

## CHAPTER VI

### RELIGION AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

#### I

The Mers, like all high caste Hindus, believe in Hindu scriptures, worship Vedic gods and celebrate all Hindu festivals. In Chapter II, I have made it clear that the Mers worship gods such as Rama, Krishna, Shiva, Hanuman and others. Not only this, they derive the origin of their lineages from the heroes and the rishis of the epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata. The note on the Mer lineages given in Appendix II will show how they link their genealogies to Brahma, Rama, Krishna, and to the three divine objects such as Agni, Surya and Chandra. I am concerned here not with Mer religion as such, but only with the relation it bears to Mer social structure.

The most favoured celebration is that of Shri Satyanarayana or Shri Vishnu. The story of Shri Satyanarayana, known as Satyanārāyanani Kathā, centres around the account of a Bania merchant who recovers his lost property and successfully comes out of many calamities by worshipping and paying offerings to this deity. The recitation or hearing of the story leads to prosperity. One occasionally comes across people who make a vow to celebrate the story of Satyanarayana with the view to come out of a difficulty or secure a desired end. The religious reading of this story is so much in vogue all over Gujarat that when a student appears for an examination, his parents make a vow to celebrate it if he passes.

A Brahmin presides over this ceremony and reads the story of Shri Satyanarayana. The person celebrating the story invites the near agnatic and the affinal relatives living in the village to attend the function. They also extend invitations to the members of other castes who have intimate contacts with the family concerned. The celebration is generally performed during daytime in the house where the Brahmin instals an image or other symbol of the deity. There is a small gathering. However, if a person is well-to-do, he may celebrate the function with much pomp, and may therefore invite the relatives living in other villages.

The celebration is concluded by a ritual act known as ārati, which consists in waving a lamp before the deity.

This ritual is performed by the son or the son's son of the family. At the end of the function they distribute sweet-meats known as prasāda to the assembled devotees. It is also a part of the function that, at the end, the people (men, women and children) sing bhajans or songs in praise of god. The act of attending this function and the partaking of the prasāda (the sweet-meat is supposed to have been accepted by the god in person and whatever is left is taken by the devotees) is regarded as an act bestowing merit and so the persons who are invited to this function seldom miss attending.

The next favourite celebration is the public reading of the Bhagvata Purana which mainly deals with the Hindu myth of the creation of the universe, with the ten incarnations of god Vishnu. Only a well-to-do family can afford to have such a recitation which lasts for seven days, and is therefore known as saptāha, lit., the reading through the Purana in a week.

If a learned Brahmin is not available in a village itself, one is invited from outside for the purpose. The Brahmin reads the Purana before the audience and finishes his work in seven days. The male and female devotees who gather to listen to the Purana bring with them offerings in cash and in kind, and lighted lamps which they place before the shrine and bow in reverence. Those who attend this function regularly go on a partial or complete fast during the period of the reading. Fasting during such a period is considered meritorious. Similarly, the act of showing reverence to sacred books,

to Brahmin priests and offering gifts and a lamp to the books which are being read are also regarded as the merit-conferring acts.

The person observing a week of Bhagvata Purana recital invites his agnatic and affinal relatives to attend the function. The married daughters, their husbands and their parents-in-law are the special guests. Some agnatic and affinal relatives of one's affines are also expected to attend the function. These relatives, some Brahmins of the village and the members of other castes are given a special dinner on the last day. Occasionally a man gives a dinner to the entire village. I have mentioned in Chapter III, the importance of offering a dinner to the people of a village; the act which enhances the solidarity of a village. On the whole, the reading of Bhagvata Purana is much longer and more important than reading the story of Satyanarayana which lasts only a few hours.

All religious occasions are generally accompanied by a programme of bhajans or the songs in the praise of god. These songs usually deal with the stories of Ramayana and Mahabharata, and also speculate on such theological subjects as the nature of life and universe (jiva and jagat), knowledge and renunciation (jñāna and vairāgya), and devotion to god and salvation (bhakti and moksha).

The singing of bhajans or religious songs is a

Plate VII

- (a) A meeting of the  
elders in chorā:

The Wers of the village Kansabad  
assemble to raise a fund to build  
a primary school. The meeting  
(dāyaro) is held in the village  
office called chorā. February, 1953.

- (b) Singing of the  
bhajanās:

Some of the Wer friends assemble  
at night in a house and sing  
religious songs or the bhajanās.  
Kansabad, January, 1953.

154-1



common feature in the day-to-day life of Mers. During my field-work I have often attended programmes of bhajans during night-time in Mer houses. Further, a few persons who are literate and religious-minded often gather together at night to read and interpret passages from Ramayana, Mahabharata and Bhagvat-Gita.

They also worship the elephant-headed god, Ganapati or Ganesha, the son of Parvati (the consort of Lord Shiva). Ganesha is the god of learning and is also considered as the remover of all obstacles. He is worshipped on all auspicious occasions. A wooden or a stone statue of Ganesha is generally found in every Mer house. They burn incense and light a lamp every evening before the image of Ganesha. When a marriage is to be celebrated, the priest sets up a shrine of Ganesha with due ceremony. A lamp is lit and kept burning incessantly till after the conclusion of the marriage. An image of Ganesha is likewise established at the place where the caste-dinner is cooked whether at the time of marriage or during mortuary rites.

Kshetrapala is another deity worshipped at the time of marriage. Kshetrapala, lord of a particular stretch of land or other area, is said to be the brother of Rukmini, the principal queen of Lord Krishna. When Krishna kidnapped Rukmini, it was Kshetrapala who helped them and acted as guard during the gāndharva form of marriage ceremony by which they were married later. It is believed that at a marriage, Kshetrapala protects the bridal couple (or the marriage itself) from harm.

The parents of a boy consider it necessary to perform the ceremony of Randal or Ranna Devi, the principal queen of Sun god, just before or after marriage. I have referred to the worship of goddess Ranna Devi in Chapter I. This deity is considered to be the giver of children and her boons bring fertility and prosperity to the concerned couple.

The worship of the monkey god Hanuman is common among the Mers. An image of Hanuman is usually found in a temple of Rama, Laxmana and Sita or in that of Shiva. In every day life, this deity is worshipped when a person or a child is affected by evil eyes. The very name of Hanuman is supposed to scare all evil spirits from a place. The talisman given in the name of Hanuman is supposed to cure a patient who is affected by black magic or evil spirits. On every Saturday, a member of a family goes to the temple of Hanuman, and offers oil and sindūr (red lead), of which the deity is supposed to be very fond.

The Mers consider it to be very essential to visit to the famous Hindu centres of pilgrimage. The four holy places, namely, Dwaraka in the west, Jagannathpuri in the east, Badrinath in the north and Rameshwara in the south are the chief centres of pilgrimage. Among these four holy places known to the Hindus all over India, Dwaraka, the place of Krishna's reign, is the nearest to the Mer region, and so every Mer goes there on pilgrimage at least once in his life-time. Besides, they may prefer to go to other holy places of the Hindus such



as Hardwar-Rishikesh, Gokul-Brindavan, Kashi-Banaras and so on. The rivers Ganges, Jamuna, Narmada, etc., are considered holy, and therefore a Mer pays a visit to a well-known temple situated on the banks of these rivers. The waters of these rivers are ritually brought to the house, and they are given to the people of the village. The drinking of even a single drop of the holy water of the Ganges is regarded as conferring such merit (punya) to the drinker, by putting a drop in the mouth of a dying person, his soul is supposed to get moksha or salvation.

There are also local centres of pilgrimage. For instance, the mount Girnar where the temples of the goddesses Kalika and Ambika, and Guru Dattatreya are situated. Two other places are associated with the life of Krishna. They are Triveni Sangam near the famous temple of Somanath Mahadeo and Madhavpur, the seat of Madhavraji. It is believed that Lord Krishna breathed his last at this Triveni Sangam, the confluence of the rivers Saraswati, Verna and a small rivulet, where he was shot by the arrow of a hunter. And Madhavpur is the place where Krishna is said to have eloped with Rukmini. A fair is held at this place every year on the 9th day of the bright half of chaitra (March-April).

When a person or a family goes on pilgrimage to holy places, the members remaining keep count at home of days taken up in travel by marking a swastika on the wall for each day. When the pilgrims return, they are formally received in the village by a ceremony called samayun. This is a formal

reception accorded to the pilgrims by the relatives and by the village elders who go in procession to receive them. The procession is accompanied by the drummers and the pipers. A dinner is given to the Brahmins and other relatives on this occasion. The pilgrims also give cash gifts (dakshinā) to the Brahmins. Such an act confers merit. The people of the village bow to the pilgrims and receive from them the sweet-meat (prasāda) which they have brought from the holy places. The water of the holy rivers is also given to the people who receive it with gratitude. The family of the pilgrims may also offer a dinner to the people of the village. On such occasions the dinner given to all the villagers pave the way towards the solidarity of a village.

## II

The followers of the Shaiva and the Vaishnava sects are found among the people of almost all the castes in Saurashtra. The Mers worship Shiva whose temples are found in every Mer village. But the worship of Shakti, the consort of Shiva, is worth noting. The worshippers of Shakti are known as the Shaktas and are split up into two sub-sects known as dakshinā-chāri (followers of the Right-hand Path) and vamamārgi, (followers of the Left-hand Path). Only a small section of the Mers are vamamārgi. This sect draws its members from all castes including Harijanas, and its membership is a secret.

The organization of vamamārgi is headed by the members of Bava (religious mendicant) sect who maintain a few monasteries (mathas) in the Mer region. The male and female members of this sect assemble at night in a secret place (known to the members only), to take part in a ceremony. The ceremony is popularly known as the pāt, which is performed on the second day (bīja) of the dark half of every month; consequently, this sect is also known as the bījamārgi. This ceremony is presided over by the priest belonging to the Bava caste. The priest spreads grains on the pedestal or stool and draws some magical formula and puts a lamp in the centre. The priest represents Shiva and a woman impersonates Kali (a form of Shakti) and there is an elaborate ritual during which their sexual organs are worshipped, and offerings of toddy and meat are put before them. When indicated by the priest, the members present also partake of the toddy and meat, and later copulate with members of the opposite sex. Sexual union even with a woman of one's own lineage is not considered incestuous on such occasions.

A reference may also be made here to the sect of Ramdeo Pir which, as it is reported to me, seems to be a modified form of Shakta worship. An important distinction between these sects seems to be that the sect of Ramdeo Pir forbids a member to eat meat and to drink wine. Besides the sect of Ramdeo Pir gives priority to the worship of a light known as iyot and not to that of Shakti or Kali. However, a

person who wants to become an active member of this sect has to approach a woman who represents mātā or the mother-goddess. I shall deal with this sect in detail in the next section and it is sufficient to mention here that the ceremonies of this sect are also kept confidential.

The Mers, like the other Hindus are influenced by the tradition of bhaktimārga (the path of devotion), that was revived in the 16th century by saints such as Vallabha, Chaitanya, etc. Shri Krishna, regarded as one of the ten incarnations of Vishnu, is held in high respect both as a child and as an adult. He is variously referred to as Thakorji, Shrinathji, Ranchhod-rayaji, etc. The elaborate ceremonial with which Thakorji is worshipped by the high caste Hindus of Gujarat, is lacking among the Mers. The Mers, being agriculturists, are busy in the fields throughout the day and they do not have the leisure which the higher castes have. Even old men and women who are expected to pass their time in meditating upon the name of god, have miscellaneous duties in the field or at home. However, it should be noted here that, the worship of Thakorji becomes significant when we hear of a person going to pilgrimage to the seats of Madhavarayaji and Dwarakadhish at Madhavpur and Dwaraka respectively.

The inner room of the chorā (village office) of a Mer village is generally a shrine either of Thakorji or Shri Ramachandraji. The Brahmin pujāri who looks after this temple opens it every morning and evening. The pujāri gives

a bath to the images of these deities and worships them with offerings of flowers and sweet-meats and with ārati (the waving of the lamp). Normally only a few men and children meet at the chorā in the evenings to witness the ārati. But on the festival days such as Ramanavami (9th day of the bright half of chaitra) Krishnasthami (8th day of the dark half of shravana) etc., all the villagers visit the temples of their village as well as those of some neighbouring villages. A big village may also have separate temples of Thakorji and Ramchandraji, but it is interesting to note that a shrine to Thakorji is generally to be found in the inner room of the chorā of a village.

Some Mers are devotees of another Vaishnava sect known as Pranamipantha. This sect was founded by the saint Prananathaji who lived in Pana in Bundelakhanda. The main feature of this sect is also devotion (or bhakti) to Krishna, but stress is laid on the love between Radha and Krishna. The devotees, men as well as women, have to play the role of the Gopis (Krishna's milkmaids) when they worship Krishna. A small section of the Mers remain as the devotees of this sect. I was told that this sect also have secret ceremonials. The members of Pranamipantha do not believe in worshipping the idol of Krishna. The women members of this sect are distinguished by the white clothes which they have to put on. I was unable to gather anything more than the few scattered facts I have given above.

Comparatively more favourite sect is that of Kabir, a saint who came from the caste of the weavers. His teachings are full of wisdom and aim at reconciling the precepts of both Hindus and Muslims. This sect is an open sect (ughādopantha), and its functions may therefore be attended by any person.

In villages where monasteries of this sect are found, the priest in-charge (called Mahant Sahab) reads the life and the teachings of Kabir. A printed picture or a statue of Kabir Sahab (as he is popularly called) is worshipped by the priest, and the ārati ritual may be attended by men, women or children. Bhajanas are also sung by the priest or by a member after the conclusion of the ārati. The monasteries and the priest are maintained from voluntary contributions made by the several devotees.

When a true devotee or bhagat dies, it is obligatory on the part of his family to perform the ārati to Kabir in the name of the deceased. This ceremony is referred to as kara nī ārati to be performed after the death of a devotee, as distinguished from a similar ceremony called ānand ārati, i.e., the one performed voluntarily on happy occasions, e.g., the marriage of a person or the birth of a son in a family. On all such occasions, ārati (the waving of light) is offered to the pāt (a pedestal representing the seat) of Kabir. Such a ceremony is attended by the agnatic and the affinal relatives of a person. Some times a person performing such a ceremony may give a dinner to his caste-fellows or to the local community, but it is not obligatory.

Some Mers also follow certain Muslim saints known as Pir, who come from the priestly sect of the Saiyeds. A Pir is supposed to have communion with god (Allāh) and therefore as possessing power by which he heals the mental or physical maladies. The people of artisan castes, who are Hindus, also propitiate a Muslim Pir and make a vow to carry offerings to a Pir with a view to get rid of any illness they may be suffering from.

A live man can also be Pir, and the story I give here is one of such a living Pir. Munjo Patel, one of the ancestors of the village Khistri, (where I stayed for more than two months) was a devotee of a Muslim Pir. He was a favourite disciple of this Pir, whom he used to visit every day. He fell ill suddenly and expired after some days. On learning of the Patel's death, the Pir went to Patel's house and by his miraculous power brought the Patel back to life. Since then, the Patel lineage of Khistri began to respect the Pir, and when he died, they even allowed him to be buried on the outskirts of the village, where his grave is still to be found. (See map 2).

I might refer here to the general behaviour of the people of a particular lineage towards different religious sects. The people of the village Khistri belong to the Sisodia lineage which forms a segment of the major lineage called Godhanla of the village Khambhodar. After settling in this village (Khistri) they broken up into two segments. The office

of the headman goes down the Patel lineage and the office of the priest to the deity Vachhada Dada goes to the Bhuva (a medium) lineage. The devotion to the Muslim Pir of the village is much stronger among the members of the Patel lineage. However, all the members of the Patel lineage worship Vachhada Dada (the favourite deity of the Mers) and likewise, some of the members of the Bhuva lineage believe in the Muslim Pir. A father in a Mer family wishes that his sons become the members of the sect of which he is a member, but he cannot force any one of them to do so; for instance, a father may remain a member of the sect of Ramdeo Pir while his sons or daughters (when grown up) may chose to become the member of Kabir or Pranami sect. Even a husband cannot force his wife to become the member of a particular sect to which he belongs. This freedom of belief that a member of a family enjoys is also one of the factors that weakens the solidarity of a lineage. And, I might emphasise here that sectarian affiliation cuts across not only caste but even more important units like lineage, joint family, etc.

Mers believe that every man should have a religious preceptor or a spiritual guide called guru. A person desirous of being the disciple of a teacher invites the latter to his home and offers a dinner and also gifts in cash or kind. When a teacher considers a person fit to be his disciple, he gives him esoteric spiritual advice (gurumantra). Even a young boy may be allowed to become a disciple, but he is not fully



initiated into the sect. The guru gives private dictum to such a young boy who is then known as kācho chēlo (lit. raw disciple). But when such a boy becomes an adult, the priest may give him full initiation and accept him as a pākō chēlo (lit. complete or full disciple). A guru may refuse to accept a person as his disciple if the latter is found unfit.

People look down upon a person who has not become a disciple of some preceptor or other. They call such a person as naguro, lit. one devoid of a spiritual guide, and it carries contempt with it. People believe that it is difficult to attain perfect knowledge, jnāna, without a guru through whom only can a man attain salvation.

A Mer boy or girl may remain celibate throughout his or her life. Such celibacy is usually due to religious reasons. They permit a person to remain unmarried if he or she wants to devote his or her life to the service of god or of a religious sect. Similarly, occasionally a widow or widower or a divorcee does not remarry in order to lead a saintly life. Such persons have occasionally established sects of their own among the Mers. Such a saint goes from village to village reciting bhajanās and collecting a band of disciples who later apotheosise the saint. The sect carries on the teachings of such a local saint. For instance, the sect of Sajan Bhagat, a Mer from the village Maiyari of the low-land, evaluates various pious acts such as giving food and clothing to the Sadhus and

Sanyasins, feeding cows and dogs, and scattering grain to birds. The main function of the sect of Sajan Bhagat is to conduct free food centres known as annakshētra at the fair of Madhavpur and Junagadh where a number of mendicants and pilgrims are fed. The members of the sect also sing bhajans at such a food-centre day and night till the fair comes to an end.

Similarly, a sect founded by a Mer woman Ramibai, later known as Ramguru, continues to exist among Mers and the artisan-castes. Ramguru was born in a village called Bagasara in the low-land, but a large number of her followers live in the high-land where she spent the later part of her life.

It is important to note that the priests of most of the sects mentioned above, come from non-Brahmin castes. A considerable number of Brahmins have become members of these various sects. In most such cases however, Brahmins maintain their purity by not dining either with the priest or with the other members of the sects. Another point to be noted is that most of these sects (except the sect of Kali) forbid a member to eat meat and to drink alcoholic drinks. It is likely that nowadays a greater number of people are adherents of the sect of Ramdeo Pir than of Kali because of the former's insistence on teetotalism.

I should also reproduce here, the observation made by Prof. M.N. Srinivas on the characteristics of the various sects in Gujarat (including Saurashtra). He says, "One important characteristic of these sects in Gujarat is their tendency to cut across caste distinctions. For instance, the large and influential Swaminarayan sect has followers from Brahmin, Kanbi, Bhavsar, Charan, Darji, Ghanchi, Gola, Kachhia, Kathi, Koli, Luhar, Mali, Rajput, Salat, Sathwara, Soni and Sutar castes. This is more or less true of the other sects as well. Thus in Gujarat in addition to the tendency to the strict spatial delimitation of caste ties, the influence of the numerous sects has been such as to weaken the hold of caste. This is in marked contrast to South India where with the exception of Lingayatism, there is no sect which ignores caste barriers. On the other hand, even in Gujarat, for purposes of marriage and commensality it is caste that is the relevant unit and not sect, when several castes together form a sect. That is, the ties of sect are not strong enough to dissolve completely caste distinctions."<sup>1</sup>

### III

In Chapter II (p.63), I have given some idea of the sect of Ramdeo Pir, while here I present a detailed account of the same. This sect is popularly known as motopanth, lit., the Big Sect, and it is to be noted that this sect is widely

spread among the low caste people of Western India. One of the Mer devotees told me that that is the classic religion, i.e., sanātana dharma, the root of all religions. For, as the Mers say, this sect gives paramount importance to light or iyot which is considered to be the essence of all the living-beings.

In essence, the sect advocates a member to overlook the distinctions of caste, colour or sex. Any person who firmly believes in the equality of all persons, may become a member of this sect. I learnt from some informants that even Muslims and Europeans have been admitted as members of this sect.

The sect of Ramdeo Pir is a secret society, because, attendance at the pāt ceremony where the light is worshipped, is restricted only to its members who are known as bhagats. These members are asked to take an oath not to reveal the secrets of the ceremony which are performed behind closed doors. It is said that if a member discloses any information about the ceremony, he becomes a victim to divine wrath and suffers from a disease such as insanity or leprosy. So, it is a difficult task to gather adequate data about the ceremonial of the sect.

In spite of the fact that this sect is considerably popular, we do not find a monastery, or a temple to Ramdeo Pir in any Mer village. The majority of the priests (including women) are peripatetics who go from one village to another to

perform the ceremony as and when needed. However, some of them work as pujāris (lit., temple priests) in the temples of Shiva, Chamunda Mata (f.), and such other deities. Every Mer village has an organization of this sect, and if a village has a population of more than a thousand souls, it is likely that there may be more than one such organization. Divisions of this kind found among the members of this sect generally correspond to the dissensions of the segments of the dominating lineage living in a village. For instance, the village Khambhodar has two such organizations of Ramdeo Pir, and each contains the members of two or three minor segments of the dominant lineage. When the pat ceremony is held by one of the organizations, the members of the other are not invited to attend.

A person who wants to become a member of the sect has to give a feast called parasādi (of pancakes) to the existing members. Formerly, an individual could become a member (bhagat), but now-a-days, they say, the membership is granted only to a couple. A new member has to undergo a strict discipline when he enters the house where the pāt ceremony is held on his behalf. He has to bow to the iyot and to the master of the ceremony who gives him spiritual advice. Later, he is asked to give pieces of the sweetmeat to other members and accept the same from them in return. The act of giving a sweetmeat-piece to a Brahmin, and accepting one from an Untouchable member is considered very significant; as it breaks through the structural distance prevailing in daily life between a high

caste member and a low caste one. The distance between the members of different castes is overlooked only when they meet at the ceremony of the iyot. Otherwise, in daily life, this distinction of the high and low is retained. Further, a new member has to pass through a test in order to be confirmed as a true devotee of Ramdeo Pir. He has to take off his clothes and approach a woman-member known as mātā who sits naked in an inner apartment. If he controls his sexual emotions to such an extent that he does not have an erection, he is considered to have come through the test successfully. If, on the contrary, he has an erection he may be asked to appear again before the mātā when subsequent ceremonies take place. The test continues till he wins self-control and is able to forget the woman before him and concentrate on the iyot.

The members are divided into three categories called vādi (lit. garden). The categorisation is made on the basis of varna, viz., the Shudras come in the moti-vādi (lit. big garden), the Vaishyas and the Kshatriyas in nāni-vādi (lit. small garden) and the Brahmins come in trāgadā-vādi (lit. thread garden, i.e., the group of those who wear the thread, namely, the yajnopavita). I have not been able to know the real ritual function (of the people) of all these categories but it is said that the presence of the members of the moti-vādi (Untouchables) and trāgadā-vādi (Brahmins) is considered indispensable when a new member passes through the initiation ceremony described earlier.

Here, varna seems to be relevant, but, as it has been noted earlier, caste has to be ignored while exchanging pieces of sweet-meat. This contradiction, on the one hand, sanctions the age old varna system, while on the other hand, it bridges up the distance between the two extremes of the caste, i.e., the Untouchables and the Brahmins. The functional importance of the former lies in maintaining the Brahmanical hierarchy of caste while the latter, probably, help achieving the vertical solidarity of the different castes of a village.

The organization of this sect is under the control of one of its leading members who is called kotwāl, lit., magistrate. The kotwāl selects a few other assistants known as chokidār, lit., guards or watchmen. The main duty of the kotwāl is to make all the arrangements for the performance of the ceremony. Besides, it is his duty to circulate the invitation among the members, and for this, he selects a code-word called vāyaka which one of the chokidārs circulates strictly among the members. If a member is unable to attend the proposed ceremony, he refuses to hear and take note of the vāyaka; in case he does so, he must attend the ceremony at any cost. The house in which the ceremony is held is kept closed and it is guarded by the members who are selected as chokidārs. A chokidār gives admission into such a house to those persons only, who, when asked for, whispers the code-word selected for the day.

This ceremony is held generally on the second day (bīja) of the dark half of a month. And, as no light is kept outside the house where the ceremony takes place, it is difficult to identify a person in the darkness and so a chokidār may also inquire of a person as to which vādī he belongs. A member who does not answer is not admitted into the house and one who is a non-member is invariably caught in the cross-examination by the chokidār.

The actual ceremony of worshipping the 'light' of Ramdeo Pir begins at mid-night and lasts for not more than an hour. Later, the devotees spend the night in singing the bhajans. Some of the bhajans sung on this occasion narrate the story of Ramdeo Pir and refer to the miracles done by the Saint during his life-time. The light or lyot is supposed to go off automatically at five in the early morning when the ceremony concludes. Bhajan-singing goes on intermittently through the night and in the intervals they partake of tea, smoke bidis or pass time in chit-chat.

The ceremony of Ramdeo Pir is celebrated generally, on three different occasions, (i) at the time of the initiation of a new member, (ii) periodically on the second day of the dark of every month and (iii) specially, on the decision of the member to celebrate the ceremony of his own accord. Of-course, this has to be done in the dark half of a month.



The last type of celebration takes a popular form and it affects the lives of all the near relations of the member who celebrates it. A person invites all his agnatic and affinal relatives to attend this function when he offers a feast parasādi to the members who take part in the ceremony and also to others who come as guests. The relatives come from different villages and they help in cooking and in other matters. This celebration is compared with the auspicious occasions such as marriage or the celebration of Bhagavata Purana when the relatives concerned spend their time in enjoying the social gathering.

Anyone of the guests who comes to attend this ceremony, may also take part in the pāt ceremony provided he is the member of Ramdeo Pir's organization of his own village, e.g., a member who comes from a village of the high-land may take part in the pāt ceremony held in a village of the low-land, and vice versa. Thus, the membership of this sect cuts across the barriers of village as well as region. Besides, the villages in which there is more than one organization of this sect, a member of one organization is permitted to attend the ceremony and join in the singing of the bhajanās organized by another organization. This he can do even though he is not invited to partake of the feast or parasādi. The solidarity expected among all the followers of this sect is strengthened on account of such a concession granted to the members of the different organization in a village or to those of different

villages. Here, also, lies one of the factors that brings the people of different Mer lineages on one platform and weakens the solidarity of a particular lineage.

It is important to note that a member of this sect is forbidden to castrate a bull or even ask someone to do so. But, the bullocks (castrated bulls) are considered indispensable for ploughing, and so a member buys a bullock at a higher price from others but sells away at a low price, a bull he possesses. Another point of importance is that when a member of this sect dies, he is not cremated but buried, and a small platform is raised on the burial-ground. It is the duty of the members of the family to offer light and pancakes every year on the death anniversary of the deceased.

#### IV

Each Mer lineage worships its own lineage deity or deities, both male and female. The names of these deities are given in the Appendix II along with the general account of the respective lineages. It is significant to note that female-deities are supposed to be more active and appear to take greater interest in the lives of the members of a lineage than male-deities. A lineage-deity (f.) is popularly known as āii or the grand-mother, and statue in wood or stone representing āii is seated in the house of one of the members of a lineage

living in a village. The importance of a lineage-deity becomes much more apparent when a member of a lineage happens to marry. After marriage, it is obligatory on the part of the groom or the bride to go to the seat of the aii (the lineage-deity) to make obeisance and to offer gifts in cash or kind. Before the marriage party leaves the bride's village, it is customary to take the couple to the seat of the bride's lineage-deity, where they worship the deity and pay their homage. Similarly, after returning to the groom's village the couple visit the latter's lineage-deity. A bride and a groom thus going to pay homage and make offerings of cocoanut, sweet-meat and lamps, entreat each other's lineage-deities to shower kindness on them. They also beg from her (aii) boons of longevity, fertility and prosperity. It is believed that the grace of the deity is essential for the perpetuation of the lineage and hence she should be duly honoured. Disregard towards one's lineage-deity may bring disaster to the family of a person concerned. The deity may cause death among the members of the family or destruction of their cattle and other property. Usually the divine wrath is expressed by possessing one of the members of the family, and harassing him. A person may extricate himself from a situation only through a medium. A medium-man, when called for, is supposed to convey all the complaints of the deity to the guilty person, and advises him to apologise to the deity. A deity may forgive an offender when entreated with respect and humility.

In addition to the worship of their own lineage-deities, Mers respect also the satis of the Charan caste. Nagbai Aii is one such deity worshipped by the members of the Charan, Barot and Bhat castes. In fact, it is said that she is a sati who comes from the Charan caste; and she is considered very powerful. She not only curses but also gives boons. Besides Nagbai Aii, other female deities of the Charan caste are also worshipped. These deities exert considerable influence upon the Mer society. Practically every Mer village has a shrine to a Charan Aii ( a common name for all the satis of the Charan caste) where the Mers assemble on different occasions to offer naiveda (an offering of cooked rice mixed with sugar and clarified butter). A medium of this deity is consulted for a childless couple. She is believed to confer children and other gifts on her devotees.

In some villages the Charan Aii plays a very significant role. When a daughter of the village, i.e., the girl born in the village, gets a son, it is obligatory on the part of her conjugal family to make offering to this deity. A woman, therefore, selects a suitable time and comes with her husband and her first son to her natal village to pay homage to this deity. Some persons from her husband's agnatic lineage take part in the function and her parents cook sweet-meat to feed to the guests who come on such an errand.

The most important function of Charan Aii is to safeguard the interests of the hereditary bards of the Mers and

those of the Charan mendicants touring round the Mer villages during harvest. If a person injures the feelings of a bard or insults a Charan-beggar, the latter curses him and calls upon Charan Aii to punish the guilty person. Thus, the satis (āii) of the Charan caste not only look after the welfare of the Mer society but also expects the Mers to protect the rights and the interests of the Charan and bardologist castes. Similarly, the Brahmin satis influence the lives of the Mers by giving boons of prosperity and longevity. The Brahmin and Charan āiis bring Mers closer to priestly and bardologist castes. The main significance of such linkage is that the Brahmins and the Bards receive from the Mer hosts valuable gifts, wholesome maintenance, and protection in distress.

## V

The seats (then) of memorial stones or pāliās of prominent Mer ancestors are found on the outskirts of every village. These memorial stones generally belong to those ancestors who might have died in warfare; but some of them also belong to those who died by accident or by committing suicide. The male ancestors who are immortalized in memorial stones are known as surāpura (lit. the perfect brave) while the ancestresses who burnt themselves alive after the death of their husbands are known as sati āii (lit., Sati, the grand-mother). Such a spirit hovers around the village and particularly the house where it was born, to protect the members and the cattle of the family from other evil spirits. It is obligatory upon

Plate VIII

(a) Winnowing the  
grains:

The members (including women)  
of a family engaged in the  
task of winnowing the jawār  
grains. Boricha, January,  
1953.

(b) Memorial Stones  
(pāliās):

The memorial stones of the  
Mer ancestors are seen on the  
outskirts of a village. They  
make offerings to these ancestors  
on the new year day or Divali  
(Nov. - Dec.). Bakharla, May  
1951.

March



the members of a family to please the spirit of their ancestors every year on the day of Divali (the 30th day of ashvina, Nov.-Dec.). The Mers, therefore, annually propitiate their ancestors by making offerings of cocoanuts, cooked rice, etc., and also a lighted lamp in an earthen pot, at the shrine. They also apply a mixture of red lead (sindūr) and oil on the stone figures or pālās. When a member of a family or a cow or buffalo dies, or is very ill, it is believed that an ancestor or spirit is annoyed because of neglect. The spirit of a dissatisfied ancestor possesses (ghatmān āvē, lit., comes in body of) a family member and speaks through the medium, mentioning the wrong done by the members of the family towards the spirit. When a member of a family is thus harassed by a spirit, a professional medium of the deity Vachhada Dada is consulted. The medium of this deity is supposed to be the most powerful one; he evokes the spirit concerned and asks why it harrasses the person in question. If it did not give the real cause, he threatens the spirit with punishment from the deity Vachhada Dada. Ultimately the real causes are known through some other person whom the spirit possesses and through whom it speaks.

The most important thing to be noted here is that, at the time of propitiating the spirit of an ancestor, the head of the family invites the members of his agnatic lineage (related to him in the range of five to six generations). For, the spirit and its descendents are mutually linked and owe allegiance to one another. It is in the presence of these relatives that a man has to pay offerings to the dissatisfied spirit and



appease its warth. I have heard people saying to the assembled relatives, "You see, we have appeased the spirit by giving offerings in your (relatives) presence; and if the spirit still remains dissatisfied with whatever we have been able to do, we are not responsible". Whereupon the relatives will sympathise with the sufferers and say, "The ancestors are always kind, they would not count whether you have given rich offerings or not. They care only for your love and devotion towards them; you have done your best and so you need not fear further punishment from them."

The spirit of an ancestor or that of a lineage-deity may possess not only the male members, but also the women of a lineage. We have seen that the women of a minimal lineage are known as karoi and their husbands and children as karolan. The well known proverbs, "dēv karoinē ghat chadē", says that the spirit of an ancestor or that of a deity may possess the women (married or unmarried) of a lineage.

A spirit may possess unmarried woman or the members of her husband's family. The spirit of a woman's agnatic ancestor, or natal lineage-deity may harass someone from her conjugal family if she is ill-treated by the latter. This migration of a spirit from the natal family of a woman to her conjugal family, is codified in the proverb, "dēv mādhiē chālē", which says that a spirit may go with a dear one (the daughter, of course). When a woman or one of the members of her husband's family is possessed by the spirit of the ancestor or the deity

of her paternal lineage, it is the duty of the members of her conjugal family to propitiate the spirit and if necessary, to found a seat (thān) of the spirit in their house. The relationship of the spirits of a woman's natal family and those of her conjugal family is supposed to be friendly. The spirit of a woman's conjugal family would not interfere in the activities of the spirit of her natal family if the cause for which the visiting spirit works is just. Thus, the main function of the spirit of a woman's natal family is to protect her from the dangers while she is in her conjugal family. The spirit of a woman's natal family is the strength behind proper affinal conduct and guarantees her wellbeing in her conjugal family. Contrary to this the spirit of the groom's family does not have much to do with the bride's natal lineage, because marriage is patrilocal.

A divorced woman who lives in her natal family may get possessed by the spirit of her conjugal family. Here also it is the duty of the members of her natal family to propitiate the spirit of the affinal lineage. And a woman who has remarried may be possessed either by the spirit of the natal family of her first husband or by the spirit of her natal family. Thus the spirits of the ancestors and the deities of a lineage are also supposed to take an active part in protecting its members and in strengthening the bonds of those families which are united by marriage.

## VI

The shrines of the folk-deities, e.g., those of Vachhada Dada, Charan Aii, Khetalio Ato, Mamo, etc., are found in every Mer village. (The reference has been made to Charan Aii in one of the previous sections, and the deity Vachhada Dada has been introduced on the pages 89 and 93). The deity Khetalio Ato (āto meaning grand-father) is the serpent-god who is supposed to be the custodian of the farm-land. In some villages this deity is also known as Dahintharo Dev or Sundario Ato; and his propitiation is made with a view to effect the longevity of the new-born child. Mamo, lit., mother's brother, is the name given to a spirit which is considered to be benignant towards the people of a village. Mamo is said to make its appearance before a person of simple disposition, and if the latter is not frightened on seeing it, and if he is bold enough to converse with it, the spirit may grant him anything he wants. The deity of smallpox, Sitala Mata is also propitiated in order that the epidemic may not spread in a village.

All these deities, it may be noted, are worshipped by people of all the castes in a village, and their area of influence is generally confined to the limits of the village concerned. However, in individual cases a deity of a village is found to be so powerful that it is worshipped by the people of many other villages, neighbouring as well as distant. The higher status that a village deity acquires among those of other villages, depends

upon its ability to remove the difficulties of its devotees. The medium of such a deity is also supposed to be mightier than those of other deities of similar nature. The medium of Vachhada Dada of the village Khistri has a reputation for being the perfect mouth-piece of his deity. Such a medium is able to persuade the deity to help him in curing a patient. The deity has to come to his rescue in view of the sincere services rendered in the past by the medium concerned.

Vachhada Dada is worshipped all over Saurashtra as a cure for patients of hydrophobia; but the deity is also famous for relieving a patient of serpent-bite. In fact, Vachhada Dada may be called a multi-purpose deity whose mediums are able to cure the patients of numerous diseases. The medium of Vachhada Dada of the village Khistri is supposed to be very skilful in curing hydrophobia. When a person does not get satisfactory treatment of hydrophobia from the medium of Vachhada Dada of his village, he comes to the medium of Khistri in order to receive a permanent cure. And if the medium of this deity in some other village has a better reputation for curing serpent-bite, the people of Khistri may also go to consult the medium of the village concerned. In the low-land, for instance, the medium of Vachhada Dada of the village Chhatrava is famous for curing serpent-bite, and so, the people of other villages come to consult the medium in that connection.

Besides, there are many other deities who are supposed to be effective in curing only a few diseases. The deity named

Plate IX

- (a) A groom with his  
kin and affines:

The groom decked with ornaments  
is seen in the midst of his kin  
and affines. Sodhana, March,  
1953.

- (b) A party going to  
propitiate a  
deity:

A party of women and children  
going to propitiate the deity  
of whooping cough. Khambhodar,  
March, 1953.

189-1



Utantio Dev. (lit., the deity of whooping-cough) of the village Khambhodar (in the high-land) is the only one of its kind, and so, the patients suffering from the disease come from distant villages to propitiate the deity. The disease of whooping-cough is generally found among children. This deity is worshipped also for many other diseases of the children. Similarly, the deity Lakkad Nath of the village Paswali (in the low-land) is famous for restoring limbs. A person, whose arm or leg is broken, goes to the deity and makes an offering of cocoanut, etc., and a wooden arm or leg, as the case may be. This offering is considered enough to cure the patient. Such a patient may not consult an osteopath even though he is not permanently cured. Besides, this deity is also worshipped when diseases break-out among animals. Often the fame of a deity is so great that he attracts devotees from many villages including distant ones.

The shrines of some of these deities, or, the memorial-stones dedicated to the ancestors may be situated either on the side of a road or in somebody's fields. In such cases it is the duty of the owner of the field (in which or near which the shrine is found) to make offerings of new grains to the deity during harvest. It is feared that if the deity remains dissatisfied, it may cause destruction of the future crops. Similarly, when the shrine of a deity is situated at the place where the boundaries of two or three villages meet, it becomes

the duty of the people of such neighbouring villages to propitiate the deity and make offerings at harvest. Such a deity is called 'common deity' or sahiāro dēv (m.) or sahiāri dēvi (f.) as the case may be. And, the deity has a right (kar) to expect offerings from the people of these villages.

Such instances make clear the fact that occasionally allegiance to a deity cuts across not only villages but also the major cleavage of Mers into low-land and high-land Mers. The religious factor brings Mers repeatedly into a net work of wider loyalties than those provided by kinship, lineage and local community.

## VII

The various fairs held in the Mer region play a very important role in strengthening the solidarity of the Mers. The fairs, no doubt, are motivated by religious sentiments but they are also characterized by the secular interest of the masses. People go to the shrines and incidentally attend the fairs also. The fairs are generally held at the minor centres of pilgrimage and they are associated with the calendar festivals of the Hindus. People consider it meritorious to attend a fair, because, on such an occasion they get an opportunity to pay homage to a deity or deities in a temple at which the fair is held.



I have attended the fair of Madhavpur several times and have found that only a few low-caste people go to the temple of the deity Madhavrai ji to make homage. Further, none of them attend the symbolic marriage ceremony (which takes place in the temple outside the town) of Madhavrai ji (Krishna) and Rukmini in whose honour the fair is held.

It may be noted that all such fairs provide a meeting place for the people of the neighbouring villages. The people of different castes including Harijans attend a fair. It gives a chance for members of the same caste in different villages to come together. If a person of the Rabari caste is humiliated or insulted by a member of another caste, all the Rabaris gathered at the fair defy the person concerned. Whether the Rabaris succeed in retaliating against the wrong-doer or not, is not very significant, but the fact that they do take sides with their own caste-folk is important.

I have earlier referred to the fair of Madhavpur (in Ch. IV) held in the low-land area of the Mer region. The fair is prominent among all the fairs held at different times and places; because, only there do the Mers of both the divisions come together. Madhavpur is about thirty-eight miles from the border of the high-land and people who wish to attend the fair have to take the bus. On the other hand, the Mers of the low-land who live in neighbouring villages come in bullock-carts. The men, women and children coming to it join the bhajana-

mandalis (a group of the singers of the bhajans) and see the folk-dances and dramas called Bhavai or Ramlila staged by amateurs. There are also other secular attractions at the fair.

Another attractive feature of the fair is that it serves as a market-place where visitors may buy many things, both those essential for the work of agriculture and house and articles of luxury, toiletry and even toys. The women-folk spend a lot of time in going from shop to shop and purchasing things after a great deal of haggling, while the men spend most of the time in hotels, smoking bidis and cigarettes and drinking tea, and at times loitering in groups teasing the young women. It is on such occasions that young people are introduced to one another, and lovers meet. The love affairs cut across the regional divisions and bring together unknown families of the high-land and low-land by marriage. A young man would find out the whereabouts of his beloved and would send a message to the parents of the girl saying that he wishes to marry her. If the girl concerned is already married, she tells her parents that she wants to divorce her husband to marry the new man. Occasionally these love affairs give rise to the stunt of hostility between two lineage groups, but by and large the fair helps to bring together the Mers of Saurashtra and make them realize they are one.

The fair next in importance to that of Madhavpur is the fair of Shivaratri held at the foot of mount Girnar

at Junagadh. It lasts for seven days and it is attended by the people of all castes. The Mers, as one of the participating castes in this fair, hold only a sub-ordinate position. However, the dining centres (annakshētras) and the bhajana-mandalis arranged by the Mers of the low-land, at this fair, attract attention of outsiders. Junagadh is alien land (dominated by Kolis, Muslims, Nagars, etc.) for the Mers and so a Mer feels proud to meet here a member of his caste. At times they forget their quarrels and rivalries and help each other in the times of difficulty. It is interesting to note that this fair is known as dhēdhio-mēlo, i.e., the fair where the Untouchables enjoy the privilege of rubbing shoulders with caste-Hindus. The high-caste Hindus who attend this fair take a bath, for the fear of pollution, before returning home; but, the low-caste Hindus never bother to do so. The latter, on the contrary, believe that if they touch a Muslim after touching an Untouchable they become pure. In fact, the fair is attended mostly by the Mers of the low-land and very few high-land Mers attend it.

Another important fair is held at the temple of Bileshwar Mahadev situated in the Barda Hills. It is held in July-August, and it is generally attended by the Mers of the high-land. The fair lasts for only a day, and a considerable number of the Rabaris, who live in the hill-area, attend it. I could not attend this fair, and so am unable to give details.

The festival of Holi, referred to on p.96, is one

of the most important calendar-festivals of the Mers. On this day, small fairs are held at many places. Of the minor fairs, the one held at Godhana, in the high-land, is important. It is held near the shrine of Vachheda Dada whom the people worship on this occasion with much pomp. The Mers of neighbouring villages meet here and perform a series of group-dances called dāndiā-rās, (lit., stick-dance). Besides, they take part in some competitive games, viz., shooting at a cocoanut (called pējun) hung at the top of a tree and racing their horses or bullock-carts. These competitive games provide a field for the expression of inter-village and inter-lineage rivalry. A person who is able to hit the target, and the horseman or the cart-driver who proves superior to others, is admired by all. And it is interesting to note that the prestige achieved by an individual adds to the prestige (gām nu nāk) of the village to which he belongs. Occasionally these competitions give rise to quarrels and create rivalries which may result in blood-shed.

Fairs are also held on the day of bhim aglāras (may-June) at Visavada and Odadar in the high-land, and Balej in the low-land. On the same day Rabaris also celebrate pūj festival of their Mamai Mata whose prominent shrines are found at the above mentioned villages.

At Visavada or Mul-Dwarika (lit., the original Dwarika), the Mers of the neighbouring villages meet and take bath in the sea and in the holy step-well called jnānavāv. After taking a purificatory bath they visit the temple of

Thakorji or Dwarikadhishaji, make offerings to the deity, and give gifts in cash or kind to the religious beggars. Some people also arrange a programme of bhajanās while others perform the group-dance, dāndiā-rās. Youths run races. These games also serve the purpose of establishing the superiority of a village over the others. In spite of the fact, that these fairs give rise to occasional brawls, their main contribution is in enhancing the cultural unity of the Mers.

#### VIII

It has been mentioned earlier in this Chapter that the Mers propitiate Ranna Devi, the consort of god Sun, before or after the marriage of a boy or a girl. Similarly, the practice of propitiating the Sun is observed when a woman gives birth to her first child. Such a woman has to stay at home for six days. On the morning of the seventh day, she takes a bath and makes her appearance with her child before the Sun and performs a rite beseeching the latter to confer longevity on child. At this moment she sprinkles water, rice and the solution of red powder (kamku) at the Sun, and thus propitiates the deity. In the end, she tramples upon a pair of earthen dish (sampūta) containing cobweb and thereby marks the act of suppressing the evil spirits harmful to the life of the new-born child.

Further, it is believed that on the sixth day after the birth, the Goddess of Destiny (vidhatri) writes down the

Plate X

- (a) Elders at leisure: The elders pass their leisure in counting the rosary, smoking hubble-bubble (hukkā) and in gossip. Kansabad, December, 1953.
- (b) Youths wrestling: Wrestling is one of the favourite competitive games of Mer youths. Visavada, June, 1950.

103-1



longevity and the kind of career the infant will have. This writing is known as vidhātrina lēkh, lit., the Document of Destiny. A piece of paper, a reed-stick representing a pen, and a dish containing the solution of the leaves of tulasi plant (*Ocimum sanctum*) are placed near the child's bed. The occasion is marked by giving a lunch of sweetened rice to the children of the lineage (roughly covering four to five generations) or to all the children in the village. When a lunch is given to the children of the agnatic lineage, it is known as katam chhathi and if it is given also to those of the caste-fellows living in the village, it is known as gām chhathi. It should be noted that the act of giving a lunch to the children, in general, is considered to be a merit-conferring act.

The first time the infant partakes of cooked food is marked by rituals. This takes place on the sixth or the seventh month of the birth of a child and the act of giving cooked food to the child is considered to be polluting (or abhadāvavun) the child. The cooked food is generally given to the child by either the mother, or preferably, by the elder brother or sister. The person who, thus, feeds the child gives it a rupee coin as a gift. This rupee is considered to be the possession of the child whose individuality is recognized henceforward.

A woman whose son or sons are living, is identified by a string round her right ankle. On the sixth day of the birth of a son, the mother takes a cotton-thread on which she puts six knots and ties it round her right ankle. This thread



is known as chhathino doro and it is supposed to carry magical powers which protect the son from disease or death. It is a matter of honour and prestige for a woman to have this sacred thread on; and, therefore, a woman wears it till she dies. In case the thread breaks or is lost accidentally, the woman concerned stops as soon as the loss is discovered and resumes walking only after she has tied a new thread.

A woman wears an iron or copper anklet when all her children die young. The piece of metal to be used for this purpose should be one which has become directly or indirectly instrumental in somebody's death. For instance, if a person is killed by a weapon, or if a crew is drowned in a boat, the metal that is used in the making of the iron weapon or the boat is supposed to acquire magical power. Such a metal is known as gozari dhātu, lit., the spoiled or the sinful metal and it is used for preparing the magical anklet. It is the duty of the brother, (real or classificatory) of the woman to acquire such a piece for an anklet. The brother has to go in the early morning to the blacksmith of his village and has to keep standing on one leg till the blacksmith finishes preparing the anklet. He, then, goes to his sister's village and gives her the anklet which is supposed to confer longevity to the future children of his sister. This sheds light on the significance of the brother-sister bond and maternal uncle - nephew (niece) bond among Mers. Besides, a woman whose co-wife has died has to wear in her neck a kind of amulet called shokpagalān (lit., the feet of co-wife) which is supposed to protect her and

her children from the evils which may be caused by the spirit of the co-wife. It should be noted here that co-wives are generally thought of as envious of each other and when one of them dies, her spirit is supposed to harass the living one.

There is another ritual which is supposed to make a barren woman fertile and also to prevent the repeated death of her children. A woman makes a vow to the effect that if she gets a child or if her children do not die young, she would propitiate a particular deity by a ritual act known as bhonbharavi. The act of bhonbharavi (lit., to measure the ground) constitutes the act of going to the shrine of the deity, not walking in an usual way, but, by lying prostrate on the ground, repeatedly, from the point of starting. The woman concerned keeps a stalk of jawār plant in her right-hand, falls prostrate on the ground, stretches her arm forward and makes a mark on the ground, with the help of the stalk. She will then stand on the mark of the stalk and again lie prostrate, in the same direction, from that point. She does this repeatedly till she reaches the shrine of the proposed deity. When such a woman comes from a different village, she begins to 'measure the ground' only from the distance from which they can see the flag (dhajā) of the shrine of the deity. She is also permitted to stop 'measuring the ground' and go forward on foot when the shrine is within a range of a hundred or two hundred and fifty feet. The priest in charge of the shrine (who may be also a medium) makes all preparations beforehand, and, when the woman

and her party reach the shrine, he assists them in making the offerings. At this time, a medium is possessed by the deity which speaks through him of the sins committed by the woman or by members of her conjugal family. The deity ends up by declaring herself pleased by the observance of this penance of bhonbharavi.

Sometimes the woman concerned keeps a shoe in her mouth till she reaches the shrine of the particular deity to be propitiated as a gesture of humility and repentance. On such an occasion, the woman concerned is accompanied by the members of her husband's agnatic lineage. But, it is likely that some of the members of her natal family may also accompany her.

It is considered to be an exceptionally auspicious event if a woman gives birth to a son at her first confinement. On such an occasion, it becomes obligatory on the part of her husband's family to distribute a voluntary gift (lān) of dry dates to his affines, and to kin living in his village. This act of distributing lan is known as vāḍavahēnchavo and it is made on the first Holi after the birth of the son. Before such a lān is distributed, the boy is taken around to all the temples in the village where he is made to bow to the deities and to put a gift of cocoanut at each temple or shrine. The mother of the boy also performs rites at the Holi and circumambulates the Holi with the boy in her lap. All these acts bring longevity to the boy concerned.

Yet another ritual is performed by the newly delivered mother at the tank or the well of the village. This rite consists in making certain offerings to the deity of water, or Jala Deva and is known as jalajavaravun (lit., to propitiate water). It is generally performed only after the lapse of one and a quarter months following the day of the delivery. Generally the rite has to be performed at the conjugal village of the woman. But, if her natal and the conjugal families live in the same village the question does not arise as to the place of the ritual performance. However, under certain circumstances, the rite may also be performed at the natal village of the woman concerned. It is attended exclusively by the female relatives who sing at this time some traditional songs appropriate to the occasion. The mother is taken in procession to the well, or, preferably, to the tank of the village. The mother founds a seat of Jala Deva and of the Saptamatrika (the seven mother goddesses) by the site of the water. (These deities are represented by stones each of which symbolises a particular deity.) After making the offering of cocoanut, rice, etc., to these deities, the mother fills a pitcher with water and lifts it on her head with the help of two married women and two virgins. (The widows are forbidden to assist in such auspicious rites.) She then walks speedily towards the home carrying the pitcher on her head and the other women go singing after her. When she, thus, reaches home, the two women and the two girls take away the pitcher from her head and throw the water at the trunk of a tree, preferably a pipal tree

(*Ficus religiosa*). On this occasion, a lunch is given to the children of the agnatic lineage of her husband. The main purpose of propitiating the deity Jala Deva, is to bring longevity and protection from evil spirits to the mother and the son concerned. It should be emphasised that the mother of the son may fetch water from the well or tank only if she has previously performed the rite of propitiating Jala Deva. The performance of this ritual confers ritual purity on the mother and enables her to assume her normal ritual status. It is after the performance of this rite that the mother begins fetching water from the tank or well.

It may be noted here that a similar kind of rite has to be performed by a bride on the day after she enters her husband's house. The bride goes to the well with her sisters-in-law, real or classificatory, and makes an offering of arecanuts to Jala Deva and then fetches the water and carries it to her husband's house. Jala Deva is respected and worshipped also when water is struck while digging a well. The digging of the new well proceeds further only when a temporary seat of Jala Deva is founded near the well, and the offerings of cooked rice, light, etc., are made to the deity.

The bonds of a married girl with her natal village are strengthened by an obligation she owes to one of the deities in the village. Such a deity may be called the guardian deity. When the girl has given birth to a son or a daughter, she has to offer a miniature cradle (ghodiun) to the prescribed deity

in the village. In some villages this deity may be Charān Aii in others it may be Sundario Ato. If the mother fails to make necessary offerings to the prescribed deity, it is said that her husband and children or the cattle in possession of her husband may fall ill on account of the wrath of the unappeased deity. As soon as such a mishap occurs, the persons concerned consult the medium of Vachhada Dada, and on discovering that the guardian deity of the children is not appeased, they take a vow to appease the deity as soon as possible.

It might also be noted that other deities of a village also are worshipped at the time of the marriage of a boy. When the groom goes in a procession (phulēkān) in his village, he has to visit the shrine of Vachhada Dada and make offering of a cocoanut. Likewise, while returning after the marriage the groom and the bride has to visit all the temples and the shrines of the (groom's) village and make offerings of cocoanuts at each shrine or temple. Moreover, if there is a seat (dargāh) of a Muslim Pir in the village, a cocoanut has to be offered to the same.

The Mers look down upon a person who, for the first time marries a divorced girl. A person has not to perform marriage ceremony at this; and so he is able to avoid giving caste-dinner, and making offering to various deities. Such a marriage is known as kunvārā ghargharanu (i.e., the bachelor's remarriage), and the bachelor's family has to meet the stigma by resorting to a negative ritual. This negative ritual is

known as padagho kadhavo (lit. to remove the stigma), and it is performed on the first day of every new year (Divali) succeeding the 'remarriage of the bachelor'. After finishing the dinner at about seven to eight p.m., the mother or the sister of the boy takes a broken earthen pot containing cobweb, salt, and chilli. She takes the pot in her hand and strikes it with a stick and carries the pot outside the village and throws it there. While carrying the pot and striking it with the stick she repeatedly utters a proverb which means that let this stigma (padagho) go. The performance of this rite is also supposed to guard the married couple from the effects of the evil eyes.

The Mers worship a deity called Diha Aii. The word diha is the corrupt form of dashā which refers to the configuration of planets which are believed to influence the fortunes of a person. Diha Aii is, therefore, worshipped with a view to safeguard the good fortune of one's family. It is on the eighth day of the dark half of shravana (August-September), the day of Shri Krishna's birth, that the worship of Diha Aii begins, and, subsequently, it lasts for nine days. The person who takes a vow to worship Diha Aii, has to hear, for ten days, a story narrating the positive boons conferred upon her devotees. On the tenth day, the sponsor takes a repast of gruel (rab), etc., at about twelve a.m. Before taking the repast, he lights a lamp in the name of Diha Aii and closes all the doors and the windows of his house. It is significant to note here that no

daughter (married or unmarried) of the family is allowed into the house till the sponsor finishes the repast. They say that if the daughter of the family happens to see the light of Diha Aii, she carries the good fortune of her natal family to her conjugal family. This also suggests a fear that a married girl might take greater interest in the wellbeing of her conjugal family rather than that of her natal one. This fear, probably, arises from the belief that a girl has but little interest in the affairs of her father's lineage which is patrilocal.

On the death of a person, it is customary to arrange the reading of Garuda Purana which gives the Hindu view of life after death and advocates dharma (righteousness) as against sinful deeds, i.e., adharma or pap. The Garuda Purana is read by a Brahmin priest for eleven days after the death of the person. This reading takes place in the chorā of the village where the mourners assemble. It is significant to note that the women seldom get the chance of hearing the teachings of Garuda Purana; because, the women of the family as well as those who come as mourners do not go to the chorā, the sitting place of the men. But, when the reading of Bhagavata Purana is arranged on the death anniversary of a person, it is held near the house of the person, and therefore attended by men as well as women.

The custom of going on pilgrimage to holy places is associated with the mortuary rites of shrāddha and ghadasun which take place on the eleventh day of the death of a person. The pinda or the rice-balls (which are offered to appease the



spirits of the ancestors) and the remains of a dead person are thrown in the water of a holy river such as Ganges, Jamuna, Narmada, Saraswati, etc. The principal mourner, i.e., the son or the nearest agnatic male descendent of the deceased has to perform these rites and therefore, he gets an opportunity to make pilgrimage to a centre of pilgrimage.

It should also be noted that the Mers of the low-land are found to worship the foot-prints of an ancestor of exceptional merit. When a person who has earned great reputation and wealth during his life-time, dies, they take the prints (in the solution of red powder, kamku) of his feet in the account-book of the family. These prints are known as subha-pagalān (lit., lucky feet) and they are supposed to carry magical power that protects the welfare and prosperity of the family concerned. This is a significant feature of ancestor worship surviving among the Mers.

## IX

I would summarise here some points of structural significance. The various religious sects cut across caste distinctions and thereby weaken the solidarity of a caste. The sect of Ramdeo Pir provides a common platform not only to caste Hindus but to the Untouchables also. This is probably one of the most unusual factor dilimiting (to the root) the caste ties. Moreover, the sect of Ramdeo Pir, taken at the lower level, seems to weaken the solidarity of a Mer lineage

for the simple reason that the small organizations of this sect are sometimes based on the segmentary division of a lineage in a village.

Ancestor worship is prevalent. But the most important thing to be noted is that the spirits of the ancestors are supposed to be guided by kinship bonds. Especially, the spirit of a woman's natal family is supposed to protect her from difficulties, and dangers while she is in her conjugal family. This is because marriage is patrilocal and it is the bride who is isolated from her natal group and not the groom.

The deity of a village gives strength and power to the local community, but sometimes the allegiance to a more influential deity cuts across not only village but also the major cleavages of the Mers into low-land and high-land Mers. Such religious factors bring Mers repeatedly into a net-work of wider loyalties than those provided by kinship, lineage and local community.

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#### Section II

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# MAP - 3

## THE GROUND PLAN OF A TRADITIONAL MER HOUSE

