery is not difficult. This is quite common and younger women emulate it in an attempt to approximate the ideal image.

Self-control in labour, during child delivery, is constantly encouraged through the prevailing norms. A woman delivering a child while working in the fields is applauded and praised as a simple soul. This confidence and self-reliance perpetuates the belief that pregnancy and child delivery are a matter of routine in a woman's life.

A woman's fearless and heroic control over herself during child delivery is explained in terms of certain desirable humane personality attributes. It is believed that good, affectionate, loving, selfless, saintly and simple souls have easy child deliveries and women who mean well, have sincere thoughts and do good deeds never face any problems during labour. On the other hand, wicked, cunning, selfish, miserly, non-loving, greedy, quarrelsome and mean women are sure to suffer difficulties and complications. Labour pains are therefore to be endured courageously with the hope of attaining successful motherhood and associated social status. Groaning and screaming during labour are disapproved. If a woman screams, she is severely criticized and immediately silenced by her attendants. Later, she has to face several uncomfortable queries that indirectly cast doubts on her positive attributes.

All containers where grain is stored are opened up and the woman's hair is loosened to symbolically accelerate labour. This practice has also been reported from a north Indian village by Jeffery et al. (1989). The woman in labour is asked to pray along with others to *Ve Mata*, the deity of birth. *Ve Mata* is the wife of *Brahma*, the creator of the world. Her blessings help in fruitful child

delivery. She is believed to be the giver of life and the mother of all. She is solicited several times while the woman is in labour. She is importuned to come to her rescue. A *chajdo* (grain chaffing implement made of straw) containing grain and *gur* (jaggery) is placed beside the woman's head as an offering to Ve Mata. It is a way of symbolically welcoming her spirit.

The reversal of symbols also take place during child delivery. The woman in labour is encouraged to repeat the names of her husband's parents and ancestors—an act disapproved in normal times. The insistence by elderly attendants on repeating these names is quite awkward for her and takes her mind off physical pain. She rarely questions the basic assumptions of cultural values, norms and knowledge. Instead, she accepts advice and instructions sincerely. The women around pray to the gods for her because it is assumed that the atmosphere at such time is infested by evil spirits and demons who might prove harmful. The evil spirits are prevented by invoking the family and local deities, and thus the woman is relieved by a successful and speedy delivery. A woman in labour has control over her situation, which is facilitated by the prevailing cosmology. Certain practices in a woman's everyday life embody the cosmology of suffering that enables her to tide over labour pains.

The common image of a woman in labour in Mogra is one who endures her agony silently. The not-yet-mothers appropriate this image very early in life. A woman facing prolonged labour pain knows what is expected of her and of those attending to her. Child delivery is handled with a matter-of-fact attitude, and this indeed is a cultural ideal. The manner by which the institutional constraints and opportunities are perceived have much to do with the way women act during childbirth.

## Material Resources

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Prevalence of the popularity of home births lies not just in the beliefs, rituals and cosmology, kinship and neighbourhood networks of reciprocity, but affordable material resources enable the continuity of this practice. Spending money, especially cash, on child delivery is seen as an avoidable waste. Of course, a household incurs expenses in conducting a delivery, including



payment to a *dai*. This payment is both in cash and kind and also spreads over a period of a month or more. The smaller amounts paid over a longer period are easier for a household to absorb than a one-time large cash payment. Also, a share of the sweets distributed among visiting relatives and neighbours is given to the *dai*. This, as it were, makes the relationship between a *dai* and the post-partum woman and her household more than a mere commercial or professional one. These expenses are in addition to the obligatory ones, such as the expensive herbal eatables (*huavad*) given to the post-partum mother and to the *dai* or a relative who looks after the new mother for some time, and the feast and festivity expenses that follow a birth. It is important to highlight that the expenses incurred in feast and festivity accrues social and symbolic capital to the concerned household among the village and caste community.

Meanwhile child delivery at home in Mogra requires very few material resources, compared to the paraphernalia in a maternity hospital. There is no elaborate preparation in terms of space, bedding, and purchase of clothing and equipment. The local *dai* and expert women relatives are already aware of the pregnancy. Usually they arrive when they are needed. Child delivery requires only some covered space with walls on at least three sides. A proper room is the most suitable, but if not available, a place unfrequented by men is used. A secluded and covered space in the house is enough to lodge a woman for rest after child delivery. This is rather dimly lit both for reasons of infrequent supply of the recently introduced electricity to the village, and to prevent unnecessary and undesirable attention about the goings on. Further, from A. Bel's information (see contribution in this volume), in favour of the dimly lit birthing space, a rather strong logic emerges: it avoids the first shock to the baby's eyes as it emerges out of the dark warmth of the womb. In this way, the seemingly inadequate light turns out to be a blessing in disguise.

Sometimes the cot used to deliver a child is small and worn out. It is covered with a small bedspread called *rali* and is made of rags. A gunny bag may also serve the purpose. Another *rali* or blanket is used to keep the woman warm, if needed. Unlike in a modern hospital, the clothes worn during labour are not special ones. They are usually old and tattered, kept specifically for the purpose. As better clothes are liable to be soiled during child

delivery, a woman doing so is criticized for being unwise. Clothes worn during labour are called *pidon raa gaba*, literally, clothes worn during contractions. These are later given to a *dai* or used as napkins or sanitary towels.

The tools required for child delivery are usually those used commonly in every household. They do not need to be fetched from outside for the occasion. A knife or a sickle is used to cut the umbilical cord. Small folding-knives are generally available with elderly men, most of them being opium addicts, who use them for cutting opium cakes. The sickle is usually cleaned with ash, or even used without cleaning. A few people prefer shaving blades—a recent trend. It is seen as a modern measure to prevent tetanus, and worth adoption. A bowl of live coals is placed in the room as heat is believed to facilitate contractions. Herbs considered to be hot and heat-generating are administered, if needed. None of the above mentioned items require a long term planned effort or time to procure. Except for medicinal herbs, which are well got in advance, everything else is already available in the house. With several people rising to the occasion, it does not take long for the items to be assembled. Thus the entire paraphernalia of child delivery at home involves only a few material resources, costing only a little to the household.

## Hospital Births: An Avoidable Cost

Child delivery in a hospital run by the government or by a private doctor reveals a different experience. Though in government run hospitals no service charges are paid, money is required for some equipment, drugs, and at times even for blood. The amount for any or all of these is not easy for an average villager of Mogra to pay for. It is crucial here to point out that this is not the only expense involved. This is only the beginning and a few days of hospital stay can mean more expenses adding onto these items. Additionally, the accompanying women and in this case necessarily a male member accompanying them, need to pay for their board and lodging, which is neither easy nor convenient. The third set of expenses is on transportation to the hospital. Finally, the possibility of some care from specialist doctors is possible when villagers route themselves through a home visit to doctors in

government hospitals who also do private practice. The visit to a doctor's house would be a good proportion of the total expenses. Finally, tips to the cleaning staff in the hospital are expected. For Mogra's people, these amount to an enormous expense for the household besides disrupting the work of attendants for a few days—it could mean the loss of wages, or some work in the field, or simply missing social events and meetings. The expenses would be much higher if childbirth took place in a private clinic where doctors, para-medical staff, all drugs, equipment and room charges are paid by service seekers. Expenses on customary presentations to relatives and others remain to be incurred, besides those spent on festivity.

In Mogra, on less than half a dozen occasions (from the 3,011 deliveries), hospital deliveries were attempted. All of these cases were a result of what was seen as a severe complication by women attending the deliveries, but none show any correlation by way of socio-economic class. Thaddeus and Maine (1994) refer to the absence of systematic evidence that cost is a major barrier in seeking care but their review of literature does indicate that economic status affects the use of services. Their review also concludes that in terms of educational status and use of biomedical care, 1) the role is not clear cut, and 2) the mechanisms through which education works are not well understood. There is little, if any education of women in Mogra. A few who have ever been to school have also had their babies at home. Less than 20% of rural women in Rajasthan are literate, and in Mogra the level of literacy is certainly far below this figure.

Distance too has been shown as an important barrier to seeking health care, particularly in rural areas. It can exert a dual influence, that is, long distances can be both an actual obstacle to reaching a health facility and they can be a disincentive to even trying to seek care. The effect becomes stronger when combined with poor roads and lack of transportation.

Besides the dispensary in Mogra, there is a primary health centre (PHC) in a neighbouring village, about 4 kilometres away, but this is rarely used for childbirth by Mogra residents. If the decision to avail biomedical services is arrived upon, it is the main city hospital in Jodhpur that is attended, which is about 25 kilometres away. In practical terms, this is not exceedingly far. One of the main reasons for this view is a major State Highway

that passes through the two settlements of the village. The highway bus stop takes a couple of minutes to a maximum of 20 minutes' walk from the village, depending on the location of one's house. The state road transport buses pass by every one or two hours. Besides, goods-transporting trucks give lifts for a payment. Private jeeps going between Pali and Jodhpur are also available. Of about two scores of tractors in the village, one or two visits per week to Jodhpur is the least one can come across. At least two trucks and/or tractors collect over 50 men and women every morning from Mogra and drop them back in the evening. These people are largely the scheduled caste villagers who work as construction labour at various sites in Jodhpur for several months of the year. Clearly, if the will to arrive at the city hospital existed, 'distance' would not be too big an obstacle, *ceteris paribus*. But the non-inclination and procrastination are strong enough to render the distance and other material factors as major obstacles both to themselves, and to survey research questions.

## The 'Holistic' Package of Childbirth

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### Preference for a *Dai* over a Nurse

A trained nurse is attached to the Mogra dispensary. Although she lives in the village, a *dai* is preferred to her for several reasons. A *dai* is adept in the local traditions of conducting child deliveries which are more acceptable to people. Unlike the professional nurse she is always available and will not say 'no' even when sent for at odd hours unless the household had not paid her sufficiently on an earlier occasion. Her services are not even half as expensive as the nurse's, and the same is true of her medicines. Besides, a *dai* offers several additional services not performed by the nurse, such as cleaning the effluvia and placenta, performing various rituals related to burying the placenta, cleaning the place and purifying it with dung paste, bathing the baby, sponging the mother, making her bed, washing her clothes and giving her post-natal massage. Above all, the *dai* accepts payment in both cash and kind and this amount depends on the sex and health of the baby, unlike payments for biomedical care where the fee is fixed and is paid in cash. In kind, the *dai* is given meals, food

grains, old garments, a piece of new cloth, and a ball of herbal sweets prepared for the parturient mother. Payment in instalments dispersed over long periods of time seems more reasonable to people than a one-time payment of cash to the nurse for a shorter visit. People say that the nurse is more bothered about her fees, and has little consideration for a client with limited resources. A *dai*, on the other hand, accepts though not always ungrudgingly, whatever little is paid by those with meagre resources.

As child delivery is expected to follow a normal course for all women, no fear or anxiety associated with it is blown out of proportion. In the same vein, spending money on child delivery is considered improper. Accordingly, a nurse is summoned only when the relatives and *dai* have exhausted all their methods. Even when a nurse is brought in at such a moment, she is asked to wait for a few minutes and is prevented from giving any medicine or an injection, to avoid payment if possible. Non-payment to the nurse is justified if she does not administer anything that incurs a cost (for general illnesses most private medical services in the area do not charge separately for consultation but include the charge into the price of medicines).

Ansi was labouring for her second child and the nurse had to be summoned because of certain complications. She was asked to wait for about 15 minutes, and prevented from administering any medicine. She was permitted only to examine Ansi's abdomen. After some time when Ansi delivered a boy, her mother-in-law asked the nurse to quit. She was not paid anything for her midnight visit. The reason given by Ansi's parents-in-law was that she had given no medicine and a mere visit did not entitle her to any payment. (Patel 1994)

Usually, the senior female relatives conducting child delivery are never paid anything for their work, but they are a part of the broader network of reciprocity by virtue of being relatives or neighbours. The same reasoning for non-payment is applied to the nurse who is hardly a part of this network of reciprocity.

Two years after Ansi had her second baby she was due for childbirth and had the same complications during labour. All her attendants felt the need to call the nurse. Her *jethani* went to summon her. The nurse first made sure that this time she did not

wait beside Ansi till she was delivered of her baby. She made it clear that she would begin her medication soon after examining Ansi and claim a fee. It was only on this condition that she agreed to move out of her house. (Patel 1994)

Both the people and the nurse are not used to each other's code of conduct. Each is critical of the other. But the people are gradually adapting to the nurse's demands, albeit after a great deal of procrastination and resistance. She is also learning to deal with village ways.

### Preference for a *Dai* over a Doctor/Hospital delivery

A modern doctor differs from the *dai* in many respects. There are indigenous ways of keeping a *dai* informed about the pregnant woman's condition. All precarious moments are discussed intensively with the *dai*. On the other hand, the modern doctor has a fixed time when patients may come. The doctor's dealing is restricted largely to professional expertise, while the local birth expert deals in an entirely different fashion. She sees the pregnant woman as a person belonging to a particular household in the village. The *dai* also observes the patient in a total context. In other words, the pregnant woman's health is seen in context of her household, family, caste and economic condition. Unlike biomedical professionals in urban areas, the local birth attendant has no fixed schedule during which she is available for consultation. She may be approached any time during the day, and even at night, if the situation demands. As the expert attendant's or the *dai*'s relationship with various households is informal, their availability for the purpose of consultation or for attending to the patient depends primarily on personal terms. And second, meetings with them are not restricted only to discussions about the pregnant woman. They form only a small part of the many matters of conversation.

The village culture ensures that the woman in labour gets expert attention when needed. The older members of the household, especially senior women engage in resource mobilization for the event through a network of personal and informal relationships.

The *dai's* payment is linked to past experiences of social relations between the two parties, and wellbeing of both child and mother. The preparations made for child delivery might appear to be casual and inadequate, but closer examination reveals that human resource mobilization is a dynamic institution assuring help when sought.

Though treatment (for any health problem) in private and government run hospitals is not the same (clients are better attended to in private clinics), both perceive villagers as dirty and ignorant, of modern medical ways in particular, and in general. This attitude is heightened in government hospitals. It is precisely to avoid an indifferent treatment that people route themselves to government hospitals through a visit to a doctor's home—to pay obeisance and a fee. This is not to say that no villager goes to a government hospital directly. But few would do so for child delivery.

The patient's attendants are also very uncomfortable in a hospital as it is a new setting; the language may be different also, thus causing communication problems. The ways of the hospitals and those of the attendants are at odds with each other, leading to awkward inconveniences to both parties. The preferential treatment given to the woman at home is nowhere in sight in a hospital. Both she and her mother-in-law may be insulted and ignored in a hospital. The common image of a hospital delivery in Mogra is one where no attendants are allowed near the woman in labour (when she needs them the most) and she is made to lie on a table all by herself with only a quick glance from nurses/ doctors once in a while. 'Is this the way to treat a labouring woman; is this what you go to hospital for?' Zurbrigg (1984) describes the agonizing rigmarole that rural women in India go through while visiting city hospitals. Wadley (1994) also observes that in rural North India people fear government hospitals—if there is any care it is minimal and brusque, which has made people shift to private care providers. The indifference of health staff towards clients in India is also reported from two other states by Mavlanker et al. (1996).

The intention here is not to make any judgmental comment on either modern medical practitioners or indigenous birth attendants and *daïs*. The emphasis is, however, on the differential perception of illness and healing within which child delivery takes place in

Mogra. Biomedicine follows the generic mechanical model which focuses on disease processes and physiological abnormalities rather than on patient experience. In the process the holistic view of the body is of lesser concern, and even less is that for the person as a whole. Biomedicine thus addresses the disease or the condition and not the person. The person factor comes in only while receiving and conversing and in other like behaviour that biomedicine practitioners engage in as social actors/persons towards their diseased counterparts. And even this aspect of their behaviour is not at all welcoming or comforting for the poor/villager. On the other hand, indigenous medicine works on the assumption of an affliction being part of a person belonging to a social, economic and cultural context. In this regard it is worth asking if the people having home births have to fall in line and 'behave' to qualify for even a less than human behaviour at the hands of modern medical system.

### Difference in Post-Partum Care

Post-partum care is considered very crucial and is well organized. Beside household members, other relatives and neighbours are available for help. The special treatment given to a woman in labour becomes more elaborate after child delivery. The rules prescribing the hours and nature of work and rest as well as the consumption of valued foods are relaxed for the *japaiti* (post-partum woman). Such relaxations are considered crucial for speedy recovery. The various comforts provided to a woman are unthinkable in normal times. The sudden availability in abundance creates a disposition that makes childbirth a desirable venture for the new mother. Also the belief that a *japaiti* is ritually impure supports the mother's bed rest while others look after her various needs: ranging from a few days to weeks. The mother is given her first purifying head bath, usually on the fifth day.

The *japaiti* avoids a normal bath as her body is believed to be in a cold state in contrast to the hot state of pregnancy. She is, therefore, given a warm sponge bath. The infant is either sponged or bathed in warm water. It is wrapped in a cloth and put beside the nearly bare bodied mother. There is a great deal of skin to skin contact between mother and child for the first few days of



the baby's life. The *japaiti* is made to sleep on a cot, straight on her back with legs close to each other to heal the vaginal injury. Gauze dipped in heated sesame oil and turmeric powder is used to clean and disinfect it. The same is applied on the infant's naval, and on the cut tip of the umbilical cord. If the *japaiti* has abdominal or back pain, the affected area is fomented with a hot brick wrapped in a piece of cloth. A soft sash is tied around the mother's waist to regain shape. She is warned not to scratch her body lest she develop striations.

The effluvia is removed and the site of childbirth is cleaned. The umbilical cord is buried in a corner of the courtyard, while the remaining effluvia is buried in the household's rubbish heap, usually in the cattle shed. The layer of dung on the floor is re-smearred with fresh dung and mud paste. All or most of this work is done by a *dai* and, in her absence, by some other female servant or relative.

Child delivery care in a hospital rarely ends with the actual birth of the infant; that is only the beginning. Cultural contrasts strike more as time goes by. The disposal of the umbilical cord is likely to cause problems because hospitals are not the sites where parents from Mogra would want the umbilical cord to be ritually buried; they would prefer their land/house. In hospitals it is summarily disposed off. Unlike at home, post-partum women are kept under electric fans. This exposure is considered harmful for a post-partum body as women at home are secluded and cover themselves to avoid any breeze for a few days after childbirth. Also the food provided/permitted by the hospital does not match with the culturally prescribed food for a post-partum mother. Food in the hospital is similar to what is given to most ailing patients. On the other hand, post-partum women are not ailing, nor are they considered to be patients in Mogra. They are given very rich and coveted food (*huavad*), and all of this is done in great privacy to avoid evil spirits from harming the mother's food and eventually harming the baby. There is a great restriction on water and any other liquid in Mogra but a post-partum woman in a hospital is encouraged to have liquids. These, like the exposure to breeze, are believed to be adverse for the body and cause various aches in later life. Similarly, infants are not given any water for two to six months depending on the season of birth, as this is believed to cause throat problems; while a baby is given water liberally in the hospital. In a context when villagers are more or less made

to feel that they are ignorant, it becomes difficult for them to refuse the prescriptions of the hospital staff without a conscience that their actions are going to be harmful for the baby and the mother (see Patel 1994: 129–30 for more detail on this issue). However, bio-medical understanding on the practice of giving water to neo-natal infants is now changing in India. This was reported by a medical doctor at a workshop on 'Gender and Representation' at Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, in November 1995. Neo-natal infants are not given water in hospitals, she had reported.

Unlike the indigenous birth attendants, the doctors or nurses do not visit the parturient mother once she returns home. Here she may get into a context where hospital prescriptions are reversed through conventional behaviour, rituals and symbols associated with post-partum care—a care that women rarely avail of at any other time in life.

## Conclusion

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Given the beliefs about childbirth, its organization—material, cultural and emotional—and post-partum care and importance accorded to a parturient woman, it makes little sense to make an effort, go through an ordeal and spend a great deal of money to have a delivery in a hospital, no matter what the Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) figures signal or the planners preach.

The holistic package of arrangements for child delivery at home makes it less inconvenient for the woman in question, for those attending to her during and after the childbirth and for those providing post-delivery care unlike in a biomedical setting. As child delivery at home does not remove the woman from the domestic scene, she can organize and indirectly supervise the running of the household chores. This is an important consideration in deciding to have children at home.

Thus childbirth in Mogra consists of a framework of comfort and care which appears to make child delivery a matter-of-course affair. It is in this way that the pain and anxieties of childbirth are dealt with. The pain is overcome substantially and sublimated symbolically as contrasted with child delivery experiences in a modern hospital. The emotional support provided to the woman

in labour, in addition to the sense of assurance she gets from the concern shown for her wellbeing makes her feel special. Participation of the household as a unit of social network in organizing child delivery enhances this emotional bond, notwithstanding the poverty ridden conditions and tensions among relatives. Reversal and relaxation of rules of seniority and hierarchy, however momentary, in favour of the parturient woman raises self-esteem and gives her a feeling of accomplishment for the household as a whole rather than just for herself.

It is only through such an in-depth look into indigenous maternity care that policymakers may pick clues as to how to make the option of modern care attractive. Modern and traditional cares, in theory at least, share the fundamental ideal of a safe and easy birth.

Like most aspects of indigenous medicine, there is a possibility of self-reflection and comparative evaluation when occasion demands. Home birth is not an isolated activity oblivious of other alternatives. There is, as Stuart Hall's (1981) phrase, a process of 'double movement' at work. The actual practice in its belief, symbolic, cosmological and material respects involves a discourse of comparative evaluation. There is an ongoing process of containment and resistance, that is, home births as popular practice lies somewhere in between pure isolation and total encapsulation. There are 'active mediations' in terms of calling a nurse, learning her code of conduct and vice versa; going to a hospital when danger is perceived to be too serious to handle indigenously; using shaving blades to cut the umbilical cord, etc. On the other hand, there is a total disapproval of modern medicine when it comes to post-partum care. Local knowledge about care of a newborn and the parturient mother constitutes the crucial part of home births, and there is little that people are willing to compromise or even trade off in this sphere. For them, child delivery is as important as post-delivery care of the baby and mother, and the latter is rather more prolonged and tedious as well. Yet, the possibility of trading off what seems worth accepting in the medical approach speaks of the thriving character of the popularity of home births as a package, though it rarely comes to them on their own and on familiar terms, and also leaves them uncomfortable.

Yet, the institution of home births is not just a piece of bodily process accepted by the people. The dimension of political

economy of home births is perceptible at least at two levels: 1) at the emotional level, involving the kin, household and neighbourhood networks, with special space for women within them, and 2) at the level of material resources required, and the material conditions in which home births are conducted.

Childbirth is not relegated to a purely personal domain. It is not a personal or private affair concerning only the woman and/or her spouse. It is a household and family matter. It is largely a women's matter and tackled mostly by them through a longstanding network of mutual help and reciprocity. In people's own frame of reference, childbirth is a matter-of-course affair, something that women by nature are ordained to go through all the time. This sustains the culture of home births and helps it from turning into a medicalized or pathologic event requiring attention and expertise beyond the local material and human resources. Everything is not, of course, so rosy all the time. Differences of caste, class, age, parity, sex of earlier children, extent of incorporation in the family, etc. are important attributes for variation in care. But the emphasis here is on the general pattern of care which dissuades people from medicalizing the matter and viewing it as a safer, economical, convenient, familiar—an overall better alternative. It is in the above light that this popular practice is produced and reproduced with material and non-material mediations and a cultural repertoire to go by. Just how far can the state and political control make inroads into this cultural practice and lived experience remains to be seen.

## Note

1. This paper was earlier presented at the Popular Cultures and Social-cultural Action Meet organized by The Centre for Cooperative Research in Social Science, Pune, 2–8 January 1998. I have benefited from the comments by Andréine Bel, Prem Chaudhary and Riet Turksma. I owe them thanks, and the usual disclaimers apply.

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## MIDWIVES: A Tradition on the Move in Maharashtra

HEMA RAIRKAR

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This is the account of a local experiment recently launched in a hilly corner of India to strengthen the status of traditional midwives at a time when their age-long know-how tends to be controlled, eliminated or resorbed into the present knowledge systems and venal practices of modern medical power. About 50 male and female animators of local groups of the *Village Community Development Association (VCDA)*,<sup>1</sup> Pune, known under the name of *Garib Dongari Sanghatna (GDS)*, namely, the *Organization of the Poor of the Mountain*, take up this issue as one of the significant objectives of their socio-cultural action activities. A core group of 15 of them (see list in Appendix 1), a few being themselves seasoned midwives, take on the responsibility of carrying out the activities that I am now presenting in this paper. A major coordination role has been secured by three main GDS animators, Tara Ubhe, Kusum Sonavne and Pandit Padalghare, apart from me.

### Context and Location

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We embarked on this action-research programme with village midwives in March 1998 in the four talukas of Velhe, Mulshi,

Mawal and Rajguru Nagar of Pune District (Maharashtra, India). This area is part of the hilly tracts of the Western Ghats, or Sahyadri Range in Western India. One hundred and twenty eight traditional midwives (known as *suins* in Marathi) have till date voluntarily attended 23 meetings arranged for them (see list in Appendix 2) to share experiences and reflect upon their present status. They are all regular practitioners of their traditional art of birth attendance. Approximately 90 of them are in their sixties, and have accumulated a rich experience along the last thirty-two to forty years of practice. When we asked them how many deliveries they may have attended, we realized that they have never thought in such statistical terms, and that our question was somehow queer. They would reply: 'We have performed more deliveries than there is hair on our arms and head.' The other 38 are relatively younger; they have attended between five to forty deliveries each till date. Some of those midwives who have come under the influence of, or in close contact with the Primary Health Centres (PHC) of the Public Health Services have somehow imbibed the administrative language of statistical 'survey', and the like. As a result, when the question of the number of deliveries is raised, they would feel apprehensive and obliged to apologize for not having yet filled up the list of deliveries they attended in their life, or having forgotten or lost or misplaced it. This is the first symptom of a shift of perspective that our present study is precisely concerned to highlight.

These midwives stay on the Eastern slopes of the Western Ghats, scattered over a range of 200 kms of hilly area from Dangekhind in Velhe taluka to Yenve in Rajguru Nagar taluka. They belong to ten different castes, from higher agricultural (Deshmukh: 1 and Maratha: 66) and service communities (temple priest, Gurav: 1, barber, Nhavi: 2 and musician, Gondhali: 1) to tribal (Katkari: 11 and Mahadev Koli: 7) and former untouchable castes (Cambhar: 2 and Mahar: 13, all of the latter Neo-buddhists), and in between former transhumant shepherds settled as cattle breeders on the hill tops (Dhangar: 24). All of them either till their own land or work on others' fields as share croppers or labour. The main crops cultivated are paddy, different sorts of millets (*nacni*, *varai*, *kathal*, etc.) and pulses. Cultivation on the slopes is a strenuous job. Agricultural practices and appliances are traditional. Modern mechanical agricultural appliances cannot be

operated in the hilly areas. Tribal communities collect forest products for seasonal sale in the market and continue living partially on hunting and fishing besides working as seasonal agricultural labourers. Dhangars rear milching cattle like cows, buffaloes, sheep and draft bullocks while cultivating millets on the slopes. Traditional peasant lifestyles and mentalities decide upon the consumption patterns. While retaining a certain extent of autonomy, the rural population is also becoming more and more dependent on market and monetary exchange, and in matters of health and delivery no less than in other domains.

The geographical conditions make communication difficult. The area counts four big dams: Panshet in Velhe taluka, Warasgaon and Mulshi in Mulshi taluka, and Pawna in Mawal taluka. The villages located in the catchment area of the dams are unapproachable for nearly six months. The roads get washed out by heavy monsoon from June onwards. From December to May the state transport buses ply more or less regularly on the hilly tracks. On the lake of the dams, transport is provided by a launch, which stops during the monsoon because of heavy rains and strong winds. The transport by launch however remains uncertain even during other periods of the year.

The serious patients are placed in a cane basket and the basket is carried by the men on their shoulders to a bus station, when in the dry season a bus is possibly expected. If the patient has to be brought at night, people have to walk down to a Govt. Primary Health Centre (PHC). During the monsoon there is no other alternative than carrying patients and walking through mountains for hours altogether up to the colony near a dam. Only the areas below the dams can be normally approached all through the year by a regular public bus service, from where access to a PHC or a city hospital is possible. The state administration has always been reluctant to provide adequate services to the remote areas beyond the dams under any pretext: lack of road, scanty population scattered in small hamlets and contributing hardly any revenue to the Treasury, areas located far from the Government offices or market centres and populated by backward, ignorant communities, etc. 'The latter should rather leave their hills and avail themselves of modern facilities down, below the dam, and in the urban areas,' is the officials' motto. In Mawal the areas called Dhamandara and Uskan Pathar are located on the cliff of



the Sahyadri range. People have to climb on foot, which is the only means of communication; the same is true of Yenve, which is situated in Rajguru Nagar taluka.

There is one PHC for a population of 30,000 in the rural areas. The PHC is equipped with an operation theatre where major operations can be done including Caesarean section. This is a full-fledged medical centre that monitors in particular the Government family planning programmes. Normal deliveries can be done in any such centre. Some sub-centres may be attached to the PHC, where small operations like family planning operations can be done. The sub-centres deal with other ailments too but their staff and medical provisions are considerably inadequate to the needs of the people.

## Inspiration and Perspectives of Cultural Action

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Since 1980, GDS animators are engaged in primary health education activities, which aim at raising health consciousness among local population.<sup>2</sup> They also distribute low-cost medicines. Some women from the health animators' group practice as traditional midwives. They attend the training provided by the PHC officers under the government scheme to upgrade skills of traditional midwives.

In 1977, the Central Government had launched a Community Health Volunteer scheme<sup>3</sup> inspired by the Chinese programme known as 'bare foot doctors'. Under this scheme, training was planned for traditional midwives. The latter had to stay in the PHC for one month, for which they received remuneration. The rationale behind the scheme was that the traditional midwife needs adequate technical training as her way of delivering endangers the mother and baby's lives. As in India modern medical services cannot definitely reach all corners of the country, this solution appeared to be an appropriate compromise and was accepted as such. Traditional midwives were offered the course in the PHCs on the assumption that their knowledge and practice being limited and defective, the intervention of some alien knowledgeable agency was necessary to impart them with proper training.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas, as a matter of fact, the government training proved to be of no use to the midwives of the GDS health animators' group who attended the course. The following experiences and reactions of Rama Ughade and Saru Kadu expound the opinion of all of them:

Rama Ughade: We had not learnt anything new in the course. The doctor placed an appliance in our hand and asked us to count the heart beats of the baby. The doctor had asked us to attend births, but he had not taught us anything. On the contrary we had many hot discussions with him. We received several things like tarpaulin, a towel, a pair of scissors. We have not got any new knowledge. We went to attend the course for the monetary remuneration as some financial provision was given to the participants.

The attraction of the remuneration prompted also Bababai Dalvi, Savirta Thule and Sakhu Shedje to go and attend the course.

Saru Kadu: I received a plastic pot to keep the placenta and an enema pot which I had never used. We have the practice of keeping the placenta in an earthen pot and burying it, the plastic pot was useless. I have never used the enema pot. We were told to use the enema pot when labour pains start. We traditional midwives follow a different practice. First we give the woman a bath with hot water, pouring a lot of water on the waist. We massage the waist, stomach and thigh, so that for us the enema pot is redundant. The doctor told me to show him how I deliver women. Two doctors were present. Along with the resident doctor, there was another young trainee doctor from Sassoon Hospital, Pune. I delivered a woman in front of them. Both of them appreciated my skill. We had cordial relations but we did not learn from them any new knowledge. We went to attend the course only because there was provision for a monetary remuneration.

It was in 1998, after we came in contact with Andréine Bel, that the group of GDS animators adopted the programme regarding midwives' practices. To tell the truth, no special attention had previously been given to traditional midwives by VCDA. The starting point was when Andréine Bel sought help to check the questionnaire of her survey (Bel 1998), for which Tara Ubhe

arranged a meeting with an animator and a traditional midwife from the Katkari tribal community, Tara Katkar, whose cooperation proved particularly precious. A few other GDS animators—Kusum Sonavne, Kala Shilawane, Baby Jadhav, Jahira Mulani and Bhimsen Nanekar—further assisted A. Bel to prepare a systematic questionnaire to interview traditional midwives, and then organized these interviews in several places of Pune district: Mulshi, Mawal, Indapur and Shirur talukas, during 1997. While providing A. Bel an opportunity to stay in the rural areas of Pune district and help interview midwives in their residential villages, the GDS animators were naturally not only the first to contribute to her research programme but also to profit by it. They began to take serious cognizance of her approach and realize its importance. They were, in particular, informed about her experiences among midwives in Bihar. This prompted them to give this issue the attention it deserved. A beginning was then made in VCDA at two levels, to create a level of general awareness and to build a level of concrete intervention by GDS groups in the four talukas of Pune district mentioned earlier.

### A Wide Attempt at Awareness

VCDA started holding regular sessions of its Self-Education Workshop (SEW) since 1989. It is a self-training programme for both youth and women in rural Maharashtra,<sup>5</sup> who take initiatives in acting as social workers and engage themselves in different kinds of activities for the development of their villages. In the session held on 24–27 November, 1997, the issue of midwives was particularly touched upon in the context of discussions about power and democracy. The theme was: 'Though we may not occupy formal positions of power, ultimately power lies with people, who can to some extent control government machinery.' It was similarly stated that modern medical power tries to convince that doctors' knowledge is superior to indigenous knowledge. In reality, the people's indigenous knowledge is autonomous, and does not need institutional recognition or any official certificate to prove its credentials. The need of the time is for the traditional midwife to regain her lost position in society so that her experience can be again beneficial to society. Giving priority to indigenous

knowledge is a point of alternative development policy centred on man. The challenge facing social workers is therefore: 'How will traditional midwives get recognition and maintain a due position in rural society?'

In the session held on 23–26 May, 1998, Tara Ubhe took the lead in presenting the subject and initiating the discussion. She particularly stressed the differences between the practice of delivery followed by medical doctors and the traditional midwives. 'The tradition of midwives' was again one of the main subjects discussed in the session held on 26–28 November, 1998. Kusum Sonavne launched the debate with a reference to the approach propounded in local GDS groups:

In our village meetings, when we took up this subject for discussion, some midwives suggested to us that we should put pressure on the Government authorities and claim from them some remuneration. As people from every other section get swayed away by a commercial way of thinking it is natural that midwives also bow down to the current mainstream views. But we are of the opinion that our duty in this regard consists in providing the time and the place for them to think over their practice in a way which will help them to get back their due place and status in society.

Tara Ubhe insisted that when this tradition is falling into oblivion, the necessity of time is to make midwives confident in the worth of their tradition and practice, and make room for opportunity to share their knowledge. Mr. Waghmare, a doctor from Wardha district, told us that patients insist on injections and the midwives are also getting co-opted into the present medical system and make use of it to serve the vested interests of its functionaries and private practitioners. According to him, the midwife work in Nagpur area is mainly done by the untouchable Mang community, while in Chandrapur area it is mainly in the hands of the barber (Nhavi) community.

Since then the issue is every now and then discussed in each SEW session, till the moment comes when an extended plan of action would possibly be chalked out at the level of the state, focusing, on the one hand, on rural social workers and organizers of social-action groups as well as, on the other hand, on midwives themselves and their practice.

## Level of Socio-cultural Intervention

Tara Ubhe simultaneously took the initiative of giving particular attention to the tradition of midwives within the framework of the socio-cultural action undertaken by local groups of GDS. The first midwives' meeting was held on 16 March, 1998. Since then, many more have regularly followed in villages of the Pune district. Meanwhile, the question of whether, and if so, why and how should VCDA take up the issue of traditional rural midwives, was and is discussed in the regular monthly meetings of the Central Committee of the GDS animators. The specific features of the tradition were pointed out, and the following aims and guidelines were accordingly clarified as a framework for socio-cultural action:

1. The midwives' tradition is an autonomous tradition, which belongs to an alternate way of life. Several of its characteristics should be properly taken into account and assessed because of their permanent and universal relevance, and acted upon.
2. Compared to the modern medical practices, the indigenous are in a disadvantageous position. They are degraded from a position of respect and reliance towards a status of subalternity and disregarded by most of the current medical practitioners in India, and to some extent, as a consequence, by the local population. If they are not backed and helped to regain full confidence, their tradition will fall into disuse and oblivion.
3. Efforts should therefore be made
  - to encourage the midwives' potentials on account of the appropriateness of their age-long know-how, especially with regard to the specific conditions of a developing country, and the dynamics of a self-reliant and sustainable development based on human innate capacities;
  - to validate the practical knowledge of traditional midwives by getting it duly recognized by all those concerned, from local population to medical profession;
  - to create an atmosphere of self-confidence conducive to the transmission by the elder and experienced midwives of their knowledge and skills to future generations;

- to reinforce the tradition on the basis of its own credentials, creating to that effect opportunities for midwives to spread and strengthen their knowledge through systematic sharing among themselves, critical scrutiny of their practices, exchange of observations and articulation of their overall experiences;
  - to initiate on a wide scale among the population at large a movement of renewed support to, and reliance on the midwives' competence. Failing this, there is hardly any hope of continuation of the tradition.
4. A dialogue, and if necessary, a confrontation on equal terms between seasoned traditional midwives and open-minded modern medical practitioners is to be facilitated to update and increase the expertise of midwives within the perspective and ethics of their tradition, on the one hand, and on the other, check the legitimacy or otherwise of modern birthing practices against traditional midwives' know-how.

GDS animators began holding meetings of midwives keeping in mind the aims here above mentioned. A number of midwives eagerly started attending them (see Appendix 2), though with different motives in mind. At the first meeting on 16 March 1998 at Kolawade in Mulshi taluka, Pune district, Tara Ubhe launched the programme. Till date (July 1999) more than 23 meetings have been systematically organized in the villages. The response of the midwives is always enthusiastic.

The first and spontaneous reaction given by midwives on 16 March, 1998, was focused on remuneration:

You have invited us. Why have you organized this meeting? What is the use of getting assembled together? We feel that you will help us get remuneration. Up till now nobody has taken cognizance of us. Nobody has taken us into account. We were surprised when we heard that you invited us.

Assembled midwives were insisting that GDS animators help them in getting some remuneration. Mathu Marne said:

We midwives were invited to the PHC of Mutha, taluka Mulshi. They collected information from us. They asked us to bring

cases to them. They paid us rupees thirty per case. Are you going to do the same?

Tara Ubhe explained her purpose in convening the meeting, saying:

We will not give you rupees thirty. No question of money. We will not even try to obtain for you thirty rupees from the PHC. Nobody takes cognizance of the value of our knowledge. We have invited you to this meeting here to find out how people may take due notice of your knowledge, how the community may value your competence, how people will take you into account. This is what we have to think about. In earlier times there was no alternative to midwives. Midwives were a valuable part of society. The real question is how people, now, in the context of modern alternatives, will take due notice of traditional midwives; how their abilities will be identified and how they will regain a lost confidence. Many generations have tried to acquire and preserve a knowledge which has been passed on to them. They did inherit and stand on the firm ground of a knowledge accumulated by past generations. Midwives' value cannot be measured in terms of money. Their precious knowledge is their treasure.

Tara Ubhe gave the example of the tradition of grindmill songs. She cited one of them,

*This is not millstone, this is a ṛṣi from the mountain  
My dear woman, open your heart to him!*

and further commented upon:

We had a place to tell our mind to the millstone. Now with the flour mill, the stone mill is no more in use. We have lost our confidant friend. We lost a precious place to share our sorrow and happiness. The same thing will happen to the tradition of midwife if we do not take care. If we do not hand over our knowledge to someone, it will get drowned in the current of time. Then poor people like us will just be condemned to death. Against this, we have to constantly come together. We must preserve our knowledge. We must share it with each other. We have to see how our traditional knowledge can be given its proper value.

In the end all midwives unanimously agreed: 'What you say is true. When you call us we shall come. We are no more after money. We are ready to attend any meeting. We are ready to come with you.' Eventually there was a consensus that the tradition ought to be preserved and transmitted. This initial scenario repeated itself in several subsequent meetings in other places. The first meeting had set the tone. Most of the later meetings went on to discuss further particular aspects of the tradition, which I now distinctively report.

## The Wish to Transmit, The Ways to Learn and Preserve

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A first elementary question is usually submitted for reflection, discussion and adequate action: 'Do we feel that we should transmit our knowledge to younger women?' In each meeting the unanimous answer is: 'We wish that somebody should learn from us our skills. We feel that some women should follow us.' The young women, who accompany their elders to attend the meetings, show their willingness to learn the skills from experienced midwives.

In the meeting at Kale Colony, Baban Khandbhor referred to the story of an old man who had kept his silver plates under earth to protect them, but forgot at the time of his death to reveal the place where he had buried them. He then commented: 'If we do not disclose our knowledge and skill to others, next generations will lose our heritage.' After listening to the story, all midwives said: 'We are not to put our tradition in jeopardy. We want to train young women. We would be satisfied if our daughters, daughters-in-law, sisters, neighbours and friends learn from us.' Seven young women who had come from seven different villages to attend, listen and know about the proceedings of the meeting expressed their readiness to learn from aged and experienced midwives and acquire their skills.

Same reaction from young ladies in Nirgudwadi, Vegre:

Our Mathubai is getting old. One day will come when there will be no one to attend deliveries in the traditional way. We are carefully listening to the points raised in the meeting. For pre-



...serving our own knowledge we must come forward. Mathubai, we will accompany you next time when you go for a delivery.

The learning process and its motivations becomes naturally another matter of reflection. Sona Akhade summarizes it in three words: 'I saw, I listened, I learnt.' Konda Margale narrates how she volunteered: 'I used to help my husband's grandmother to hold the waist of the delivering woman. She was worried: "Who will continue my work?" I showed my enthusiasm to learn from her.' In meetings held at Kolawade, Panshet, Uskan and Kale Colony, midwives belonging to Katkari and Dhangar communities have similar positive responses and justify thus their will to receive and transmit the tradition:

We stay in the mountains and valleys. Our women can deliver at night also. We have no access to the hospital. There is for us no alternative but the midwife. We do impart our skill to other women from our community.

Regarding the question from whom do the midwives usually inherit their knowledge, the unanimous response is that they learn from some elderly woman in their family or community. In the natal family they may learn from grandmothers, mothers, brothers' wives, paternal and maternal aunts, elder sisters and cousins. In their married homes they learn from their mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law and husbands' aunts. In the village they learn from other midwives when they are allowed to help them, from neighbours and friends. A very important feature is that to learn, they are unhesitant to go beyond the boundaries of caste circles. Mathubai, from a Dhangar community, learnt from Dhonda Kangude, a Maratha lady.

Modern methods of teaching are unknown to the illiterate midwives. Which methods do they then follow to learn? In the meeting held at Kolwan, taluka Mulshi, the discussion was started by Kusum Sonavne thus:

There is a difference between the methods of traditional and modern education. The midwife does not go anywhere special to get education. She observes what other midwives are doing, she tries to gain experience, and she works with her own hands. She does not learn the alphabets a b c, or how to from books.

In a meeting held at Pune for some other special reason, and attended by many leading men and women animators of GDS, the issue of midwives was purposively discussed. Questions were raised about the willingness of midwives to part with their knowledge to others and whether other women are ready to accept it. One male animator was of the opinion that midwives tend to keep their knowledge secret, as they feel that their importance will be reduced if they impart their knowledge to others. Another observation was made that it may not be only a matter of unwillingness on the part of the elder midwife; she may be rather concerned whether her knowledge, once handed over to another woman, will be properly used. A midwife tests women before imparting her knowledge to them, as the practice needs capability, integrity and sincerity.

The question of modalities was also raised: how such a skill could be handed over. Tara Ubhe said, 'When a midwife is attending a delivery, other women are present to help. They see and observe how the midwife works.' According to Saru Kadu, a midwife, 'If a woman accompanies the midwife five to six times, she can learn.' It was remarked that the midwife does not use formal words such as 'giving education', and people are therefore not conscious that a new midwife is getting trained.

Itha Gonge is in her sixties. She started out of necessity to practice as a midwife when people told her: 'Your mother was a midwife. You have seen her. Come and help women to deliver.' She dares not attend difficult deliveries.

Interviewed at Pune with Saru Kadu, Rama Ughade takes time to narrate how she learnt:

A relative of mine had a very difficult delivery. She was staying in the next village. She had labour pains for three days. I went to meet her. The lady died. After this incident I thought: 'Why should I not learn the skill of midwife?' I went to see the delivery of my sister-in-law at Pole. The same midwife was delivering my sister-in-law, Nakubai. I asked the permission of Bhagubai, the midwife, and requested Nakubai to sit on my knees. I helped Bhagubai and tried to remember how she was proceeding. I attended one more delivery and helped Bhagubai. Then I started doing it on my own. My mother was also a very skillful midwife. Her own delivery was easy. She used to deliver alone without any attendant. I have one elder brother. I am next after him. I

observed the other five deliveries of my mother. Mother used to sit resting her back to the main pillar of the house. After delivery she used to cut the umbilical cord herself. She used to bathe the baby taking a bath herself and then lying down for rest.

Saru Kadu gives further personal details:

Najubai was a midwife. She helped me in my four deliveries. I used to sense how Najubai was delivering me, where she put her fingers inside my body. As we realize the touch to our own body, it is easy to remember it and study it properly in our own mind. This is the method I followed. I started accompanying Najubai. Najubai used to sit in front of the lady and I used to hold the waist of the parturient. Then one day I requested Najubai to let me sit in front of the delivering woman while Najubai would sit near me. We repeated this scenario several times. This gave me skill and confidence. When I sat in the front of the woman for the first time I was very much nervous. I was trembling, frightened, but I collected strength and continued. Najubai patiently gave me courage.

Bhiku Bhalerao said,

When necessity arrives we face it and learn in the process. For instance, there is a custom in the village that a blouse on the corpse of a woman must be stitched in a particular fashion. One Gangubai used to stitch such blouses. When she died the question arose as to who will now stitch such blouses. I went ahead and stitched the blouse.

Eventually, on this issue of transmission, three significant questions deserve due consideration. They were raised as follows in the GDS Central Committee meetings at Pune, the echo of midwives meetings' reports.

First of all, midwives transmit their knowledge as a tradition. There is no school to impart it. The knowledge is welcome with modesty and it is used for the purpose for which it has been taken. The learners must be trustworthy and gifted. This is not a knowledge meant to make business. Nowadays, the same midwives find themselves in a new situation and faced with questions which they had not traditionally been confronted with. Sundra More says, for instance, that when girls, who have taken some education up to tenth standard or so, attend their first delivery, they

ask many questions, like, 'what is going on?', questions about their own condition, etc. This is a demand that traditional midwives should take care of and be able to cope with if they want to uphold the relevance of their tradition in the eyes of the new generation.

Second, changing mentalities and new sets of attitude may sound the death knell of the midwife tradition. The attraction of hospitals is the main enemy as the disuse of midwives' practices will spell a fatal discontinuity in the transmission of tradition. The hospital magic comprises various allurements, as Tukaram Pawar, a Katkari tribal animator in his fifties, observes:

In the hospital there are cots, fans, white cloths, mattresses, injections and saline, that is why people get attracted to the hospital. The midwife has no such things with her. Naturally people consider her less effective. Doctors take our trees and bushes and prepare medicines out of it. We must study these realities properly. Common people easily get attracted to the tablets and pills, which are sold in attractive bottles and paper.

Kusum Sonavne, in the Kolwan meeting, points to similar causes:

The doctor has a degree hanging around his neck, he speaks alien language, he has read many big books, he wears white clothes. All these factors create fear and respect for doctor in simple people's minds.

Technical facilities make people lose patience and ignore attitudes of self-reliance, which give way to emergency syndromes:

Mathu Bawdhane: We can manage difficult deliveries. But now people do not show any patience. They are in haste to go to hospitals. So we midwives come under pressure. The girls also think that there are amenities. Their lives will be saved. The girls say that they are not to get delivered at home with the help of midwife but will rush to the hospital. They become impatient. One girl behaved in that way: I was telling the parents not to move the girl, but the girl insisted and her baby died in the womb.

Lakshmi Umbarkar: I was called for a delivery. I was with the girl since nine pm till four am. The girl and her parents became

nervous. The father went to bring a jeep. They wanted to transfer her to the hospital. The father arrived with the jeep and stood in front of the door. Then the girl had her delivery. We midwives know when the girl will deliver but parents lose patience.

Third, it was thought that in view of the scale of the challenge, the question of transmission of the midwife tradition to next generations should be raised among local population at large in the following terms: 'Who will become the heir of the midwives? Who will claim a right to this heritage? Should not the tradition be duly owned and acted upon?' In the matter of fact, the transmission of the tradition is not only dependent upon the will of committed women to learn, carry it effectively and hand it over to youngsters. It is still more dependent upon the willingness of local communities at large, to recognize, value and support it, instead of being allured by the deceptive enticements of venal discourses and technical facilities of systems of medical trade and power. Without a conscious collective appreciation and a deliberate will to own it, the midwife tradition will never be marked with the seal of social legitimacy that it needs to maintain its strength and power, and survive. At the level of local communities, the challenge may appear as being basically of a cultural nature.

To this effect, the following pamphlet was prepared and circulated among local communities as a means of socio-cultural action.

**The Midwife—Our Tradition**  
**WHO IS HER HEIR?**

Dear Villagers,

**An Ancient Tradition**

The midwife is an integral part of the culture of our rural area. In the village many babies come into the world with the help of the midwife. This tradition is millennial. It is through observation and practice that these women have created that knowledge and increased their skill in order to deliver a woman.

They called their daughters, daughters-in-law, women neighbours to accompany them. They put them to practice. They taught

them with love. They had only one expectation, that their heritage of midwife be transmitted as a vow, without arrogance, without deceit.

Women sing on the grindmill:

*Oh God! Where are you running and running!*

*With silver keys I go to release the pregnant woman.*

God in the guise of a midwife runs to deliver a woman.

According to the saying:

*Man's death in the field and woman's in delivery,*

they have developed the expertise to bring back from the grip of death the woman caught up in a difficult labour.

*For nine months and nine days I was in the dark*

*My fortunate mother she showed me the light.*

*For nine months nine days I was in mother's womb left side*

*Then how could I retort to my mother?*

We have grown up in mother's womb. We saw the world thanks to the midwives' hand. We have to accept their obligation. We should not hurt them. We must give them honour. This is what mother teaches through her songs on the grindmill. But we are losing this precious value.

### **The Situation Today**

We have good traditions. We have traditional skill and knowledge. We have turned our back to them. The midwife has the ability to solve the puzzle of delivery. She has acquired that competence through her strength of mind. She assumes the responsibility to deliver a woman. But we do not give her the respect that she deserves. Deserting the experienced midwife from our village we take our women a long distance for delivery.

The saint poet Tukaram says:

*You have your things at hand but you miss the place.*

Such is our condition.

### **Questions to Villagers**

The midwife helped unfold the puzzle of human birth. She found out ways for difficult deliveries. She studied and kept in mind which herbal medicines are to be given to mother and child to

keep them healthy. She effectively used them. She thought about the diet to be given to a delivered woman. Should we forget all this traditional knowledge? Should we be taken away by the current of time? Or should we preserve the tradition?

She has no syringe; she wears no white apron, should we therefore reject her? Or carry further the tradition, as she knows the art to draw the baby out in her fingers and has the stamina to caress the parturient in difficult labour?

The saint poet Choka says:

*The sugar cane is crooked, the juice does not bend.*

The moment has come: should we keep this thought in mind or not?

Who will come forward and receive this midwife's heritage?

Who will take cognizance of this heritage?

The time has come to make a decision.

**Animators  
Organization of the Poor of the Mountain**

## Modern Medical Profession versus Midwife's Commitment

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When asked what differentiates the doctors' treatment from their indigenous practices, midwives strikingly articulate their perceptions in terms of clear-cut opposition with regard to various kinds and levels of conducts: personal behaviour, delivery practices, motivations and attitudes. Medical profession and midwife's tradition obviously pertain to two antithetic collective lifestyles and professional ethics, two antagonistic social and cultural configurations.

### Contrasting Behaviours and Conducts

Women who had the experience of delivering at both places, at home and in hospital, are unstopplable on the subject. They project

a vivid opposition, term to term, of both the situations. Below is a summary of views often expressed in group discussions.

Before entering the hospital we have to decide first how much money we have to give. We are not admitted unless we first give them money. Shall the doctor say that 'the cow is stuck in the mud and we should give her a helping hand?' The woman or the baby may die in hospital; still we have to pay the bill. When the woman enters the hospital, the doctor behaves rudely with her. Sometimes nurses beat her.

Nurses do not even touch our body. They do not let close and affectionate relatives, who came from home with us, stand by our side. They themselves neither do not stay near us. They leave us alone and go away. Labour pains are there, acute pains make us terribly restless. The nurse tells us to climb on the bed in the labour room. She never gives a helping hand in climbing. We wish that somebody would hold us by the waist when pains come, but they do not do it. We cannot even moan, lest they talk sarcastically, make fun of us, which is very hurting, still we have to bear. If we moan too much, they may sometimes slap us. Though themselves women, hospital nurses behave in such a fashion.

In hospital we have to bear all that they do. We cannot open our mouth in front of them. We feel like we have offered our necks to the hands of a butcher. We go on our own to hospital. If we happen to say something, they retort by asking us whether they had invited us to come: 'Why have you come then? You may go back home!' We keep quiet out of fear of death.

In hospital we have to lie down on the bed to get delivered. In the hospital they excise the vaginal wall with a blade for enlarging it. The body gets damaged unnecessarily. After delivery we feel terribly hungry, but we consider ourselves lucky if we get a cup of tea. A nurse just keeps a cup of tea and biscuits near the bed. The accompanying person is also helpless. In hospital there are bright lights, fans, white bed sheets and people's white dresses. All these factors bring pressure on the mind of the patient.

There is no possible comparison between the doctor's and midwife's conduct. From the very instant the midwife enters the house of the parturient, her behaviour displays a set of conducts thoroughly different. When asked to describe the whole process, midwives describe it as follows:



When a woman's labour pains start, the midwife is called. The midwife bows down to the god's idol in her house and prays to him for the success of the delivery. When she reaches the parturient's house she again prays to the god on the threshold of the house. Then she enters the place where the lady is sitting. She looks at her face and gets a feeling of the woman's condition. Then she goes in the kitchen and takes some ashes from the hearth and spreads them all over. She takes edible oil in a cup and sprinkles it around. Then she sweeps the corners of the house with a broom.

The women delivered by the midwives sum up their experience as follows:

When we have a delivery at home the midwife and other women sit close to us with affection. They hold the waist, sit near us, caress our body, encourage us, touch our body. We do not have to leave behind our small children. Other women give us a bath of hot water. We can sit up while delivery. After delivery we get hot food to eat.

In her interview Rama Ughade summarizes in a systematic way the differences between hospital and home delivery:

- 1) In hospital, nurses slap the woman who has labour pains. We object to this practice. We midwives show concern, caress the woman who is in labour.
- 2) The woman's legs are tied down to the bed. We feel that the woman should be free.
- 3) In hospital there is a practice of cutting and stitching the vaginal wall. They give injection. Caesarean section is performed unnecessarily.
- 4) Other women or relatives are not allowed in the labour room.
- 5) The mother and the baby are not bathed properly.
- 6) Affectionate and close people are not allowed to sit near the woman during the labour pains.
- 7) No proper diet is given. Just a cup of tea and biscuits are kept near the bed. We give her rice with purified butter. We sit near her and with love ask her to eat.
- 8) If the labour pains die down before delivery we give rice and curds to the lady to eat. After eating she gets strength to

go through labour pains. In hospital they do not bother to give her something to eat.

9) Nurse never gives mental support to the lady.

I questioned Ramabai about the reasons of her objections:

- Q. You think that the nurse should not slap the lady. Why?  
R. With her labour pains she already feels exhausted and alone. She needs mental support. We provide it. We pat her and assure her that we are there to help her, and we will see to it that she gets through her delivery safely. We caress her body. In the hospital she is left alone on the bed. They do not touch her body. The doctor says: 'She has to bear labour pains. What can we do for her?'
- Q. You complain that they unnecessarily excise the vaginal wall. Why?  
R. Doctor never thinks that he has to toil. We toil physically. We think that our role is to provide mental backing.
- Q. In hospital they tie her down to bed. You do not agree. Why?  
R. She must be free to move instead of being tied down. If she kills herself, nobody pays attention to her. To tie her down means *vanavas*.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes we tie a cord to the roof and ask her to stand and hold it. This gives support and strength for her to 'give labour pains.'
- Q. In hospital they do not allow a single woman to come in. You disagree?  
R. In labour pains she needs support. She feels nervous. If at that time she is left alone her nervousness increases. At the time of my sister-in-law's delivery, twelve women were present.
- Q. In the hospital they ask her to lie down on the bed. You object to this?  
R. The midwife on the contrary asks her to sit resting her back to the wall or the pillar. In sitting position the baby proceeds easily out of the womb. In lying position the baby goes upwards. Other women hold the waist and the midwife sits in front to support her.
- Q. Why are you against caesarean section?  
R. We feel that most of the time doctors practice caesarean section without reason. They do it to earn money.

Mental potentialities are part of the delivery process:

Sundra More: Parturients become nervous. I caress them, tell stories, talk jokingly, and tell them comic anecdotes. I try to draw their attention away from their pains. Doctors scold them, shout at them. This is not a good practice anyway. We midwives must keep patience and remain in control of our feelings.

Naku Ghonge: God has given a child. He has not given it to be kept in the womb permanently. It takes time for the child to come out, as 'nine veins are to be cut', which needs time. So the parturient should show endurance.

## Opposite Skills and Techniques

Several midwives' practices, which significantly differ, deserve a particular attention on account of their importance:

Kisa Kamble: We wait up till the time when the baby itself comes out. We do not put our hands inside the vaginal canal. The fruit falls when it gets ripe. A baby is like that fruit. We examine the woman from outside. The doctor has appliances, and he has to use them. Without the appliances he does not understand anything. The doctor cuts the vaginal wall. He is not willing to wait.

Sakhu Shedge: In hospital, the doctor cuts the umbilical cord immediately when the baby comes out. With the result that some times the blood comes out and the baby remains weak for his whole life. We on the contrary wait as long as the umbilical cord is moving and we send the blood towards the baby. When the umbilical cord stops moving we cut it.

Tara Ubhe: Doctors charge ten thousand rupees for a Caesarean. Let us remember one thing. Once a sari gets torn, we stitch it, but the sari does not remain strong. Our body is like that. After a Caesarean section, our body gets weak.

Sona Dhangar: We delivered many children. We were never afraid. We do not open the abdomen. The belly of my daughter-in-law was open. I felt very sad.

Hira Malpute: A doctor never touches the dirt. He stands aside. He asks maidservants to clean every thing. Midwives on the contrary clean the baby and mother. They clean the place, apply cow dung and bury the placenta.

Rama Ughade: Those who want to be midwives must cut their nails regularly. When we feel that some lady from the village is

to get delivered we cut nails in advance. We rub nails with glass to make them soft. Before entering our fingers inside we dip them in edible oil. Doctors put on gloves when they put their hand inside. We traditional midwives have remedies which our ancestors have discovered. If labour pains slow down we give her tea with pepper. If the vaginal passage gets swollen we pour liquor from the flowers of the tree *moha* (*Bassia Latifolia*) on a pad, which we then apply, or we prepare a pad with salt and turmeric powder and apply it for one month after delivery. This remedy is far better than stitching. The midwife has to examine the baby with her left hand. The midwife senses the baby's head as the head gets fixed when the labour pains start. On the head there is a membrane, which breaks. If it does not break, the midwife has to break it. With the amniotic fluid the baby starts moving out.

Saru Kadu narrated one incident: The lady was not getting delivered. I put her in a truck. Three other men came with us and the truck went down on the hilly road. She started her pains. I took her out in the fields. No woman was there to help me. The lady delivered in the fields. Then we brought the big basket from Gaju Konda, asked her to sit in it and brought her back in the village. All people were sitting outside and were worrying. I took her inside the house and gave her to eat rice and purified butter. Afterwards I cut the umbilical cord.

Rama Ughade: When I joined the health group of GDS I came to know about tonic, iron tablets. In the village a girl was pregnant for the first time. Her uncle brought her to a doctor in Pune. The doctor said that the delivery is difficult. I was sure of the contrary. The doctor gave a prescription of a costly tonic. When they returned back to the village I went to see the girl. I understood that she had been given a bottle of costly tonic. I was furious. I asked why this costly medicine was unnecessarily bought. Finally she delivered in the house. I was the midwife.

Traditional midwives do not support breast-feeding immediately after delivery for the following reason:

When the baby comes out from the womb, he has the dirt from the womb in his mouth and stomach. So we give honey (with the tip of the finger applied on the baby's lips), diluted cow milk and water with sugar. We do that for the first three days. The purpose is that the dirt should come out of the body. We do not give mother's milk until the first black stools of the baby are ejected. We consider honey as the best means.

Massages and baths are considered essential practices:

After delivery, for twelve days, we massage baby and mother with a paste of turmeric-coloured zedoary (*āmbē haḷad*) and *vāvaḍiṅga*, (*Embellia Rives*),<sup>7</sup> two times a day. After these twelve days, we massage baby and mother with sesame oil. The massage should be continued for five weeks. While massaging the mother we apply maximum force to the waist, joints and groin. The baby should also be thoroughly massaged with force, stretching its legs and arms, the neck in particular should be forcefully massaged. While bathing the baby, its head should be moved in such a way as it should not ache, the reason being that for the first five weeks the neck of the baby is not firmly fixed.

The first five days, we bathe mother and baby two times, later on, one time, in morning. A lot of hot water is used for bathing. After the bath, the newly delivered mother enters the room undressed with only a sari thrown across her body: she goes to sit near a fire placed in an iron container. On the burning coals we have put *vāvaḍiṅga*, neem powder, leaves or powder of *nirguḍī* shrub, garlic skins, *ovā* (*Ligusticum Ajaen*) and *bāḷanta śopā* dillseed (*Anethum Grave Olens* or *Sowa*). The mother sits as close as possible to the burning coals in order to inhale the smoke and that the smoke and warmth may envelop all her body, especially the abdomen and genital parts. Then she lies down on a bed made of ropes woven and stretched on a stand under which the fire is kept. The mother is covered with blankets and put to rest for a couple of hours. She must perspire profusely. The more she sweats the better. Then there is no fear of puerperal disorders, and her body does not get loose. In other words, her muscles get toned. After the baby's bath, the baby should also be brought near the same fire, held on it for some time and then put to sleep. The baby should be placed near the mother on the same bed, and in the same warm environment.

Appropriate diet is advised by midwives:

For the first five days, the mother is given boiled rice, jaggery and a lot of clarified butter (*ghee*) to eat. Then later on she has to start eating millet pancakes. In the morning, a special food is given, which contains powder of fenugreek seeds, dry coconut, dry dates, dry ginger, gum, *haḷīva* (*Lepidium Sativum*) and poppy seeds, all this put in a lot of ghee. For the first three months, the mother is supposed not to eat potatoes, brinjals, etc. Fenugreek seed is given for the waist, *haḷīva* is rich in iron, etc. After twelve days, she is given the gravy of various types of fish.

Widespread sayings deride the expectant mother who eats too much: 'Eating like a she-buffalo but producing sample like bandi-coot rat'; 'The elephant delivered, but she gave birth to a spider'; 'She has eaten eight hundred kilos of food, but she appears awful'; 'A tunnel was dug in the mountain and a rat only came out'.

## Doctors' Contempt for Midwives

A few testimonies may carry the midwives' perception in this matter. Saru Kadu's daughter-in-law was in her fifth month of pregnancy. She started bleeding. According to Sarubai it was a case of miscarriage. The daughter-in-law's brother said: 'If my sister dies, are you going to give her back to me? I will take her to hospital.' Against her will Sarubai went to the hospital with her daughter-in-law. The lady doctor said that there is no foetus in the womb; it is only a blood clot. Sarubai was not ready to accept the diagnosis. The doctor gave an injection. The bleeding increased. After some time the foetus came out. This was what Sarubai was expecting. Sarubai wanted to protest but as she did not have any backing; she ultimately had to keep quiet and yield: the doctor charged rupees 7000. Sarubai's economic situation is a miserable one. Her daughter-in-law was very weak. She suffered a lot. As she was in need of nutritious food and Sarubai was unfortunately unable to provide it as the doctor's fee had to be given by all means, Sarubai had to take a loan. In the process the whole family suffered. Who is responsible for all this suffering? If excess bleeding affects the daughter-in-law's next delivery and something wrong happens, the midwife who will attend her will be held responsible. But no question can be raised about the behaviour of the lady doctor, her code of ethics and professional competence when tests are there to know whether a woman is pregnant or not: why had the doctor not used them? But first of all, why did she not give considerate thought to a seasoned midwife's opinion?

During the meeting discussions, Mathu Marne remembered the following event:

I accompanied a woman to hospital. The doctor told us that the lady would deliver after three days, and he went away. She delivered the same night and in the hospital. I attended to her

and performed the delivery. Then I challenged the doctor: 'What have you said, three days?' The doctor asked for pardon.

The spontaneous reaction of the midwives was that doctors consider delivery as a business. But 'we, women midwives, deliver women with love.'

Tara Katkar, a Katkari tribal midwife, experienced the same type of contemptuous attitude from the doctors of the PHC of the taluka headquarters, Paud, where a lady was brought. The doctor advised to take the patient to Sassoon hospital, in Pune, at a distance of 25 miles, as he found the case particularly difficult. Tara Katkar, who was accompanying the lady, told the doctor that the case, for sure, was normal. The doctor scornfully insulted her. Tara Katkar took the lady out of the hospital and asked her to sit under the tree in front of the hospital gate. She borrowed two saris from a nearby vendor to arrange a cover inside which she performed the delivery within 15 minutes. Afterwards Tarabai had a hot discussion with the doctor. The doctor asked her to pardon him.

Matha Bawadhane: A doctor told a woman that she was carrying twin babies and that one of them was upside down on its face. I delivered that lady. Before delivery I examined her from outside and, as I was expecting, there was only one baby and that too was not upside down on the face. I was proved to be correct. We have courage, we have skill, but we are not given any value in the society.

Sundra More: I had taken my daughter for tubectomy operation to the hospital in Wada. It was Sunday. Another woman had come for delivery. The doctor told her that she had to go to Rajguru Nagar (taluka centre) as her case was a difficult one. Then he tied her hands and legs to the bed, locked the room, and the personnel left the hospital to watch a film on TV. The woman was a very poor widow. Labour pains were acute, she was crying. I could not bear it. I requested the maid at the hospital to open the room. The woman wanted to go to the bathroom for urination. I cut the ropes and set her free. I took her to the bathroom. Being a midwife I could not resist, I helped her. I thought 'the cow is stuck in the mud and I must give a helping hand'. I examined her. My fingers sensed that the baby's head had come in the vaginal passage. I told her that she would deliver within a couple of minutes. I asked her to sit in a reclining

position. She sat and delivered. I cut the umbilical cord with a blade. An hour later the doctor returned. He was furious and started shouting at me. He told me: 'I will take you to the police. I will lose my job.' I was not afraid. I told him: 'If saving somebody's life is a crime, then take me to the police for it. Whether you lose your job or not is not my concern. If you prefer to go home and watch television instead of attending a patient you must be sacked from your job.' They told me that they will not operate on my daughter. I retorted that 'I am able to feed any number of children of my daughter. I do not need you.' The woman's family people gave me five hundred rupees. The doctor was transferred.

## Divergent Motivations

Kusum Sonavne and Tara Ubhe explain that two basic and related reasons explain for these contrasting conducts and contempt:

Doctors do private practice. This is their business. They can take 10,000 rupees for a caesarean section. But have we not ourselves started giving importance to doctors and belittling the value of midwives? The doctor has spent on his education, so he wants his money back. We have made a big mountain of the doctor. The midwife is the small stone at the base of that huge building. We have made him great!

Midwives repeatedly confirm that their sole concern is the parturient, as Naka Bodke simply declares: 'I do not eat before the woman gets delivered. I feel concern for her.' The testimony of Mathubai and Kondbai is exemplary:

One day we had to cross the river in spate to go and deliver a woman at midnight. We were carrying with us the oil lamp which was blown off by the wind and we crossed the river in pitch dark. The woman was safely delivered. Unless the woman gets delivered we never feel like even drinking water.

Naku Sathe: I delivered a woman even in the running State Transport bus.

Ansa Bhalerao and Gawu Bhalerao: There are twelve hamlets to our village and we are only two midwives. We have to go to all these hamlets. Ansabai has the trouble of knee ache. She cannot walk properly. One day somebody from Shindewadi took



her on his back to deliver a woman. If some woman starts labour pains in the night people come with torches made of stick wrapped in rags to invite us.

Midwives feel restless and worried until the parturient is delivered. When asked what they expect from the people, they reply: 'When somebody invites us to deliver a woman the first thought is to save the woman, to get her delivered. No other thought comes to our mind. Doctor covets money, midwives covet life.'

Referring to her ability to deliver a woman as well as a cow, Lakshmi Umbarkar says:

This is the work that releases two lives. It corresponds to the saying that talks about 'releasing the cow found stuck in mud'. I have delivered a cow. The calf was dead in the womb. I brought out the calf and saved the cow.

In fact, a number of midwives are equally expert in delivering cows, buffalos and sheep. 'I have delivered not only sheep, cows but even buffalos,' says Sagu Dhebe, 'Take a cow to your doctor and see whether he can deliver a cow! Now you will tell me that there are veterinary hospitals, but they are not in the mountains. Here we have to face every situation.'

Sona Shedge shows a list that she has prepared of the deliveries that she performed, learning all from Sakhu Shedge from her village: 24 women, 8 cows, 1 buffalo, 19 sheep. Sakhu Shedge did not help to deliver only women, she delivered sheep also. Kasa Shedge tells us the difficulty that she faced while delivering a cow: the leg of the calf was folded. She asked a man to help but he was afraid. Finally another woman helped: she held the cow while Kasabai turned the calf in a proper position, and brought it out. She added that she has also delivered a sheep.

Midwives' testimonies clearly and enthusiastically express a sense of pride grounded in the secure consciousness of a seasoned capability and unique responsibility as a life saviour:

Naka Konde: Only a mother can understand the pains of delivery. A midwife becomes a mother. We must feel proud of ourselves as midwives.

Sula Khaire: I am called any time during the day or at night. I am always ready to go. This is the work of saving life. In the

beginning my husband used to say you take a lot of pains. I told him all girls are like our daughters. We must go and help them.

Thakub Bawdhane: If I am ill and cannot go at the time of delivery then I feel sorry. The pregnant young women hope that I will be present. They rely so much on me. I feel obliged to go and attend to them.

Rakhma Koli: If somebody gets labour pain I cannot resist going there. I always go to the jungle to search for medicinal plants. I do not remember the names of the plants but I know that they are medicinal plants.

Tara Takdunde: I have some skill; that is why people invite me. I do good work. I am proud of it.

Rama Ughade used to request her local GDS group: 'Please do not arrange meetings at a long distance from my village. There are three girls who will get delivered shortly. I must be present in the village.' Saru Kadu testifies: 'People wait for me. If somebody is to deliver they come and request me in advance not to go out of the village.' Many midwives confirm that such is also their experience. Tara Kamble says: 'I do not want honour. All women go through the same process. The riddle of woman's delivery must be solved.'

The permanence of tradition in remote areas where doctors would not take the trouble of going is accompanied by a quiet perception of one's value. There is no trace of enforced self-depreciation in the testimony of Sagu Dhebe:

We do not value the knowledge of the doctor. We stay in the mountains and the deep valleys. Why should we reach out to a doctor? We are not inferior to a doctor in any respect. Each midwife has done 40 to 50 deliveries. The babies are grown up now, and they are married also. We will rely on our own knowledge.

Rama Ughade was asked whether the doctor should not be requested to give them a certificate, as recognition of their capability. She said that this is not necessary as the midwives' knowledge is original. Tukaram Pawar, a GDS animator from the Katkari tribal community, says with pride and calm assurance:

Our Katkari women get delivered any where in the forest or in the mountain or near the corinda tree. They never suffer from

a bad eye. I have not seen any of our women dying while delivering. Our midwives are skilful enough.

Pandit Padalghare, GDS male animator, insisted in a Kale colony meeting that

It is important that our knowledge and skill be recognized. We consider the work of midwife, saving baby and mother, as God's work. In our culture midwives are honoured. Her value is not established through money. In marriage the bride and the groom bow to the midwife who has brought us into the world. In society human relations are based on love and feelings. It is necessary to revive these bonds of social relations. People may sure that everybody gets the essential for living. Your claim is for recognition by others.

Pandit Padalghare explained again during a meeting at Pune that

in the village structure people live in proximity. They experience a feeling of togetherness. They gift with love saris, blouses and bangles to the midwife. In the new world dominated by trade, these traditions are being slowly forgotten. These forgotten traditions must be discussed in the village, and people's memory must be reactivated. The midwife should not be given remuneration as a salary but she should be honoured and given status. In a modern context, people may like to give some remuneration, but still we feel that the recognition of knowledge and heritage, and the recognition of a place in society are more important. The question of remuneration must be seen in that different perspective. Under the guise of modernity, business increases and trade gets strengthened. Attention should be paid to stop such practices and viewpoints.

## The Difficult Deliveries

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Medical practitioners use to share the opinion that midwives can handle simple deliveries only. It is not so. The majority of midwives attending GDS meetings have experiences of dealing successfully with difficult deliveries too. As a matter of fact, during their meetings they use to stress mainly their experience

in dealing with such difficult cases, and feel particularly proud of their skill. This, on the one hand, significantly reinforces their self-confidence, while on the other hand, the younger ladies who accompany them and attend the meetings, get themselves assured of the validity of the traditional midwives' knowledge.

Only four ladies have reported that the child or the mother died while delivering. Each one had only one such unsuccessful case: Sula Khaire, Thaku Bawdhane, Hausa Walvekar and Rama Ughade, who mentioned in this regard Bhagu Margale from Dangekhind (taluka Mulshi) who has now passed away. Otherwise each of them confirmed that not a single woman or baby ever died while they were attending their deliveries. Itha Gonge mentioned that formerly in cases of transverse baby and two balls coming near the vaginal wall, leaving no room for the baby to come out, the question was posed to relatives whether to save the baby or the mother, the unanimous answer has been to save the mother. She said that there was a man, Ramji Mukhe, who used to cut the baby inside the womb and draw the pieces out. He used to do this work closing his eyes. 'Not a single woman died after his intervention.'

## Delivering a Dead Child in the Womb

In Kale colony meeting a midwife said that she had taken out a dead baby from the womb in four cases. Rama Ughade narrated as follows two experiences:

Mr Rama Dhebe invited me in the morning, at nine, to come and deliver his wife, telling me, 'The labour pains were there the whole night, but nothing happened. You please come.' Sensing that it was a difficult case, I asked whether they longed for both mother and child. The husband replied, 'If the mother is saved it is enough.' Then we went, my daughter-in-law Gangu, my sister-in-law and I. The other two helped me. When I examined, I realized that the child was dead in the womb. We took out the dead child.

The lady suffered delivery pains the whole night. I was not invited at night, another midwife was called. I was invited in the morning. One hand of the baby came out. The other midwife was saying that the hand should be cut, but I prevented it. It was a transverse baby. I put my hand inside, placed it below the head, and slowly brought the baby down. The baby was deliv-

ered; it was a girl but stillborn. Had they called me at night the girl would not have died out of suffocation. Later on, I was the midwife for the same lady in other two deliveries. I also delivered for her daughter two times as well.

Hausabai Bhalerao shared her own experience:

I was in labour pains. My mother-in-law was sitting near me. The labour pains continued for three days. Ultimately they decided to cut the baby. I told them not to do it that way and became unconscious. Then the midwife Mokashi came. The baby was dead in the womb. The belly was swollen. Bucketsful of water came out. The midwife broke the baby's skull, put her hand in and took out the dead baby.

Tara Takdunde: One lady had a dead child in the womb. Fortunately she had labour pains. The child came near the vaginal wall and was not proceeding further. The child was not grown, it was a soft foetus. I delivered her safely.

## Twins

Four midwives attending the Kale colony meeting narrated their experience of delivering twins. 'All these twins are living in normal conditions, they are grown up and some even are married.' Sona Akhade said, 'My daughter-in-law had twins. I delivered her first child. After half an hour the other baby came out. I delivered her too. Unfortunately my daughter-in-law died on the third day and her children died after four months.'

Gita More told us at Wadawali that if the amniotic fluid is not there, we have to apply oil. She remembered one case of twins. One baby was born; the other had started to come out. Gitabai had put her hand inside. That baby came to the vaginal wall by legs (breech presentation). She adjusted the position of the baby inside the womb and then the baby was born. She narrated yet another more difficult case:

The first baby was born at eleven am. The placenta was common. I told them that for the other baby you should send her to hospital. The girl was not ready. Then I tried and the second child was born at three pm. In case of twins if the placentas are different then it is easy to deliver.

Sona Shedge told us of a lady who took some medicine to terminate her pregnancy.

But the pregnancy continued. She was carrying twins. The first baby, which was a girl, was delivered. That newborn was bathed. The other baby was not coming out. In fact it was not a full grown baby, only a round foetus, which had only a head without features on the face. After some efforts that foetus came out.

Lakshmi Umbarkar said that she delivered one case of twins where both the babies had one placenta. The mother was safely delivered. Savitra Thule told us about twins surrounded by placenta. She was successful in delivering and saving the babies and the mother. She is of the opinion that after handling such difficult cases a midwife feels more confident.

Sakhu Polekar could successfully handle one case in which a woman delivered twins when she was in her eighth month. As the children were born in the eighth month they died, but the mother was saved.

Midwives assembled at Gadale said that their general observation is that in the case of twins sometimes there are separate placentas for each baby while some times the placenta is the same and at the end of this placenta there are two branches to which the babies are connected. If each baby has a separate placenta then the case is easier to handle.

## Breech Presentation

A case was reported in Kale Colony meeting where one child came out by the side of the rectum (transverse baby) and the umbilical cord was around the neck of the baby. Both baby and mother were saved.

Saru Kadu: Once I went when the delivery pains started. I examined. I did not feel the head down but legs; then I sensed a hand. I adjusted the legs from outside. The lady delivered. The baby came out with the legs first.

Sakhu Shedge: The leg of the baby was stuck in the membrane. The fingers were moving. The membrane broke. I asked the lady to lie down and I put the leg back in the womb. The other

leg was folded. I put my hand in the womb and arranged it properly. When the baby was coming out the chin got stuck near the cervix. I put my hand in from the backside of the head of the baby, I lifted it softly and brought the baby out.

Naku Sathe reported a case to the male animator Ananta Dalvi:

I reached at midnight at a neighbouring village. The girl had become unconscious. I started giving pressure to one side of the abdomen and one leg came out, then I put pressure on the other side and the second leg came out. Then I managed to take the baby out of the womb.

## Warming the Umbilical Cord

Many have the same method of rubbing the umbilical cord, and putting it either in hot water, or placing it near burning fodder to warm it, if after delivery the child does not cry. In one such case reported, a child was not moving nor crying after the birth: his umbilical cord was kept in hot water, then slowly he started moving and was thus saved.

In another case the first delivery was a caesarean. The midwife delivered the second time with success. She commented:

If the child does not cry immediately after delivery we bring the blood through the umbilical cord to the baby. If the baby still lies motionless then we bring grass and we burn it nearby to warm up the cord. This helps in blood circulation and the baby cries. We give the blood in the umbilical cord to the baby. Before that we do not cut the umbilical cord. If we do hastily cut the cord before transferring the blood from the umbilical cord to the baby, the blood comes out and the baby remains weak. We also bring grass and burn it to make the placenta warm, and we give the blood in the placenta to the baby.

## The Transverse Baby

Biba Morve's general observation is that when the baby is in transverse position, it goes to one side of the womb and then it becomes difficult to deliver. Sakhu Shedge handled such a case.

She started giving pressure on the belly from outside. The pressure pains are used to help the baby to proceed downwards. With this method she was successful in bringing the baby down; the other midwife was helping and took out the baby. Tara Katkar had also the experience of the delivery of a transverse baby.

Baba Dudaji Dalvi, who is in her seventies, had a fantastic experience. One woman was in labour pain. Bababai took her to PHC, Paud. The case was of a transverse baby. The woman was admitted by a PHC sister and asked to sleep on the bench. The sister went away to sleep. Bababai kicked the door open and attended the parturient. She did the delivery herself. Then she scolded the sister. Bababai is very proud of her skills. According to her when labour pains start, 'Bababai can confidently tell when the woman will deliver.'

## Delivery of a Monster Baby

One midwife told her experience of a baby born with eyes near the hair and with no other features on the face. The baby was alive for some time. The midwife was frightened but she succeeded in delivering. Sakhu Thakar observed that some women deliver strange children 'like monkeys or frogs' (monster babies).

## Problems of Placenta Attached to the Uterus

Gangu Kokare said that a baby was born at three o'clock in the afternoon. The placenta came out next day at dawn. The family declared that there was some obstruction from their family god (*naq*). The woman went into trance, then the placenta came out. The outer part of the placenta was tied down to an iron rod. Thus Gangubai delivered the woman safely saving both baby and mother.

Naku Sathe: Sushila Sathe was taken to hospital. I was requested to accompany her. The doctor was on leave. The baby came out but the placenta was stuck in. I managed to bring it out.

Tara Ubhe narrated a case which was further discussed in a meeting:



In the village Bodhe, taluka Mulshi, one lady died during delivery. Her first delivery had been done in Sassoon Hospital, Pune, where she had been told that once pregnant again, she will have to come back to the hospital as her delivery process is difficult. For the next delivery, because of their poor conditions, her mother and she decided to deliver in the house. Tara Walhekar was the midwife. She tried hard but the placenta took a longer time to come out. In her trial the placenta came out with the uterus. People decided to take her to the hospital. She was bleeding profusely. She died in the jeep. The child was saved.

The question was raised whether midwives can deliver successfully when the placenta is attached to the uterus. A gynaecologist previously consulted opined that medically such a case is considered problematic. He said that though the placenta may come out there is a possibility that it may perforate the uterus. Saru Kadu said that the umbilical cord comes out with the baby. The placenta is attached to the navel. If placenta is not coming out then the midwife has to put her two fingers inside. The touch of the placenta and the uterus are similar. When the midwife puts her fingers inside she has to distinguish between both uterus and placenta. She has to put her fingers under the placenta. The outside end of the placenta must be held with the fingers firmly. When she reaches at the end of the placenta, where it is attached, she has to detach it very slowly. Pressure should be given from outside on the belly. Generally if the placenta is not coming out the midwife may try to place the hair of the delivering lady in her mouth, or to give her water to drink containing ashes, or tea prepared with pepper, etc., so that the parturient is forcibly made to sneeze, cough or vomit, which helps the release of placenta.

The same case was discussed in the meeting held at Gadale. Sakhu Shedge said that

whenever the placenta is not coming out quickly, I put my hand inside, and from the side of placenta I take my hand slowly up to the point where placenta is attached to the uterus. Then I slowly try to cut with the nail the attached placenta. Then the placenta comes out.

Still, the observation is that in such cases, there is generally a profuse bleeding, which midwives cannot cope with. Several

reasons explain for the placenta coming out late. Midwives can control some of these reasons, but not all. Saru Kadu shared one of her experiences in this respect. She went to deliver a Dhangar woman. The baby was delivered at 9 a.m. At 3 p.m. the umbilical cord was cut. The outside part of the placenta was attached to the hoe. If the outer part of the placenta is not attached it goes inside up to the heart and the woman dies. The baby was given a bath. Some basic cleaning was done to the lady and she was given something to eat. The placenta came out at 9 p.m.

When asked about the circumstances in which the midwives cannot cope with the situation, Rama Ughade, Saru Kadu and Thaku Bawdhane mentioned four situations:

- 1) when the cervix is so small that midwives cannot put their fingers in;
- 2) when the vaginal passage, etc. is very stiff;
- 3) when there is profuse bleeding; and
- 4) when the placenta is stuck to the uterus.

I have observed that in some cases midwives from tribal and other backward classes/communities such as Katkari and Dhangar have shown better skills:

Rakhma Koli: One Maratha woman was in labour pains. The other midwives had not been able to deliver as two balls were preventing the baby from coming out. We, my sister-in-law and I went and tried. My sister-in-law pressed the belly and I pressed the ball. A way was created for the baby. The baby slowly advanced and came out.

Sakhu Shedje said that her daughter had labour pains for three days. She became unconscious. Sakhubai wanted to break the skull of the baby. If the skull of the baby is broken it becomes small. But Sona Katkari, another midwife, came and successfully delivered the daughter of Sakhubai. Hausa Bhalerao told the experience of her own delivery. She was in labour pain for three days. The midwife was struggling. Ultimately the Mokashi midwife came and released her.

Tara Katkar: A Maratha girl from Watunde village was in pains. Another midwife was not been able to do the delivery. The

parents took her to the hospital in Pirangut which is at a distance of 15 kms. In the hospital they sent her back saying that she will deliver after three days. The parents were carrying her back when they met me on the way. They requested me to examine her. I said that the baby is dead in the womb. I did the delivery in the nearby field.

The midwives' common observation is that Katkari and Dhangar women show more endurance than women from other communities. The more the distance from the PHCs, the greater is the resilience of the tradition. Katkari midwives themselves stress the fact that they wear their saris in a different fashion. Maratha ladies put a knot to the sari near the waist. Katkari women roll up the sari around the waist so they can have easy deliveries. Baba More says that the foetus being in the upper part of the abdomen, the delivery of Katkari and Dhangar women is easy. The Maratha women's foetus is below the naval and they have a difficult delivery. The bodies of the Katkari and Dhangar women are also more sturdier and flexible. They stay on the top of mountains and have to wander about in the mountainous areas. Their food intake being limited and simple, they are sturdier. This may be a reason behind their easy delivery.

## Symbolic Rituals and Gestures

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### Mother Holi Delivered

The plantain tree (in marathi *ke/a*, feminine gender) figures as one of the characteristic symbols of pregnancy and delivery, and is accordingly associated with various rituals. These rituals have their ground in the myth of 'Mother *ho/ī* delivered'.<sup>8</sup> The myth is not known only in the remote village of Saru Kadu, who narates it here, a village located beyond the dam of Warasgaon (it takes Sarubai 3 hours by launch on the lake to reach her village from the dam, or a 10 hours walk in dry season). The myth as reported here with its ritual figuration in the *ho/ī* festival, has been checked with other animators, men and women, from Pune district. All knew it. It has also been checked with other informants from distant places (Ahmednagar district, at about one hundred kms

from Pune, Latur district, at about 250 kms from Pune), all knew it too.

There was a Māᅅg woman. She had an illegitimate baby born from a Brāhmaᅅ. To avoid dishonour that lady jumped into the fire and ended her life. She left her baby behind. The *hoᅇ* festival is celebrated to remind people of this incident.

For preparing the *hoᅇ* ground a pitch is dug. An areca nut, a small wood of palas (*Butea Frondosa*), a root of turmeric, and a coin of five paise are kept in the pitch. And upon it the trunk of the plantain tree is erected. The wooden logs are arranged around it. When the flames start rising up it is said that *hoᅇ*, namely, the dancing girl *kalavatin*, is dancing in memory of the Māᅅg woman. On one hand the woman is held in bad memory as she left behind her infant child, but on the other hand, to show sympathy towards her, a trunk of plantain is erected in her memory. The plantain trunk is erected in such a way that when the *hoᅇ* fire dies down, the plantain tree falls to the ground in the direction of a river or nearby water source. Moreover, though *hoᅇ* is a festival, some of its rituals resemble funeral rites, for instance, five honourable men from the village walk around the *hoᅇ* fire, clockwise, sprinkling water and then milk on the flames while circling five times around the fire.

## Representations and Ritual Practices

Three main representations define the attributes of the plantain tree:

- She (*keᅇa* is a feminine word) gives birth without male intervention: she gets pregnant without being impregnated by the male semen.
- She is a Brahman and therefore cannot tolerate pollution.
- She dies after her first single delivery.

Ritual practices are associated with the plantain tree at the time of delivery. When labour pains die down or weaken, a root is plugged from a plantain or cotton tree and put in the hair of the parturient. When the root has been cut and brought some ornament is deposited near the plantain tree as a guarantee. When

the lady starts delivering, the root taken from the plantain tree is immediately returned to the tree, and the ornament placed as a guarantee is taken back, because the root should not get polluted with the blood of the delivering woman. If the placenta is not coming out immediately some rice grains are put at the root of a plantain tree and she (the plantain tree) is prayed to for the placenta to come out quickly.

A naming ceremony is performed on the twelfth day after the baby's birth. That day the mother takes seven grains: black millet or *nacni*, two other millets: *varai* and *kathal* (*Panicum frumentaceum*), wheat, gram, paddy and barley, and mixes them together. She looks for a small secluded place near a water source, either a river or a rivulet, a stream or a well, where she herself sows the grains. The belief is that the baby will grow as the shoots themselves shall grow. Anybody going to fetch water may sprinkle some upon them. This small plot of land is called the 'god's field' (*devācā māḷā*). In this connection, a saying goes: 'Given by God and accepted by us'.

If labour pains die down or become weak the midwife again sweeps the corners of the room, stands on the winnowing basket and says 'Come, labour pains, come!' The midwife may dance, placing her *chappals* on her own head.

Kasabai narrated the incident of her daughter's delivery:

The daughter's in-laws stay in the same village. The daughter was in her seventh month of pregnancy. She came to see her mother. There was some pain in the abdomen. The mother sent her daughter back home fearing the in-laws. When the daughter reached home the pains increased. The mother was invited. The pain kept increasing. The soothsayer *bhagat* was called and consulted. According to the diviner, the girl had some obstruction from the evil spirit. This is a happening that nobody can control. Actually the baby was dead in the womb. In the night they took her down the mountain. She would cry loudly. The mother consoled everybody saying that the problem of evil spirit is beyond our reach. Nobody should be sad. We have to accept the difficulty of evil spirit. The baby was born in the hospital. It was a monster. 'We performed the ritual which was necessary to pacify the evil spirit.'

Kasabai was asked: 'You are yourself a midwife and there are other midwives in the village. Why were you not confident that

the midwives from the village could manage the delivery?’ The first fear was that of the evil spirit. The mother was, moreover fearing her daughter’s mother-in-law as much as the evil spirit. The mother-in-law equally was in fear of the evil spirit. In this case, even the midwives came under the spell of the fear of evil spirit. In such a situation it was decided to take the girl to the hospital.

If the woman is not getting the delivery in time then the midwife may advise the family to consult a *bhagat* and see whether there is some obstruction from the evil spirit or from the family god or from any other god. On the part of women, the obstruction can be due to the non-observance of the rules of menses: while being in menses, the woman may have gone near the temple, or the tail of her sari may have touched the idol of god. During the labour pains if the delivery is delayed, a woman or a *bhagat* goes in trance. They ask about the mistake done by the member of the family. After delivery, a ritual is performed to pacify the deity or evil spirit who had created the obstruction.

When the placenta comes out, the midwife keeps it in a fragment of earthen pot, and then, with a crowbar, outside the bathroom where the baby and mother take baths, she digs a pit into which the bath water will flow. She does not use iron hoe or scraper or pickaxe as they are used to dig the pit in which a corpse is buried. Then she puts in the pit the fragment of earthen pot, and upon it throws turmeric powder, red powder (*kumku*) and some rice grains. She closes the pit by filling it with mud. She puts upon it the branch of a tree and a heavy stone so that no dog or cat may dig the pit. If the placenta is thrown away, anywhere, the baby will be in trouble.

When a woman feels like having no more children she asks the midwife to put the placenta upside down in the pit. It is believed that this ritual helps her to have no more children. According to Saru Kadu, this ritual does not give the expected result. When the newborn baby is a girl, midwives move the placenta on the baby’s legs, arms, chest and lips so that no hair may grow on them. She similarly moves the placenta on the sexual organ for the same reason.

Rama Ughade said:

The lady should get delivered in a place where there is light.  
The placenta should not touch the cow dung. We plaster the

floor of the place with cow dung once we have put the placenta in an earthen pot. If the child starts vomiting immediately after birth, we collect the vomit, put it in a snail and bury the snail at the door. When this is done, the vomiting stops.

## Singing Motherhood in Unison

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During group discussions midwives quoted grindmill songs either to articulate their feelings or to support the relevance of their observations. Pregnancy and birthing are two events of such consequence that not only physiologically but culturally and socially connect to women's life, status and social identity, that it comes as no wonder that these experiences are represented in the tradition of songs on the grindmill. There is no need to present here a systematic content analysis of hundreds of songs on the expectant mother and delivery, which have been collected in the very villages of the same midwives, and even from them.<sup>9</sup> But a short account is appropriate to realize how birthing cannot be dissociated as a physiological happening, let alone a matter of medical concern, from the wider vision in which it is embedded. Clinical observation of biological processes and body sensations, poetic metaphors, semantic investment, symbolic inspirations, aesthetic apprehensions, linguistic inventiveness, basic human emotions and social expectations, all fuse together into a symbiosis of sorts when birthing experiences find their articulation in the distiches composed and shared on the grind mill.

First of all, pregnancy and delivery are not a matter of birthing but of motherhood, namely, of women's identity, self-image and status. While projecting women's labour in the realm of poetry, the songs do not intent to embellish its hardships, but to claim for motherhood due consideration. It may even come as a surprise in this regard that a number of grind mill songs carry a strong claim to due respect against the offending behaviour of rude or unreliable males. Their leitmotiv is a warning, which I may sum up as follows: 'Do not abuse a mother, who suffered the throes of childbirth!' Many songs refer to the insults hurled at their mothers by sons, who blame, dishonour, aggress, ill treat, sling mud at them, and compare them to the legendary sour-tempered Kegai, and address them as sham, slut, fool, idiot, sin, shameless, and the like, when

'at our birth time, her nine veins broke',<sup>10</sup> 'her body was trembling',<sup>11</sup> and 'her life was at stake.'<sup>12</sup>

Rakhma Koli reports the saying circulating in her tribal Katkari community, which lives on hunting and fishing: 'Man's death in hunting, woman's in delivery'. The same saying is transformed in peasant communities as to read: 'Man's death in field, woman's in delivery'. An expectant mother 'feels frightened for her life,'<sup>13</sup>

Nine months nine days one day is god's day  
No guarantee is there for the girl's life.<sup>14</sup>

No wonder if one significant symbolic conduct consists in relying on god's good will, with the wish and prayer of relatives and friends that a critical situation might not arise. Trust in God might as well be construed as a blending of fear and confidence in the mysterious though precarious potentialities of life.

Pregnancy gives life a fright  
Leave to god the nine-month riddle.<sup>15</sup>

The following song may refer to the profuse perspiration of labour:

Son, do not call me, your mother, 'Stupid! Sham!'  
At the time of your birth my body turned into Ganga.<sup>16</sup>

The metaphor of Ganges cannot but carry a wealth of mysterious connotations, and possibly stand as a symbolic representation of the perception that labouring for childbirth is like being born again:

Delivered woman, eat anis seeds and dillseed!<sup>17</sup>  
Eat anis seeds and dillseed, you have been born anew.<sup>18</sup>

A sister warns her brother:

Brother, we should not call our mother 'Tatters!'  
At the time of birth she let loose her hair.<sup>19</sup>  
Who would reply back and retort to Sita, our mother?  
I tell you, child, both of us are jewels from her womb.<sup>20</sup>

Women singers remind men that they would not have seen the light of the world without the sweat of their labour pains. That was



a true and genuine labour of love, when they were rocking the baby in the lap or in the cradle after a trying wait. Maternal anxious expectation only makes mother's genuine love, paralleled to none:

She did not get a wink of sleep for twelve days twelve nights  
O my dear brother, your wife, where was she in those days?<sup>21</sup>  
You may say 'There are scores of affectionate women!'  
At birth time mother paces up and down the room.<sup>22</sup>

Grateful remembrance and humble acknowledgement of an original obligation are the demands of women singers. Concretely, the regard that is expected finds its expression in a frequently recalled and advocated norm of basic ethics, that one should never answer back one's mother:

I was nine months nine days on the left of mother's womb  
How could I reply back to my mother, my *Māvalī*?<sup>23</sup>

It is already gratifying news for a mother to see her daughter pregnant for the first time. She immediately notices the changes caused by pregnancy in her body:

First pregnancy, glow on the tanned face  
She feels an unsatiable urge for juicy lemon.<sup>24</sup>

The signs of first pregnancy arouse the mother's curiosity: when had she her last hair-bath (meaning when did her menses stop):<sup>25</sup>

In the fourth month a reddish glow on the woman's face  
In which month did Radha my milkmaid wash her hair?<sup>26</sup>

While pregnant for the first time a young girl feels shy, and will strongly deny the fact. In effect she wants her mother to know and share her joy. The latter actually had noticed the changes:

"No, No!" says the myna<sup>27</sup> pregnant for the first time  
What to say, woman! Your youthfulness gives evidence.<sup>28</sup>

Morning sickness in the first months<sup>29</sup> signals the event but gives also women nausea for food.<sup>30</sup> 'Food makes the pregnant woman feel like vomiting.'<sup>31</sup> 'Lemon juice,<sup>32</sup> dry fruits, clove, areca nuts, pomegranates<sup>33</sup> are given to eat as they bring relief.

Pregnant woman, you carry, you have bouts of nausea  
Your husband has gone to fetch areca nuts for you.<sup>34</sup>

Young girlfriends make fun of a pregnant woman who feels an uncontrollable urge to eat sour fruits. Her mother says:

Jujube-trees grew berries, tamarinds hang down  
My myna is pregnant, she clasps them in her hands.<sup>35</sup>

The delicate relationship of maternal uncle and niece is naturally reflected in the songs. The maternal uncle is equally glad to know about his niece's first pregnancy, and keen to help and celebrate:

Pregnant woman, what would you like to eat?  
Dear brother went to lemon and pomegranate market.<sup>36</sup>  
My myna is pregnant, how did my brother know of it?  
A basket of mangoes, brother Saravan, come on quickly!<sup>37</sup>

Expecting her pregnant daughter to be given milk to drink, a mother boasts that her daughter's wealthy (in-law) family is rearing milking animals—a subtle way to express her wish that they will serve her milk:

In the fifth month the woman is lifted up by the side  
In my milkmaid's house, milching cows and buffaloes.<sup>38</sup>

Many songs naturally focus on various aspects of the parturient's condition. For instance, when delivery pains start, experienced midwives may ask her to walk in the room to facilitate the delivery process. She is made to sit in a reclining and comfortable position against the wall instead of lying; there is heavy perspiration on the body; the warming up of the parturient's genitals, etc.

The woman is in labour with her back against the wall  
Let the baby come out and then we shall warm her up.<sup>39</sup>

The protected condition of the baby in mother's womb is compared to the safety offered by 'the noblemen's fortress'<sup>40</sup> and a woman is 'not afraid to carry' after a mother 'exhausted herself in educating us.'<sup>41</sup>

I was in mother's womb nine months nine days  
No sun no wind to strike in the freestone stronghold.<sup>42</sup>

The following two songs considered to be obscene were reluctantly quoted. The first one describes the posture at the time of delivery. The second one is sung to make fun of a newly married youngster carrying for the first time:

Says midwife: 'When labour pain starts I hold legs up'  
When the baby is born out tears come in the eyes.<sup>43</sup>  
I have an urge, a desire to be pregnant  
Hymen broken, my mind's urge is satisfied.<sup>44</sup>

A pregnant woman is advised not to have intercourse from the sixth month onwards as this is not healthy for the foetus:

The fifth month passed so-so, the sixth was heavy  
I tell you, woman, leave the husband's couch.<sup>45</sup>

The eighth month is considered to be rather difficult, the observation and experience being that a baby born in the eighth month never survives. Everybody feels relieved when a woman enters the ninth month. Generally the daughter comes to her parents for delivery either in the seventh month or in the ninth month. During the eighth month, travelling is avoided. In the following songs, parents are requested to call the daughter home for delivery as she has entered the ninth month:

It is the eighth month, the month has passed heavy  
Milkmaid my woman, send a letter to mother and father!<sup>46</sup>

The singers observe with concern the anaemia due to blood loss:

Delivered woman, your body became yellowish  
Tell your mother to bring dry date and dry coconut.<sup>47</sup>  
On the fifth day after delivery the heels are yellowish  
While going to the bathroom her husband noticed it.<sup>48</sup>

For five weeks following delivery, generally mother and baby are given hot water baths after massage. The custom is that village women help the mother or mother-in-law of the woman by fetching water from the reservoir at least during twelve days:

God Krishna is born, which was the day, that day  
I tell you woman, go and fetch water for twelve days.<sup>49</sup>

In the villages where there are no bathrooms, the new mother and the baby take bath in the stable. From a hole on the side, used water flows into the courtyard, where bushes or vegetables are planted. Warm water is supposed to be used in plenty for the bath of mother and baby. With this water the flower trees grow well and blossom, in the image of the baby.

Delivered woman, twelve days have passed since you delivered  
Near the baby's bathing place jasmine has grown a tuft of flowers.<sup>50</sup>  
Delivered woman, when was your twelfth day after delivery?  
Near the baby's bathing place a jasmine gleams with bloom.<sup>51</sup>

The bath is never a casual affair in India, especially baby and mother's bath. It is a whole ritual, which includes massage of body with oil—oil of sesame being the purest of all oils<sup>52</sup>—cleaning the body with gram flour, turmeric powder and milk, hot water in plenty and fire to warm up the body.

Carefully the oilman gives sesame oil  
I get my baby massaged by my mother's hands.<sup>53</sup>

After the delivery woman and baby sleep on a cot prepared with ropes stretched upon a wooden frame. Burning coals are kept beneath in an iron vessel in which anis seeds have been thrown. (The ritual of lying seven grains in earth has earlier been explained.)

Pregnant woman, warm up at the hearth with anis seeds  
Put on your dear husband's blanket to go and lay the seven grains.<sup>54</sup>

We already know of the symbolic import of the plantain tree, which 'gives birth without man's intervention',<sup>55</sup>

Plantain, woman plantain, your birthing is good  
Without man's aid your lineage is expanding.<sup>56</sup>  
Do not go, you, dancing girl, in the gardener's garden!  
The plantain is delivered without man.<sup>57</sup>

The presence of man would bring blame on women:

In the gardener's garden why is the gardener asleep  
Woman plantain says: 'The blame fell on us.'<sup>58</sup>

The plantain tree dies immediately after giving birth to a child,  
when the new shoot comes out, the main tree dies:

Of all the births the woman plantain's birth is good  
She ended her life before the child was born.<sup>59</sup>

A baby's arrival never goes unnoticed. Village womenfolk and the various communities of artisans, who are at the call and service of a cluster of villages, are asked to play their role according to their competence. A mother describes everyone's part:

The third day the carpenter arrived in the village  
I paid him an advance for the cradle of my daughter's baby.<sup>60</sup>  
On the twelfth day the tailor came from there  
He decorates with puffed balls my daughter's baby's cradle.<sup>61</sup>  
On the thirteenth day the bangle seller came to our house  
I paid him an advance for the bangles of my daughter.<sup>62</sup>  
On the fourteenth day the gardener came  
He planted plantains at my milkmaid's bath place.<sup>63</sup>

Women of the village are relieved that the girl is delivered, and eager to see the baby. They all pay a visit during the day to see the baby, enquire about the condition of the mother and fill up her lap with auspicious food:

My milkmaid is delivered of, a baby is born, first day  
To see the baby milkmaids came through out the day.<sup>64</sup>

## Conclusion: Opposite Dynamics

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I may sum up our report by contrasting as two opposite ethos, the world of the midwife with the world of the modern health practitioner. Our statements wish to reflect the midwives' point of view. They are the pure ideal-type constructs and have a mere

heuristic function. They are purposively coined to stress in the abstract attitudinal changes, cultural drifts, contrasting social trends and adverse interests.

### The Modern Nurse, an Alienated Woman

A modern nurse imparts in hospitals her medical knowledge, skill and technical education, enabling her to attend deliveries. She knows how to examine human anatomy, use appliances, and deal with problematic cases with confidence. She is convinced that her medical education is modern, scientific and, for this very reason, trustworthy. Though a woman, she is unaware of the human limitations and biases of that education (Sathyamala et al. 1986). The woman lying on the bed before her is a body cut off from other links and determinations. Technical education has alienated her from her moorings and her own self, while her status as a servant in a modern medical institution makes her consider the parturient as a mere medical case. Her modern competence pre-empts the female communicative relation that as a woman she might understandably be expected to entertain with the women that she attends to.

We observe that a similar attitude of disregard, if not contempt, happens to be instilled in the minds of younger rural midwives who attend the PHC training. For instance, Indu Shirke is, in her thirties, a Government Village Health Worker (VHW). Very recently she started practising as a traditional midwife, and took advantage of the government training course for midwives. She reports that as she got training from doctors as VHW, she finds herself 'a far better midwife than older traditional midwives' because she has 'acquired a modern approach and knowledge that the old midwives have not. I give iron tablets and suggest pregnant women to take anti-tetanic injections, etc.'

Nakha Ghonge, Kisa Kamble, Matha Marne, Sundra More and Kisana Ghare accompanied women for delivery to the hospital, and they themselves delivered in their traditional ways there. While staying in the hospital they could observe practices other than their own, which they may wish to follow. For instance, Nakha Ghonge slightly cut the vaginal wall of her daughter when she later on attended to her daughter's delivery at home. While discussing

with her, she recognized that it was actually not necessary to do so. The risk with such imitation is that the sanctity of the tradition vanishes while new practices are neither properly learnt.

## The Health Practitioner, an Unaccountable Professional

The midwife feels responsible for the mother and baby's life; she identifies herself not as a professional but as a woman with a skill for the benefit of other women. A public health servant does not consider himself answerable to people's claims and expectations. He is concerned with his job and his employment security. This severs him from the delivering women he attends, and makes him communicatively non-human. A private practitioner may apparently prove more communicative or rather attractive, out of business and profit imperatives.

## Modern Medicine, an Asset of Subordination

Traditional midwives consider the process of delivery as a natural physiological event. They believe in the innate capacities of a woman to make the event properly follow its natural course. They perceive their skill as meant to attend and facilitate an autonomous process, while other interferences on their part aim at creating a mentally supportive atmosphere. This spirit of self-reliance is forcibly succumbing to the allurements of modern and scientific medical dominance, which generates, as an alternative faith, a blind belief and passive dependence upon technology and medicines. Words like injection, operation, medicine, pills, doctor, hospital, caesarean, etc. have become a fetish and substitutes to self-reliance.

## Home Delivery, a Shared Labour

The traditional midwives' skill operates on the assumption of a conjunction of body and mind exercised in an open domestic space and communicative environment. The birth attendant is not alone; other experienced women assist her or stand near the

parturient in empathy. Physiological factors are incorporated in an overall process comprising words of support, body caressing, symbolic practices and rituals, use of herbs, physical touch, and mainly constant interactive communication focused on the progress of labour. In a hospital, women relatives and friends are not welcome; delivery is reduced to a medical act in a technical environment. A hospital room is a place which, for reasons pertaining to the ethos of the medical power system, has purposefully been turned into a non-communicative space, in which the body of a delivering woman is made an object of scientific manipulations as per the decisions of unanswerable experts following prescribed impersonal procedures and operating mechanical devices.

Beyond the domestic space, traditional birthing finds also its embedment in the social space of the village community. It is not severed as a private and purely intimate moment from the webs of daily social rapports and networks of social relations. Neighbouring women and artisans are involved in one way or another.

## Emergency Culture

The space of delivery is drastically affected. The traditional time parameters are no less perturbed. Traditional midwives operate in an environment where lifestyles abide by attitudes of respect, confidence, reliance and non-intervention towards nature. It has been pointed out that work habits and lifestyles give women supple and elastic bodies. Time is measured by biological rhythms. We have seen midwives patiently relying upon these rhythms even in case of protracted and problematic delivery processes.

Two adverse trends tend to break with this time. The first trend is the hospital time, which subjects the time of nature to tight alien agendas determined by other immediate needs and constraints of various kinds.

The second trend is the mental syndrome of emergency that we have observed taking hold of young women. This phenomenon is symptomatic of a fundamental cultural change. Out of fear and anxiety, the young parturient and her family, attracted by promises of 'safe delivery' in an hospital environment, give up previous



conducts of endurance and self-reliance based on trust in the reliability of timely biological processes, on their mental strength and self-confidence, and on the midwife's expertise. The young parturient once exposed to the 'hospital attraction' is easily prompted to lose patience and feel insecure with former slow, traditional ways. Her wish of a quicker, technically controlled delivery breaks with the traditional biological, communicative mode and social times of her community. Moreover, the parturient's own family and in-laws may fear each other's blame in case of any unwanted happening. Formerly the decisions were taken by the head of the (in-law's) family; nowadays relation patterns have changed. All this has resulted in transforming a delivery into a medical emergency of sorts. Moreover, the young pregnant woman may on her own insist on making the decision to be taken to a modern hospital out of a new personality consciousness, motivated by a wish to assert her individuality in front of the family, caste, community, village, and tradition as a whole.

In sum, the real time of life processes becomes problematic and is resented as suspect. It tends to be replaced by the alien and artificial times of institutions, techniques and medical personnel.

## Male Scientific Modernity

The traditional midwives' tradition appears as a women's orally transmitted practical knowledge, which stands as a guarantee of survival for local communities, not only in the face of adverse environmental conditions but also against the dangers of illegitimate scientific claims of modern practitioners—let alone the irresponsible and even inhuman behaviour of some of them in rural India. Still, that knowledge is not valued. It tends to be, in modern times, looked down upon or simply ignored. Modern medical science of midwifery (gynaecology) is bypassing that knowledge. In fact, this happens for unscientific motives. Modern midwifery is driven by economic, cultural and social trends which have only contempt for the age-long culture of common women. Many of our findings would easily lend support to statements indicting modern scientific midwifery as an asset for cultural male dominance, and not only a syndrome of modern medical power. We might rather

anthropologically and culturally identify that will to power of modern medical science, as a male will to power, which hides itself behind a particular modern scientific epistemology. That epistemology has emerged in Modern times against Tradition, Orality and Fertility.

## Integral Tradition

The midwife tradition significantly exemplifies the integrative structural characteristics of indigenous systems of creation and transmission of indigenous knowledge. That knowledge emerges and operates through coalescence of the various following conducts:

- Observation and practice *in situ*, in the open and real setting, and not through statistical tools, or in isolation of given factors analytically separated in the artificial conditioning of a laboratory experiment. Tradition as a regime of production of knowledge operates synthetically and on the spot;
- Response to the actual conditions, constraints and challenges of a given context (for instance, in cases of delivery of cows, sheep, etc. as well as women), and in consonance with the resources of the physical environment (such as plants, cereals, helping hands, etc.).
- Embedment in the webs of social relations which constitute the local human milieu with its cultural forms, norms and living patterns; and constant opportunity for all those concerned to participate and share;
- Transmission through oral and protracted practice: no formal, time-bound teaching and learning as sanctioned by a certificate and legitimized by an institution; the actual result only sanctions a traditional knowledge, for the failure of which there is no escape nor institutional cover;
- Learners are allowed to participate in the learning process to the extent they welcome and abide by the rules, spirit and ethics of the tradition;
- Incorporation of psychological and symbolic elements (values, emotions, language, mentalities, rituals, representations) in a coherent form of lifestyle.

## Unbroken Epistemological Mapping

Two traditions, those of grindmill songs and midwife knowledge originated in, and by women. They resemble one another in many respects. Both are transmitted from one generation to another without written records, by the word of mouth for songs and by actual practice for birthing. Both are exclusively a women's cultural heritage. Both are seriously endangered by dominance of technology and corresponding patterns of modern life. Both stand as a rich heritage, still faced with questions of relevance in a new era. Both also exchange their idioms and experiences with regard to pregnancy and delivery. This poetic transmission is an inalienable dimension of midwives' expertise. The traditional know-how does not remain a mere practical invention transmitted through practice. It enters the realm of symbolic representation and cultural creation. Personal observations and social experiences offer a ground to semantic appropriation through poetry. The latter can properly reflect gender aesthetic values so that birthing is represented in its multiple perspectives, as a mental, emotional and social event, and not only a physiological happening. Modern medical knowledge would be well advised to take cognizance of these anthropological aspects, which in modern educational systems belong to different disciplines, medicine being a branch of science and not a part of 'humanities'. Such dichotomies do not tear as under the epistemological map of traditional knowledge systems.

## Appendix 1

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List of VCDA-GDS Animators Taking on the Responsibility of Meetings of Midwives

| Name of Women | Village and hamlet | Taluka | Remarks   |
|---------------|--------------------|--------|---|
| Ubhe Tara     | Kolawade           | Mulshi | Member of GDS Central Committee. Takes overall lead in GDS activities for the last 15 years, mainly in women and health programmes, grindmill songs action-research. Maratha. |

|                                 |                     |                           |   |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Sonavne<br>Kusum                | Nandgaon            | Mulshi                    | Member of GDS Central Committee. Takes lead in activities of local action groups for the last 18 years, involved in grind mill songs action-research with a capacity to compose songs. Mahar, Buddhist. |
| Yewale<br>Shanta                | Pachane             | Mawal                     | Member of GDS Central Committee. Takes lead in all types of cultural action, elected member of village council, deeply involved in GDS activities for the last 16 years. Maratha.                       |
| Shilawane<br>Kala               |                     | Mawal                     | In the GDS organization since 5 years. Has started taking more responsibilities, especially in health action. Chambar.  |
| Ughade<br>Rama                  | Dhudhwan<br>Gadale  | Mulshi                    | Expert, clever and articulate midwife. Knows thousands of grindmill songs, health animator in GDS since 20 years. Out-spoken, daring personality. Dhargar.  |
| Katkar<br>Tara                  | Lawarde             | Mulshi                    | Versatile, self-confident midwife. In GDS since 9 years, has leading role in her tribal community, elected and daring Sarpanch. Katkari.  |
| Mulani<br>Jahira                | Walchand<br>nagar   | Indapur                   | Health animator in the organization for the last 6 years. Muslim.   |
| Kadu<br>Saru                    | Wadawali            | Mulshi                    | Seasoned and skilful mid wife. Knows thousands of grindmill songs too. In GDS since 20 years. Maratha.  |
| Andre<br>Radha<br>Dhebe<br>Sagu | Wajawane<br>Pole    | Rajguru<br>Nagar<br>Velhe | In the GDS organization for last 2 years. Shares responsibility of hostel for 30 girls, animator in GDS since 19 years, healthanimator. Dhargar.  |
| Name of Men                     | Village             | Taluka                    | Remarks   |
| Padalghare<br>Pandit            | Rihe,<br>Padalghar- | Mulshi                    | Leading figure of GDS Central Committee, main coordinator of  |

|                 |           |       |  |
|-----------------|-----------|-------|--|
|                 | wadi      |       | all activities of GDS cultural action, especially the health programmes. Involved in grind-mill songs action-research; active in GDS since 19 years. Maratha.  |
| Khandbhor Baban | Nagathli  | Mawal | Member of GDS Central Committee, coordinator of two GDS local groups (Rajguru Nagar and Ambegaon tal.), in-charge of training activities for village council members; involved in GDS since 10 years. Maratha. |
| Dalvi Ananta    | Bramanoli | Mawal | Expert in singing, active in children's programmes. In GDS since 9 years. Maratha.   |
| Polekar Namdev  | Thangaon  | Velhe | Member of GDS Central Committee, coordinator of Velhe GDS action group, in-charge of a girl's hostel. Involved since 20 years in community organization. Maratha.  |

## Appendix 2

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### List of GDS Group Discussions with Midwives

| Village              | Taluka | Date               | Attendance:<br>Animators + Midwives |
|----------------------|--------|--------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Kolawade             | Mulshi | 16 March, 1998     | 3 + 10                              |
| Kolawade             | Mulshi | 19 April, 1998     | 4 + 10                              |
| Kolawade             | Mulshi | 16 May, 1998       | 8 + 11                              |
| Pune                 | Pune   | 1 June, 1998       | GDS Central<br>Committee            |
| Kale Colony          | Mawal  | 19 June, 1998      | 15 + 40                             |
| Kale Colony          | Mawal  | 19 August, 1998    | 15 + 40                             |
| Kolwan               | Mulshi | 24 August, 1998    | 7 + 12                              |
| Pune                 | Pune   | 9 September, 1998  |                                     |
| Kolawade             | Mulshi | 18 September, 1998 | 4 + 9                               |
| Ajiwali              | Mawal  | 7 October, 1998    | 6 + 11                              |
| Panshet              | Velhe  | 23 October, 1998   | 5 + 7                               |
| Wegre,<br>Nirgudwadi | Mulshi | 24 January, 1999   | 6 + 4                               |

|                        |               |                  |        |
|------------------------|---------------|------------------|--------|
| Pune                   | Pune          | 9 February, 1999 |        |
| Pune                   | Pune          | 9 March, 1999    |        |
| Wadawali               | Mulshi        | 23 March, 1999   | 4 + 10 |
| Gadale                 | Mulshi        | 24 March, 1999   | 4 + 7  |
| Mangaon,<br>Nivgunwadi | Mulshi        | 19 April, 1999   | 3 + 7  |
| Nigade                 | Velhe         | 17 June, 1999    | 4 + 8  |
| Yenve<br>Mahagaon,     | Rajguru Nagar | 25–26 May, 1999  | 10 + 8 |
| Dholewadi              | Mawal         | 20 June, 1999    | 4 + 5  |
| Kusgaon Wadi           | Mawal         | 21 June, 1999    | 1 + 4  |

## Notes

1. *Village Community Development Association*, a 'non-governmental organization' supporting in Pune district, among lower sections of village communities, activities of people's education, cultural awakening and social action, in particular those of the spontaneous local groups associated under the name of *Poor of the Mountain*.
2. For a detailed study report about these activities, see Poitevin 1988.
3. For a global evaluation of the scheme, see Chatterjee 1982; Jobert 1982; Bose & Desai 1983.
4. There were officially two ways of looking at the midwife tradition. According to one school of thought, traditional midwives, provided due corrections are brought in their practices, can be used to strengthen the modern medical services. According to the other, the scheme was envisaged only as a compromise solution as long as 'we cannot create an adequate number of trained people to provide proper medical services in rural areas.' Otherwise the continuation of the midwife tradition is considered useless and practically irrelevant (Ashtekar 1992: 69).
5. A full course consists of nine sessions lasting six days each, held every alternate month, as the attitudes, pedagogical and analytical skills to be generated through group exchanges demand time to mature. The group usually comprises 25 participants.
6. Reference to the forest exile inflicted by the king god Rām to Sitā, his spouse, symbolic epitome in the women's cultural traditions of all the harrassments to which a woman might be unduly and inequitably subjected in her life, first of all her in-laws' physical and mental torturing.
7. According to Molesworth's Marathi-English Dictionary, *Embellia Rives* is 'considered of great efficacy as a vermifuge'.
8. According to Molesworth's Marathi-English Dictionary, *hoḷī* is the name of a she-demon to whom the festival is addressed; it is also the name of the pile (of wood, grass, etc.) arranged to be kindled at the close of the festival, and by extension the name of the festival itself 'held at

the approach of the vernal equinox, within the first day and the day of full moon of the month of Phalgun' (approx. February-March). 'The term is applied also to the day of full moon of Phalgun', and 'to the tree or stick which is planted or fixed in the centre of the pile.' It is commonly understood that the fire symbolically burns all evil and filth of the past year.

9. These songs are quoted from a comprehensive Mawal Corpus established by Hema Rairkar since 1983, comprising more than 30,000 distiches and covering 131 neighbouring villages, mainly in Mulshi taluka (Pune dist.).
10. आपल्या माऊली नको म्हणू येड्या येड्या/जलमाच्या येळेला नऊ तुटल्या नाळया (C:VIII-1.1a, 7)
11. आपल्या मावलीला नाही म्हणू येड पाप/जलमाच्या येळ तिच्या देहीच झाल काप (C:VIII-1.1a, 14)
12. आपल्य आईला नको म्हणूस अवदसा/आपल्या जलमाच्या वेळी नव्हता धडीचा भरवसा (C:VIII-1.1a, 16)
13. गर्भीण माझी बाई तिच्या जिवाला वाटत भ्याऊ/आता ना रे देवा तू गर्भीण सुखी ठेवू (C:VIII-1.7, 7)
14. नऊ महिने नऊ दिवस अेक दिवस देवाचा/नाही भरवसा गोव्या बाईच्या जिवाचा (C:VIII-1.7, 5)
15. गरवारपणाचा घर लागला जिवाला/नऊ महिन्याच कोड पडू देवाला (C:VIII-1.7, 6)
16. नको पुत्रा म्हणू तू तर माईला येड्या सोंगा/तुड्या जलमाच्या वेळी माझी देहीची झाली गंगा (C:VIII-1.1a, 10)
17. Ligusticum Ajwaen
18. बाळतीण बाई तू तर खा शेपा ओवा/खा शेपा ओवा तुझा जलम झाला नवा (C:VIII-1.8, 1)
19. बंदू आपल्या मावलीला नाही म्हणावा वाकळ/जन्माच्या वेळी केस सोडूनी मोकळ (C:VIII-1.1a, 9)
20. सीता आपल्या मावलीला हिला फिरुनी बोलव कुणी/सांगते बाळा तिला पोटीची रत्न दोन्ही (C:VIII-1.1a, 23)
21. बारा दिस बारा राती डोळ्याच्या केल्या वाती/बंधूजी राया माझ्य तवा अस्तुरी कुठ होती (C:VIII-1.1b, 1)
22. बया बया म्हण मावच्या बया बारा/जलमाच वेळी माता धालीती येरझरा (C:VIII-1.1a, 8)
23. नऊ महिने नऊ दिवस होते बयाच्या डाव्या कुशी/मावलीला माझ्या मातेला माधारी बोलू कशी (C:VIII-1.2, 3)
24. पहिली गरभीण गरभ सावल्या तोंडावरी/वासना काई झाली रसाल्या लिंबावरी (E:XIII-1.5ai, 7)
25. Allusion to the rite of pouring water on a woman's hair to mark the end of the five-day confinement, which she has to observe during her menses for reason of pollution.
26. चवथ्या महिन्यात बाईच्या तोंडावर लाली/गवळण माझी राघा कोणत्या महिन्यात न्हाली (E:XIII-1.5 aviii, 7)
27. Myna: any bird of the family Sturnidae, of southeastern Asia, related to the starlings, blue-black to dark-brown with yellow bills; certain species are known for mimicry of human speech; usual pet name for a daughter.
28. पहिल्यान गरवार मैना म्हणती नाही नाही/काई सांगू बाई तुझी जवानी देती ग्वाही (E:XIII-1.5aiv, 2)

29. गरभीण नारी तुला अत्राचा राग भारी/अंजीर झाली महाग तू तर दुसर काही मागी (E:XIII-1.5aii, 1)
30. गरभीण नारी तुला अत्राचा येतो वास/हौशा कंथ पुस तुला झाल्यात किती दिस (G:XIX-2.11, 1)
31. गरभीण नारी हिला अत्राची ओकारी/हौशा भरतार तिला फोडी चिकण सुपारी (G:XIX-2.11, 6)
32. आंबा घेते आंबवनी लिंबाचा भाव पुस/पोटीची गवळण मला गरभीण दिस (E:XIII-1.5ai, 13)
33. सहाव्या महीन्याला बाईला हौस डाळींबाची/गवळणीला माझ्या बोल चोळी शिवावी रेशमाची (E:XIII-1.5avii, 2)
34. गरभीण नारी तुला गरभाच्या ओकाया/कंधानी पैदा केल्या तुला चिकण्या सुपाया (G:XIX-2.11, 21)
35. बोरीला आली बोर चिंच आकड्या लोंबती/आता माझी मैना त्याला गरभीण झोंबती (E:XIII-1.5ai, 10)
36. गर्भीण नारी बाई तुला खाऊशी काय वाट/हवशा बंधुची स्वारी गेली लिंब डाळींबा पेठ (E:XIII-1.5ai, 6)
37. मैना माझी गरोदर बंधु माझ्याला कस कळ/अंब्याची आंब डाली बंधु सरवणा बेगी चल (E:XIII-1.5 ai, 1)
38. पाचव्या महिन्याला बाईच्या अुचलल्या कुशी/माझ्या का गवळणीच्या घरी पारड्या गाया म्हशी (E:XIII-1.5aviii, 10)
39. बाळंतीणबाई कळा देती टेकूनी/अुपजू दे बाळ मग काढू शेकुनी (C:VIII-1.3, 1)
40. नऊ महिने नऊ दिवस होते बयाच्या पोटात/नाही लागला ऊन वारा श्रीमंताच्या कोटात (C:VIII-1.2, 8)
41. नऊ महिने नऊ राती वागवायाला नाही भिली/सीता आपली मावली शिकवीताना दगदगली (C:VIII-1.2, 6)
42. नवू महिने नवू दिस बयाबायीच्या पोटांमदी/नाही लागत उनवारा चीरबंदी कोठ्यांमधी (C:VIII-1.2, 16)
43. कळा येताना मी तर तंगड्या धरुनी/बाळ या अुपजताना आली नेत्र भरुनी (C:VIII-1.3, 4)
44. हौस मला मोठी गरवार पणाची/फाटली पुचाबाई हौस फिटती मनाची (C:VIII-1.5, 3)
45. पाचवा महिना असा तसा सहावा गेला जड/सांगते बाई कंधाची शेज सोड (E:XIII-1.5aviii, 9)
46. आठव्या महिन्याला आठवा गेला जड/गवळण माझ्या बाई आई बापाला पत्र धाड (E:XIII-1.5av, 5)
47. बाळतीण बाई तुझ पिवळ झाल अंग/खारीक खोबर आईला आणाईला सांग (E:XIII-1.5bv, 3)
48. पाचव्या दिवशी पिवल्या टाचा/कंधानी देखिली नहाणीवरी जाताजाता (E:XIII-1.5 bv, 2)
49. जन्मीला कृष्णदेव कोण व्हता त्या दिवशी वार/सांगते बाई तुला बारा दिवस हेल घाल (B:III-2.1av, 7)  
That particular custom, called '*hel ghalne*' is described as follows by Molesworth's Marathi-English Dictionary (1831: 909), 'The supplying for a few days (with water, milk, etc.) of a family in which a child is born. Usually performed by udra females, and viewed as a sort of tribute or as an acknowledgement of respect. Also the water, milk, etc. so supplied or brought. Also refers to the throwing of water before the door for a few days as an act of the same significance.'
50. बाळतीण नारी तुला बाराव झाल पुर/बाळाच्या न्हाणीवरी जाई मोगयाला आल तुर (E:XIII-1.5bvi, 3)



51. बाळतीण नारी तुला बारावी कुण्या दिशी/बाळाच्या न्हाणीवरी जाई मोगरा लसोलशी (E:XIII-1.5bvi, 2)
52. तेलामधी तेल निर्गळ (निर्मळ, निवाळ) तिळाच/माझ्या गवळणीच्या न्हाण होतय बाळाच (E:XIII-1.5 bvi, 12)
53. तिळाच तेल तेली देतो कसुनी/आईच्या हातानी बाळ घेते माखूनी (E:XIII-1.5bvi, 9)
54. बाळतीण बाई तुला छापुची शोगडी/इसवर घालाया हौशा कथाची घोंगडी (G:XIX-2.11, 19)
55. माल्याच्या मल्यात नको जाऊ कळावतीणी/नाही पुरुशाच वार केळी झाल्यात बाळतीणी (B:VII-3.1, 7)
56. केळी न केळी बाई तुझा जनम चांगला/बिन पुरुशा वाचूनी तुझा विस्तार पांगला (B:VII-3, 1)
57. माल्याच्या मल्यात नको जाऊ कळावतीणी/पुरुशावाचूनी केळी झाल्या बाळतीणी (B:VII-3.1, 3)
58. माल्याच्या मल्यात माळी कशाला झोपला/केळीबाई बोल दोश आम्हाला लागला (B:VII-3.1, 5)
59. जलमा मधी जलम केळीबाईचा चांगला/बालायाच्या आधी परण तपला बधिला (B:VII-3, 1)
60. तिसया दिवशी गावात आला सुतार/बाईच्या बाळाच्या पाळण्याचा देते इसार (E:XIII-1.5biii, 1)
61. बाराव्या दिवसाला तिकडून आला शिपी/गवळणीच्या माझ्या बाळाच्या पाळण्याला गोंड गुफी (E:XIII-1.5biii, 2)
62. तेराव्या दिवशी आला कासार वाड्याला/गवळणीच्या माझ्या दिला इसार चुड्याला (E:XIII-1.5biii, 3)
63. चवदाव्या दिवशी तिकून आला माळी/गवळणीच्या माझ्या न्हाणीवर लावी केळी (E:XIII-1.5bvi, 6)
64. बाळतीण गवळण पहिल्या दिवशी जनमील बाळ/बाळाला बघाया आल्या गवळणी तिनया पार (E:XIII-1.5biv, 1)

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# IN LIEU OF AN EPILOGUE

EDITORS

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This book is like the central panel of our social science triptych on communication.

On our left hand-side we started our investigation with, as it were, a first 'technical' panel focusing on means and technology. This 'instrumental' view of communication appeared short-sighted, scientifically sterile and above all, purposefully misleading. 'Communication explosion' diverts the attention from the networks of power which put to use powerful means of transmission to circulate directives and serve vested interests. We have therefore been warned to remain decidedly suspicious about enthusiastic but naive discourses on communication delivering development and democracy, and other similar candid shibboleths.

Communication appeared as a matter to be apprehended within the context of politics, that is to say, of networks of prestige, authority, influence and power relations. This imperatively brought home the fact that, in its essence, communication has to do with the modes of articulation of social relations between individuals in society. Still, the visualization of society as a global combine of systems of relations, and communication as their articulation, will sound redundant as a tautology as long as we do not construct the concept of this integrative articulation.

The 'symbolic' central panel displays evidences arranged in the light of the category of the symbolic suggested by Marcel Mauss and heartily recommended by Lévi-Strauss. The panel let realize that this category proves the most appropriate conceptual framework to apprehend how communication holds the key to the

articulation of the social as a totality. The ground of that totality is not the world but the function of symbolization specific to the human mind. This potency operates as an agency of correlation and conjunction of entities, elements and components of all possible sorts which remain distinct and stand apart for themselves in the very moment they are pieced together into a complex singularity, namely, a society of discrete human beings.

This singular totality does not only associate human beings together in the world through ascription of status, recognition of identity, symbolic systems of social communication such as languages, myths, ritual practices, regulation of rapports. It correlates them together through and with their physical world itself, mainly their body and their work, wrapping men and nature into one single symbolic dispensation. Communication as symbolic relation starts when any object in the world is turned into a sign and made a symbolic form. The social articulation of communication is of a symbolic nature in the sense that it originates in the symbolic capacity of man's mind.

The 'symbolic' central panel of our triptych invites us accordingly to shift our attention from kits of means of transmission of information towards the world as an inexhaustible mine of symbolic signs. Our scientific concern similarly shifts from technology of communication to the human mind as the sole agency capable of turning any element in the world into symbolic form of relational synthesis, theoretical and practical. This capacity operates through and manifests itself in, social systems of symbolic communication which are the heart of the social and consequently the very object of a science of the social in general and communication in particular. The processes, modalities, strategies and cognitive logics which preside in the construction of systems of symbolic forms, toward their interplay, structural homologies and confrontation are the common threads of the contributions of this central panel.

However, the symbolic synthetic function, principle of correspondences, coherences, equivalences and relations, and translations of the one to the other and vice versa, appears as a kingdom divided from within. It displays itself in our central panel as fragmented into a multiplicity of symbolic social forms which do not always tally with one another as should the two broken parts of a *symbolon*. The function of symbolization is unable to con-

gregate the distinct totalities it assembles. The indefinite multiplicity of the 'signifying'—the *signifiant flottant* of Lévi-Strauss—allows a possibly infinite variety of 'signified' whose translation into one another is not always easy or even feasible. Social forms and systems of symbolic communication do not always or totally communicate with one another, and this holds good between collectives as well as within them.

As no third mediating agency can be expected to reconcile from outside discrepant or conflicting symbolic forms of social communication, attempts of interaction, whether made out of free will or under compulsion, display modes of transaction which oscillate between the two extreme modalities of dominance and resistance. They are also not deprived of ambivalence and ambiguity. Clear antagonism may give way to negotiation, exclusion may be substituted by cooptation, autonomous appropriation may be inverted into inclusive domination, free assertion may prefer unbound flights of imagination to critical appropriation and realistic confrontation. Unpredictability and multiple transitivity characterize the ways symbolic totalities meet, compete and contend.

Ultimately, the main conclusion to be drawn from this 'symbolic' central panel is that the rationality of the symbolic function is more often than not, willingly or unwillingly, knowingly or unknowingly, surrendering to power processes which instrumentalize its potentials. Symbolic forms are stakes of conflicts of influence, authority and power. They are precious assets of social control. This was already the main conclusion of our first 'technical' panel. Power transcends the symbolic as much as the technique.

Our third 'cultural' panel, on our right hand-side, will particularly draw the attention towards the multiplicity of the symbolic forms of social communication for the reason that 'the cultural' is the space of their fragmentation, meet and competition. It will display the ways of emergence of symbolic configurations with their specific motivations within given contexts. It will point to the diversity of forms of symbolic expression. Ultimately, again, it will focus on the modes of management of cultural confrontation over time and space within the context of given power contests. Recasting the social as the symbolic prompts to remoulding the cultural as the contentious.

# ABOUT THE EDITORS AND CONTRIBUTORS

## The Editors

**Bernard Bel** is a computer scientist currently working at *Laboratoire Parole et Langage*, a speech research laboratory of the French National Centre for Scientific Research, Aix-en-Provence, France. Between 1994 and 1998, he was deputed to *Centre de Sciences Humaines* (CSH), New Delhi, to carry on projects in musicology and social-cultural anthropology. During his stay in India he also took part in an enquiry on birthing in rural India conducted by his wife Andréine. He is currently involved in social activism for an improvement of maternity services in French-speaking countries.

**Jan Brouwer** recently retired as Professor of Cultural Anthropology from the North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong. He is presently Professor of Anthropology at the University School of Design, University of Mysore and Honorary Director at the Centre for Advanced Research on Indigenous Knowledge Systems (CARIKS), Mysore. He has many published works to his credit and is currently working on the concept of autonomy and death as a social relation.

**Biswajit Das** is Professor and Director of the Centre for Culture, Media and Governance, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. He was previously Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology, Jamia Millia Islamia. He has over two decades of teaching and research experiences in Communication Studies, Development Communication and Sociology. He has been a visiting fellow at the University of Windsor, Canada, the East-West Centre, Hawaii, and the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla. His research has been supported by the Indo-French Scholarship, Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute, Charles Wallace India Trust, Ford Foundation, UNESCO, UNDP, University Grants Commission and

ICSSR. He is currently finalizing two book length manuscripts 'Media, Memory and Modernity', based on fieldwork in Orissa, and 'Social History of Radio in Colonial India' on early broadcasting in the subcontinent.

**Vibodh Parthasarathi** is an independent communication theorist and public policy consultant, occasionally foraying into media production. Trained in Development Studies and Mass Communication, his research interests lie in the political economy of the media. He has taught courses in communication theory at the Manipal Institute of Communication, Karnataka, and the Mass Communication Research Centre, New Delhi, and was the coordinator of a trilingual publishing project on 'Communication and Citizenship' involving writers and publishers from Brazil, France and India. 'Crosscurrents—a Fijian travelogue', his last documentary, explored the many faces of 'reconciliation' after the decade of coups in the tiny Pacific nation. His current research focuses on the music industry in India, both during its formative years (1900–1914) and in present times (1995–2005), the latter pursued as a Visiting Professor at the Centre for Jawaharlal Nehru Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

**Guy Poitevin** (1934–2004) was born in Mayenne (France). After studying to become a priest and graduating in philosophy and theology, he taught for twelve years in a seminary in Western France. He settled in Pune in 1972 and later became a naturalized Indian citizen. Along with his wife Hema Rairkar, friends and associates, he set up the Village Community Development Association (VCDA, <http://vcda.ws>) in 1978 to support socio-cultural action in remote rural areas, and the Centre for Cooperative Research in Social Sciences (CCRSS, <http://ccrss.ws>) in 1980 for the purpose of carrying out theoretically related activities. Besides numerous articles, he has written several books in English and French, including translated works from Marathi.

## The Contributors

**Andréine Bel** began investigating 'instinctive movement' on the basis of the Seitai school in Japan after training in classical ballet. Later she felt the need to develop technical aspects in a thorough

study of North Indian Kathak, for which she was taught by Pandit Birju Maharaj. In 1986 she returned to Europe and became involved in contemporary dance forms with a particular interest in choreography. From 1995 onward she has shifted her focus back to the fundamentals of human movement. She organizes self-learning workshops and takes an active part in discussion lists dealing with a critical appraisal of health care methods, both official and 'alternative'.

**Prabhakar Ghare** is a farmer from Jaul, taluka Mulshi, Pune district. He is the youngest of three sisters and two brothers. His father died in 1954 when he was 15 months old. His uncle then took over one and a half acres of their land, which forced his mother to become an agricultural labourer. Two of his sisters and a brother are no more. His third sister is married while his brother works as a coolie in the grain godown in Pune. Ghare joined VCDA in 1981. Working as an animator he began to understand the laws about land. He fought his uncle and got back their ancestral land, which is now two and a half acres. His family has further acquired two more acres, and is now self-sufficient. Thanks to a new percolation tank, they can irrigate their land, cultivate paddy, and grow double crops of wheat and tomato.

**Sanjay Jogdanda** attended school up to class 10th (1988) when he failed in the exam. His father scraped the bottom of the river for pieces of gold and looked after the ashes of cremated human bodies. His mother would cut and sell grass. Sanjay worked as a daily labourer, loading trucks with manure, and so on, while being simultaneously involved in social activities. He was selected by the Village Community Development Association, where he narrated the experiences of his community in its training workshops. This led him to join the team of the Centre for Cooperative Research in Social Sciences, Pune, with youths of similar background. They share the aim of bringing to light the life, thoughts, struggles and visions of their marginalized and ostracized communities, in the very words and perspectives of their members. This has helped Sanjay to resume studies as a S.Y.B.A. student.

**Baban Khandbhor** was born in a peasant family and remains an agriculturist of Mawal (Pune district). While helping his father in the fields, he studied up to class 11th, changing schools five

times, and studying from second-hand books borrowed from friends, with only one set of clothes and no footwear. By attending the training meetings of *Garib Dongari Sanghatna* (Organization of the Poor of the Mountain), a regional action-group of similar village youth, his life has gained meaning. Along with a vast and critical knowledge on many burning issues, he has now the means to fight with courage and success, thanks to the collective self-confidence and efficiency of the GDS.

**Chandrakant Kokate** earned his B. Sc. and B. Ed. (1995) from Boravake College (Shrirampur, Aurangabad district) while he worked, under the scheme 'Earn and Learn'. Selected in 1988 by the college to take interviews of young students, he developed an interest in social movements and came in contact with various activists in Shrirampur. He then became active in a youth movement for social transformation (*Chhatrabharati*). Since March 1992 he is employed as a clerk in the same Boravake College. Though a science student, he feels he has found the right direction in pursuing social studies by coming in contact with the CCRSS, Pune, as member of a team of young activists committed to keeping records of the collective testimony of depressed communities.

**Suresh Kokate** was born in a poor Parit (washerman) family. His father died when he was in class 6. He completed his education and graduated with B.A. and B. Ed. as his mother began to sell vegetables. Since childhood he has been deeply influenced by the movement *Rashtra Seva Dal* and worked briefly as a journalist during his college days. He was a teacher from 1984 to 1988, after which he was appointed as a full-time social worker with Asha Kendra, Puntamba. In 1991, while attending a self-learning in social action organized by VCDA, he found the motivation for an in-depth study of his Parit community, as a commitment to the past memory and future of his community. This study is now ready for publication.

**Tulsi Patel** heads the Department of Sociology at the Delhi School of Economics, Delhi University, her alma mater where she obtained her Ph.D. In 1978 she began teaching Sociology in Miranda House, Delhi University. Since 1982 she has taught at Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi. Her research interests have been



gender and development and population. An interest in fertility behaviour has opened new vistas of studies to her, such as the study of social organization of child delivery. Her contact with the field has been very long and her work provides with additional insights every time her academic interests are linked with those in the field.

**Hema Rairkar** graduated in Economics and worked in the Gokhale Institute of Economic and Political Sciences, Pune. In 1991 she became involved in the research projects of Centre for Cooperative Research in Social Sciences (CCRSS), in connection with action-groups of peasant women in villages of Pune district. Since 1983 she has conducted vast systematic research in Marathi-speaking western India on the tradition of women's grindmill songs. She organizes seminars and debates in colleges and villages on folk culture and knowledge, in cooperation with peasant animators in a spirit of reflexive reappropriation of one's heritage. Currently she is working on the expertise, social recognition and status of traditional midwives.

**S.A. Samy** was born in an agricultural family. He joined AICUF (All India Catholic University Federation) during his college years. He became the full-time editor of a vernacular students' magazine, publishing analytical articles on issues related to students. In the meantime, farming activities almost collapsed due to droughts and overuse of chemicals. Television sets and cricket games replaced childhood street games, village theatre and folk performances. Challenged by these disturbing trends, S.A. Samy joined the Centre for Culture and Development at Chennai.

**Datta Shinde** was born in 1968 in a Chambhar community, in a village of Maharashtra with no school, dispensary, water supply, road, nor any means of transport. In class 7, he got a scholarship that enabled him to continue up to his M.A. and B.Ed. while working. He has been employed as a teacher since 1993. 'The fifteen years spent in school to get a bookish knowledge have only made me going round the track as a horse in the circus with the eyes covered by blinkers on both the sides. Since my participation in several research activities of the CCRSS I have discovered what really means to study with a free mind. I realize that this has made me different from the other teachers.'

**Nandini Sinha Kapur** is a Reader in History at PGDAV College, University of Delhi, New Delhi. The author of the book *State Formation in Rajasthan: Mewar during the 7th-15th Centuries* (2002), she was awarded Homi Bhabha post-doctoral fellowship for research on tribals and pastoralists in the historic setting of Rajasthan. She has presented lectures at the Universities of Harvard, Chicago and Columbia, USA, and at the London University. She was also invited to the Annual South-Asia Conference at Madison, Wisconsin University, USA, in October 2003.