

## CHAPTER II

### REGIONAL SOCIAL STRUCTURE

#### I

The Mers form two distinct ethnic groups of western India. After the historical migration in the 5th century A.D. from Central Asia, the Mer horde 'spread over the deserts of Sind and Western Rajputana.'<sup>1</sup> 'In Sind it encountered the opposition of the great tribe of the Jats'<sup>2</sup> and in Rajputana it seems to have come in conflict with the various Rajput groups. The Mer group of Saurashtra (which originally comes from Sind) is explored in the present work, while the other one which awaits study is found in the Ajmer Merwara area in Rajputana.

At present the Mers as such have formed parts of the two different speech-communities of western India; namely the Gujarati and the Rajasthani. From linguistic points of view

these groups are not poles apart because the languages Rajasthani and Gujarati are nearer to each other in many respects. But it seems that the Mers of Saurashtra (broadly speaking Gujarat) and Rajsthan are not in contact with each other for the last many years.

## II

The Mers of Saurashtra (and a majority of them in Rajputana except some converts to Islam) are the noteworthy entities of the bulk of the Hindu community. They are a group of settled farmers who claim themselves to be Rajputs. Their early history induces us to suppose that they are possibly the descendents of the Kshatriyas of the Aryan fold.

Prof. M. N. Srinivas's analysis of caste system of the Hindus is helpful in analysing Mer social system. He says, "Caste is an institution of great complexity. It has its root deep in history, and even to-day it governs the lives of 300 million Hindus in several important respects. It is popularly understood as the division of society into a five-fold hierarchy with the Brahmins at the head, following in order by the Kshatriyas, Vaishyas or traders, Shudras or servants and labourers, and, lastly, the Untouchables. The first three castes are 'twice born' (dviya) as they alone are entitled to undergo the ceremony of upanayana which constitutes

spiritual rebirth. Only the twice born castes are entitled to study the Vedas and to the performance of Vedic ritual on certain occasions. Caste in above sense is referred to as varna and has an All-India application."<sup>1</sup>

The Mers of Saurashtra who form a part of Kshatriya varna are recognized as a distinct jāti or gnāti of endogamous character, having cultural, ritual and juridical autonomy. The Mer gnāti of Saurashtra, though agricultural, stands prominently among others as a warrior caste. The Mers regard Brahmins as their priests who are indispensable for performing various rituals at marriage, death, etc.

The Mers as well as other Hindus respect a Brahmin, bow to him with hands folded at the chest. While thus saluting a Brahmin, a Mer says, "I touch thy feet, Maharaj" (pagēlāgiēn Maharaj), and the Brahmin replies, 'bless thee' (ashirvādā). An accidental meeting of a Brahmin, while going out, is a good omen and it foretells the success of the work a man sets out for. A Mer receives a Brahmin guest with warmth; the acts of honouring, giving dinner (bhojana in provision) and gifts (dakshinā) to a Brahmin constitute the religious duty or Dharma, the practice of which brings merit or punya. The merit of punya received by honouring a Brahmin brings an honourable place in heaven or swarga for which every Hindu craves. A Brahmin is honoured also because his blessings are supposed to be instrumental in

getting prosperity and happiness of all kinds. Contrariwise a Brahmin's curse can cause misfortune.

On the birth of a son, a Brahmin may be sent to convey the auspicious message (vadhāi) to kinsmen in the neighbouring villages. He is thus a bearer of good news and in this respect he stands in contrast with an Untouchable (mēlo) who is asked to convey news of death. It is through a Brahmin that the bond of marriage is consecrated. The obituary (karaj) ceremony performed on the 11th day of a deceased, is presided over by a Brahmin, and the ritual propitiation done through him is supposed to <sup>give</sup> a permanent peace and liberty to the soul of the departed.

Any fault of a Brahmin is believed to be pardonable. It is considered a great sin to kill a Brahmin (brahmahatya) as well as a cow (gauhatyā); intentionally or unintentionally. Mers talk about the Brahmins who stopped blood-shed by influencing the parties in dispute; and at times they are said to have sacrificed their lives while rushing in, to thwart hand to hand fight. If a Mer insults a Brahmin or wounds his feelings out of arrogance, the latter resorts to an act known as trāgun which constitutes fast unto death or self-infliction of wounds on the body and lashing of his head on a stone till death. It is before the house of the offender that a Brahmin enacts the trāgun. The hereditary bards (bhāt, bārot or vahivanchā) and Charan mendicants likewise resort

to trāgun when necessary. Now a days, a man who resorts to trāgun\* rarely gets full attention of the offender or the common public. A man and his family meet with defame and public reproach (kaji) at such an incident; even the village in which the incident takes place receives censure from all sides. The elders (panch) of the village interfere in such matters and bring about a reconciliation. The village panch which constitutes a representative local body of the Mer community or the Mer caste organization (i.e., nāt)\*\* has power to punish such a guilty man. A Brahmin as well as a bard thus receives great care and attention from the Mers.

As a Kshatriya it is the duty of a Mer to protect a Brahmin and a cow. Intercourse with a Brahmin lady is considered sinful; and the breach of rule is no less than an incest. Mers take a Brahmin lady as a sister (bēn karvi) and a Brahmin too may take a Mer lady as a sister. A Brahmin lady who is considered as a sister by a Mer, receives all protection and care even from the family members of the Mer concerned.

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\* 'The Bhat', says Mr. A.K. Forbes, 'had at his command means of extorting compliance with his demand which were seldom used in vain. These were the rites of trāgā and dhāranā. Trāgā consisted in shedding his own blood or the blood of some member of his family and in calling down vengeance of heaven upon the offender whose obstinety necessitated the sacrifice. Dhāranā consisted in placing around the dwelling of the recusant a cordon of bards who fasted and compelled the inhabitants of the house to fast until their demands were complied with."<sup>2</sup>

\*\* Incidentally it should be made clear that the word nāt refers here generally to a caste organization. Besides, it is used to indicate a dinner party given to caste fellows.

A man born in a Brahmin family is supposed to have performed righteous deeds in his previous birth. The opportunity to get birth in a Brahmin family is considered to be a reward that a man gets for his good actions done in previous birth. So it is a sacred duty (dharma) of a Mer to pay respects to one born in a Brahmin family. A desirous Mer would, therefore, lead his life according to the dictates of dharma and karma which constitute religious duty and good actions respectively.

Though the Mers as warrior caste come next to the Brahmins in varna hierarchy, there is some confusion as to their status in the local caste system. Virtually, the Vaishyas or the traders hold lower position than the Mer Kshatriyas but in practice the Vaishyas assume higher status. The Mers as peasants may not take bath daily as the Brahmins and the Vaishyas are supposed to do. The Mers, therefore, assume lower status than the Vaishyas in the matter of cleanliness. Similarly the Vaishyas do not take food cooked or handled by the Mers. Vaishyas are also teetotalers as the Brahmins are, whereas the Mers are not. Moreover, the Mers freely accept food from some of the people of the artisan - castes who generally compose Sudra varna. So the Mers, who take non-vegetarian diet and take food from the people of the lower status, degrade themselves to the rank of Shudras who come lower to Kshatrias as well as Vaishyas in the system of

varnas. Thus there is a general correlation of diet with status and therefore the Mers as Kshatriyas lose their rank in the local caste hierarchy.

### III

The Untouchables such as Dhedh, Chamar, Bhangi, etc., are clearly distinguished from the bulk of a village population. They are generally associated with hide-cleaning, tanning, scavenging and weaving. Some of them, specially Chamars eat carcasses of domestic animals such as cows and buffaloes; excluding cats, dogs, horses, donkeys and camels. The idea of pollution attached to the Untouchables is not strictly codified as it is in south India.\* However, there are some general rules which help a high caste man to get rid of pollution if he happens to touch an Untouchable or takes water handled by the same.

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\* "The uncleanliness which attaches to these castes would seem to be due to the work they live by rather than to the character of the people themselves. To explain how the present fallen castes first came to undertake their degrading duties, three causes are assigned: one is that they were of shameful birth, children of a Brahmin woman and Shudra man; the second, that they are of alien race, the remains of a tribe who for long refused to submit to their conquerors; the third, their own and from the almost entire sameness of look, language and customs, apparently the true belief, that they are fallen Rajputs, forced by the pressure of war or want agree to undertake the meanest work."<sup>1</sup>

At the first instance the idea of pollution by touch or contact is attached to the objects like cotton cloth (wool and silk cloth is considered ritually pure), currency notes and coins (associated with Laxmi, the goddess of wealth, are therefore regarded sacred.), vegetables, fruits, etc. These objects when polluted by a touch of an Untouchable can be pure, if a high caste man sprinkles water on them. In some cases water touched by gold is considered to be a better purifier. Other agents that are supposed to have purificatory power are fire and the members of Muslim caste or Jat as they call it.

If a Hindu touches or is touched by an Untouchable during day time he has to take a purificatory bath; but after sunset he can become pure by taking ember in hand. The most convenient and easy way in all cases and at all times was to get rid of pollution by touching a Muslim. An orthodox Brahmin regards touching a Muslim as defiling and so requires purificatory bath before doing any religious act. The Mer Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras do not receive contamination if they happen to touch a Muslim. As a matter of fact they behave very freely with a Muslim. So they use a Muslim as a purifying agent when they want to get rid of pollution by the touch of an Untouchable. It is difficult to say why the touch by a Muslim is regarded as cancelling the pollution by an Untouchable. The Muslims who were in past regarded as 'untouchables' by an orthodox Hindu and



the Brahmins are now looked upon as capable of removing pollution of a high caste Hindu.

There was a time when a member of an Untouchable caste (jāt) had to shout, "Make room! make away! take care! (pois! pois!), while passing through the market of Porbandar. In those days it was the duty of an Untouchable to inform the members of high caste of his contaminable presence and enable them (high caste men) to avoid pollution by touch. Some Untouchables believe that they incur sin (pāp) and its consequences if they are instrumental in polluting a member of high caste, specially a Brahmin. They say with anxiety, "When shall we be liberated from taking birth in this degraded caste if we go on committing sins like this?" "They believe like all other Hindus that birth is not an accident. Certain Hindu theological notions like karma and dharma have contributed very greatly to the strengthening of the ideas of hierarchy which is inherent in the caste system. The idea of karma teaches a Hindu that he is born in a particular sub-caste because he deserves to be born there. The actions he performed in a previous incarnation deserved such a reward or punishment, as the case may be. If he had performed better actions in his previous incarnation he would have been born in a higher caste. Thus the caste hierarchy comes to be an index of the state of an individual's soul. It also represents certain milestones on the soul's journey

to God."<sup>2</sup> Mers and others conform to these ideas and when they see that a man born in a Brahmin family violates the sanctions of religion, they become sorry for him. Because they think that the man as a Brahmin is not taking advantage of his highest birth achieved by religious (dhārmik, adj.) actions performed in his previous birth. They regard the birth in a Brahmin family (or yoni) as the last stage to reach moksha or freedom from the cycle of birth and death; and one who neglects dhārmik karmas, and therefore fails to achieve moksha, is a subject of pity, and derision.

"Things associated with high castes, their houses, clothes, customs, manners and rituals tend to become symbols of superior status."<sup>3</sup> The traditional dress worn by high caste Hindus, e.g., the Brahmins and the Vaishyas was, in the olden days, a symbol of superior status. The Mers as peasants wear a dress different from that of the high caste people. The dress of the Mers represents a special variety of clothes worn generally by those who follow peasantry in Saurashtra. The illeterate Aboti Brahmins\* of the Mer region have taken over to peasantry, the low-caste profession, and so they wear the dress of the peasants. I am not aware whether the Aboti Brahmins were compelled to wear the dress

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\* Aboti Brahmins are said to be a branch of the Gugali Brahmins of Dwarka who have settled in some villages of Mer region.

of the peasants. However, they of their own accord seem to have adjusted their dress in conformity with their new profession. The Untouchables of this area generally wear the same dress as the peasants do, but with some degree of variation. The Untouchables here do not wear a head-gear in an elaborate style as the Mers do. Moreover they have adopted some minor changes in the style of their clothes which distinguish them from the Mer peasants who are higher to them. At present, however, the association of dress with status in caste hierarchy has changed considerably. The educated Brahmins, Banias, Mers, etc., wear the common English dress (consisting of coat, pant and shirt) and overlook the difference of caste and class.

The ward of Untouchables known as (dhēdhavādo) is generally found on the left hand side of the entrance (gām jahāmpo) of a village; while the quarters of Brahmins are sometimes found on the right hand side. It should be noted here that <sup>the</sup> right hand side is considered auspicious and important while the left hand side inauspicious and ordinary. Untouchables are forbidden to draw water from the wells meant for the high caste people, so they have to keep a separate well for their use. Till recently, the Untouchables were not allowed to build their houses in an elaborate style in which the high caste Hindus did. They are also prohibited to enter the temples and the shrines worshiped by the high caste Hindus. They are likewise not allowed

to follow the social customs and manners of the high caste people. It is almost inconceivable and impossible for the groom of an Untouchable caste to move in procession or phuleka in a village. The custom of arranging a procession of a groom is the sole monopoly of the high caste people; and if the Untouchables are allowed to do it, the custom may lose its value and dignity. This is how a marked distinction is made between the high caste Hindus and the Untouchables.

#### IV

The Mer region is peopled by more than twenty castes and sub-castes. Mers come in contact with most of them some time or the other. The rights and duties of each caste towards the Mers shall now be discussed. It has been shown that the Mers are segregated into two divisions called the high-land Mers and the low-land Mers. For the sake of convenience, it has been proposed to describe the interdependence of other castes with the Mers of the two divisions differently.

It is worthwhile knowing the relationship of the high-land (Barda Panthaka) Mers with the people who border them in the north-west direction. In the extreme west they are in contact with the Vaghers of Okha, while on the western

and the northern sides they come in contact with the Rajputs of the Jamnagar state. They also know the Sathawaras and Ahirs of the northern side.

The Mers are seldom on good terms with the Vabhers, the Ahirs and the Rajputs of this side. The Vaghers who in olden times were reputed pirates and high-way robbers refrained from looting a traveller who was accompanied by a Mer escort. A few decades ago, the pilgrims who wanted to go to the religious centre of Dwarka, were guarded by the Mer escorts while passing through the territory inhabited by the Vaghers. It is reported that the Mers overpowered the fierce Vaghers in tribal war-fare during the struggle for supremacy. Since then the Vaghers agreed not to harass or loot any one accompanied by a Mer.

In pre-British India, the Rajputs of Jamnagar state waged bitter wars with the state of Porbandar. But the aggressions were at several times driven back by the armies of the Mers. Thus, the high-land Mers have established martial equality with the Vaghers, the Rajputs and, as it is said, with the Ahirs also. Because of these early rivalries with the neighbouring fighting tribes, the Mers do not share a harmonious and an easy life with them. However, it is common to find Mers employing some of these people on their farms as labourers.



The other people of their region are Baradai Brahmins, Aboti Brahmins, Lohanas, Banias, Sindhi Muslims, Khoja, Memon, Rajputs of Jethva clan, Kharwas and the Untouchables.

The Bardai Brahmins, who are originally of Audichya group, have acquired territorial designation (Baradai - from Barda region) as their sur-name. The Mer ancestors have given land in charity to these Brahmins. A village called Mujwana belongs entirely to these Baradai Brahmins who cultivate their own land and depend on agriculture. The Brahmins of this village and others who are peasants are less respected by the Mers than those who pursue the priestly profession. The Brahmins who are wellversed in priest-craft are the only ones considered fit to receive alms.

The Mers show different attitudes towards Baradai Brahmins professing business, agriculture, priest-craft and government services. In a Mer village a Baradai Brahmin may be living as a merchant, a talāti (revenue collector), a school teacher or as a village-police. A Mer would use their own kinship terms while addressing a Brahmin man or woman. The terms like kāko (paternal uncle) and mosi (maternal aunt) are used for addressing the high caste men of one's own village while the terms like māmo (maternal uncle) and fui (paternal aunt) are used for those who belong to one's affin's village. The Aboti Brahmins who are not proficient

in Hindu scriptures confine themselves merely in agricultural activity and ordinary services. So the existence of these Aboti Brahmins is not significant in socio-religious life of the Mers.

Like most of the high caste Hindus of Saurashtra, the Mers propitiate the goddess Randal (i.e., Ranna Devi, the principal queen of God Surya). It is significant to note that the medium of this goddess is always a Brahmin lady. Similarly the marriage and funerary ceremonies of the Mers are presided over by a learned Baradaī Brahmin or sometimes by a Brahmin of Kanauja group.

Now we come to the merchant or trading castes living in the high-land. The small scale business of a Mer village is carried on by at least two or more families of Lohana, Bania or sometimes Bhatia of the trading castes. They play very important role in the economic life of the Mer peasants. Various kinds of grain-seeds, cotton and oil-seeds etc. produced by the peasants is purchased whole sale by these merchants who sell them in the retail market. Before the bus service joined most of the villages with towns and cities, the trading castes served an even more important function than what they do to-day. The Lohana and Bania merchants who lent money to the Mers became so powerful that in the long run they owned cultivable lands, mortgaged by the Mers. In past when the transaction of

goods was carried more on barter system, these money lenders seem to have forged the accounts in their own advantage. However, the mischievous elements among the Mers have many times harassed the merchants who became dishonest in their dealings.

In a village panchāyata a seat is reserved for a member of the merchant caste. They are usually literate and clever and are therefore considered to be better advisers in legal matters. Presently a few Mer youths who have taken to law, work as pleaders and advisers to the parties in dispute.

On the other hand, the Mers consider it to be their duty to protect the merchants of their village from the attacks of the gangsters and the dacoits.

We now come to the people of Rabari caste, who are herdsmen and cattle breeders. They are found concentrated specially in the interior of the Barda Hills. But they have also taken their shelter in majority of Mer villages. The existence of a cluster of Rabari's mud-huts is a noteworthy character of a Mer village. The cluster of the Rabari's mud-huts known as rabāri kēdo is generally situated a furlong or two distant from the village. The Rabaris congregate cows, buffaloes, goats and sheep around their dwellings at night and graze them in neighbouring areas at day. Some of



the Rabaris also work as farm-labourers in the fields of the Mers. They sell milk, clarified butter (ghee), dung-cakes, and fire-wood; besides, they earn money by penning flocks in fields. The Mers are in every-day contact with them, because they look after the herd of a Mer village. Apart from a few rivalries and petty feuds, the Rabaris live in harmony with the Mers.

There are many occasions like fairs and calendar festivals when the Rabaris and the Mers come in close contact. For instance, when the Mers celebrate bhim agiāras in May-June, the Rabaris also propitiate their goddess Mamai Mata.\* At this occasion the Mers of the high-land and the low-land gather together at the villages Visavada, Balej and Odadar all situated on the coast. The three big seats (thān) of their goddess are likewise situated in these villages; and so the Rabaris also assemble there in order to celebrate their festival known as pūj. On this religious occasion the Mers and Rabaris attend each other's festivals. The Mers believe in Mamai Mata of Rabaris, because the Rabari medium-man of this goddess is said to predict about rains for which every Mer craves. Moreover the Mers aspire after getting favour of this goddess who protects cattle from disease and destruction.

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\* The Mamai Mata is a dumb goddess, whom they consider to be the representative of dumb animals. And as it is the inherent profession of the Rabari to rear the animals, they depend on the mercy of the goddess who is supposed to guard their cattle from disease and also bring fertility to the same.

It is a custom among the Mers to invite Rabaris to take a special dinner of rice, called chhēlan which is, perhaps, a means of propitiating the dumb goddess in order that she may look after the health and fertility of their cattle. Moreover, the high-land Mers pay respects to the Holi\* of the Rabaris which is lit at Kanmera nēs in the Barda Hills. They say that this Holi of the Rabaris is lit and attended by the great religious souls whose spirits hover in that region. So the Mers consider this Holi of the Rabaris as very sacred and light the Holis in their villages only after seeing the glowing light of that Holi from a distance.

The Mers and the Rabaris of a village, who are on good terms, invite one another at marriage and other festivals; and go as mourners when some one amongst them dies.

A few Sindhi-Muslims who live in the villages of the high-land are not happy with the Mers who entertain anti-Muslim sentiments. Some of them are land-owning farmers while others subsist as farm-labourers. The Muslim Khojas living in the city of Porbandar and the town Ranavav are well-known businessmen who now live in harmony with the Mers.

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\* Incidentally it should be made clear that a Holi is a heap of dung-cakes and firewood burnt at one particular place at particular time. Holi is here associated with the destruction of Holika, the sister of the demon Hiranyakasipu who prepared her to destroy his son Prahallada, the devotee of god Ram, whom he considered to be his enemy.

The Mers of this region sometimes come into conflict with the Rajput Girasdars, the agnates of the rulers of Porbandar. It has been mentioned earlier that these petty chiefs harassed the Mer tenants who lived in their villages and cultivated their lands.

Most of the Untouchables of this area are leather tanners or weavers. They also work for the Mers on daily wages. Their most important duty is the disposal of the dead animals from house of the high caste persons. The dead body of an animal is looked upon as a defiling thing by all the Hindus who therefore pay the Untouchables for dispersing them of.

The Mer women of the high-land spin cotton and get it woven into coarse cloth (named pānkorun) by the Untouchables who have specialized in weaving. These weavers are generally paid in grain for the work they do. The Untouchables also provide expert drummers (named dholi) who beat drums and enliven the auspicious functions of the Mer people. Besides, an Untouchable is essential when somebody dies. He is regarded as a proper person to carry an obituary note known as chithanu. In this context he is known as impure or mēlo who carries bad news.

# V

We now discuss the position of the Mers of the

Plate III

- (a) Sisters-in-law: The elder woman to the left is the wife of the brother of the girl to the right. Vachhoda, April, 1953.
- (b) A woman spinning cotton: During the later half of every summer, the Mer women spin cotton which is woven into coarse cloth by the Untouchables. Khistri, May, 1950.

5717



low-land (Gher Panthaka) in the local social system. They are surrounded by the Muslims, Kolis and Ahirs living on the northern and eastern borders. Some Mer villages on the border of the Porbandar territory were the parts of the Babi Navab of Junagadha, and some others belonged to the Navabs of Mangrol and Manavadar. These Mers living in the region of the Muslim kings come under the general category of the low-land Mers. Their contact with Muslims was not happy because the former tried, in vain, to convert the Mers to Islam. Moreover, the common people who were much weaker than the Mers were ceaselessly harassed by Muslim dacoits, especially the Sindhis who at times attacked the Mer villages of the high-land also. However, the brave and proud Mer leaders retaliated these attackers. In spite of the adverse circumstances, the Mers of the Muslim states have maintained kinship associations with those living in the territory of Porbandar, which I call the low-land proper.

The Muslim land-lords and land-owners (who are no more) used to employ Mers to look after their land and work therein as farm labourers. This was a degrading position that the landless Mers were forced to embrace. On the other hand we have seen that the position of the Muslims in the high-land was and still is inferior to the Mers who employ them in their farms. With all these conflicting relations of the Muslims and the Mers, a small section of the Mers

believe in the miracles of the Muslim Pir and saints whom they consult for removing illness and disease.

The Kolis who are Hindus live on the eastern side of this region. Some of the Mer villages are represented both by the Mers as well as Kolis. The Kolis are also land-owning farmers; their fields lie by the side of the Mers who being hot tempered, raise quick quarrels with them. Moreover many a Koli subsists as farm-labourer in the Mer fields. These Koli servants also do domestic work in the Mer households. They fetch water from the village well or pond and take liberty to enter the kitchen of their Mer masters when necessary. In the matter of eating and drinking they are treated like other members of a Mer family.

The Kolis have imitated some customs of the Mers with whom they live. For instance, Koli women have adopted wearing white and red coloured skirts exactly like Mer women. And, the menfolk have also started to put on upper garment (āngadi), trousers (chorano) and headgear (pāgadi) like the Mers. There was a time when the Mers who claim to be higher than the Kolis, prevented them from adopting the Mer dress. But now the distinction in dress appears to melt away.

The Mers may keep Koli women as concubines while the Kolis seldom dare to have even extramarital relations with a Mer woman. However, the Kolis enjoy community life with the Mers in the well-known fair of Madhavpur. The fair of

Madhavpur is held every year in the month of chaitra where the Mers, Kolis, Rabaris, Sathavaras and also a few high caste Hindus take active part. Here is both a hierarchy and common life existing among the Mers and the Kolis.

Social relations of the Mers of low-land with the Brahmins, Banias and Lohanas, Rabaris, the artisans and Untouchables do not differ much from those of the Mers of the high-land with them. So I shall skip over this matter and pay attention only to the Ahirs of this side. The Ahirs are land owning farmers like Kolis, but they are much more proud and haughty than the Kolis. However, some landless Ahirs work on wages in the Mer fields and thus they come to have a lower status. Here a reference may be made to the Untouchables of this area; they subsist more as farm-labourers than as weavers. Because the Mer ladies of this side do not take to spinning seriously, the weavers do not get enough work.

## VI

In this section I make an overwhole survey of the social relations of the Mers of both the divisions with the people of many other minor castes who come in contact with them at one time or the other. Besides, I refer to some folk deities who function as cementing media within the people of various castes and sub-castes.



The people of Barot caste are of two types, the heralds and the bards. The heralds are known as vahivanchā who record and read Mer genealogies; they also sing and compose songs in praise of the Mer ancestors and tell interesting stories and legends. The bards, on the other hand, are known as bhajanika or gāyaka whose main profession is to sing religious and secular songs. Tradition has it that the Barots are born of a Kshatriya man and Brahmin widow or Vaishya woman.

The heralds (vahivanchā) perform socio-religious function in the Mer society. The genealogical records are sacred to the Mers and therefore the heralds receive more honour and respect than what a Brahmin priest receives. When a son is born in the Mer (patrilineal) family, his birth ought to be recorded in the genealogical book (chopadā) of the herald. A well-to-do Mer would invite the herald of their own lineage and pay him all respects. The herald performs the name recording ceremony (nām mandāvavun) which is attended by the kin and the affins of the Mer family concerned. The heralds of only a few Mer lineages live in the Mer region while others come from other parts of Saurashtra. As a matter of fact the heralds and the bards are seasonal wanderers who tour generally in marriage season.

The people of the Charan castes are also held in high respect. Their old profession was to breed camels,

horses, cows and transport and sell goods and animals to distant places in caravan. Now-a-days some work as cattle breeders while others subsist on religious begging. The forecasts, curses and boons given by Charan men or women are supposed to come true, because they are said to be dēvi-putra, i.e., the children by divine birth. The Charan women are said to be potential Satis, and therefore they are respected as spiritual mothers or Aai (which generally means grand-mother). These ladies keep an iron trident(trishula), a symbol of Shakti (the consort of Shiva or divine energy), who is said to use them as mediums for the expression of her pleasure or wrath. During the harvest seasons they tour the country with the trident (trishula) and confer boons of birth of children and prosperity. People never like to displease them for the fear of curse and therefore they present them corn, money or other useful articles.

The people of Ravalia caste are also known as jāgarīa (pl.). The word jāgarīo (sin.) means an awakener; in this context his duty is to sing praises of various folk dieties and invoke them to come to the mediums concerned. His songs are accompanied by the beating of drums or dākalun, which gives unpleasant sounds. Whenever a god or a goddess is to be propitiated a Ravalia becomes an indispensable person. He is paid in cash or kind at every harvest and for each individual act of propitiation. It is important

to note that Ravalias, Charans and bards are looked upon as religious beggars and so they may get gifts or charity at any time. People believe that like Brahmins and Bava-sadhus (mendicants), the people of these castes have a right to take alms because the socio-religious functions performed by one of them cannot be done by others.

The other low castes of Gola, Rana and Vagharis sell salt, hand-quern, baskets, brooms, hand-fans, etc. for a living. They are more or less nomadic people who raise temporary tents outside the Mer villages and halt there for a fortnight or more. They keep a few donkeys and horses as beasts of burden.

After the partition of India, the Mer region is sparsely populated by Hindu refugees from Sind. They are primarily traders and so they tour Mer villages as paddlers selling vegetables, fruits, cloth and other household goods. They generally deal with the women whom they can easily cheat. They are paid in cash or kind. Some Sindhi Hindus have opened shops in the Mer villages and have adversely affected the long standing business of the Banias and the Lohanas. Those who left large property or estate in Pakistan got the possession of cultivable lands, houses and other property of the Muslim evacuees of the low-land area.

Lastly I refer to the two important folk deities whom the Hindus of the Mer region pay great respects. The

deity Vachhada Dada (m.) is propitiated at various times by Mers, Brahmins, Banias and Lohanas, the artisans, Rabaris and even by the Untouchables. Generally the mediums (bhuvā) of this deity come from the middle caste. The propitiation of the deity cures ailments, physical and mental and especially dogbite.

The sect of Ramdeo Pir provides, so to say, a secret forum to the people of all the castes including the Untouchables. Ramdeo Pir is a Hindu saint from Jesalmir in Rajasthan. He is said to have possessed miraculous powers by which he proved himself to be more powerful than the Muslim Pir. Therefore, though he was a Hindu saint he acquired the designation of a Pir.

The Brahmins & the Untouchables, the two extreme (highest and lowest) castes of the varna hierarchy are the essential participants in the secret ceremony of the sect. This ceremony is known as pāt which means a pedestal on which they draw magical diagrams and keep an earthen oil lamp in centre of the same. The officiating priests of this ceremony are the Bavas or Sadhus who have taken training and initiation from their teachers, guru. They assemble at night in a closed room to attend the pāt ceremony. The Mers and the people of other high castes who are the devotees (bhaktas) of this sect consider Untouchables as ritually pure when they meet for the ceremony. At this time they accept morsels of

food at the hands of the devotees who are Untouchables and profess that under the shadow of Ramdeo Pir all humanbeings are equal. There does not exist any distinction of sex, caste, colour or creed. After finishing certain other ritual injunctions and acts at the wick-light which is known as iyot of Ramdeo Pir, they sing religious songs for the whole night. The main theme of these songs centres round the biography of Ramdeo Pir.

The sect of Ramdeo Pir seems to have taken deep roots among the people of the low-land. Every few years the devotees arrange public ceremony to celebrate the Ramdeo Pir's marriage. The marriage ceremony is known as mandapa which literary means a marriage booth. In fact, mandapa is a more than forty feet long wooden post with pitchers tied on wooden-cross at the top. I do not go in the details of these but I should like to make it clear that many people throng to attend the ceremony. It takes the form of a big fair (mēlā) where the Mers and Kolis of this area show a remarkable sense of discipline and co-operation. During the two days of the mandapa ceremony people forget all rivalries, disputes and walk hand in hand. The idea of pollution attached to the low caste people is ignored completely. The people of Kharva (sailor) caste bring long ropes to be tied with the post of ceremony. They help others to raise the post on the level of the ground. In this connection it is said that it is due to the sat (power of truth) of Ramdeo Pir that so heavy

a post rises itself on the flat ground with the least effort. The important point to be noted is that the success of the co-operative and unified effort made by the people of the various castes is here symbolically ascribed to the sat or power of Ramdeo Pir.

There may be internal rivalries existing among the officiating mediums of these deities in different villages, but among the general people of various castes the deities as well as the mediums command great respects. Similarly, the belief in many other minor deities also work as the cementing media between the people of various castes; because the people of all the castes are bound to these deities with similar ties of obligations and ritual propitiation.

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## REFERENCES

Section I

- 1 & 2 Lient. Col. John Hoskyn, op. cit., p. 115.

Section II

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- 2 Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, Gujarat Population, Vol. IX, (Govt. Central Press, Bombay, 1901), p. 210.

Section III

- 1 Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, Gujarat Population, op. cit., p. 381.
- 2 M. N. Srinivas, op. cit., p. 25.
- 3 M. N. Srinivas, op. cit., p. 29.

MAP -2

