

### CHAPTER III

#### MER VILLAGE ORGANISATION

##### I

The controlling power of the village organisation rests with the Mer head-man, i.e., the Patel of the village. The headmanship is hereditary and it passes to the ablest male member of a family. A Mer family which acquires the right to headmanship is one of the minimal lineages of the major segment of a particular Mer lineage. In fact a head-man inherits the office from generation to generation in only one male line and so he is a representative of the members of a lineage segment occupying a single village.

A village headman is the highest local authority acquiring a seat in the assembly of the Mer caste or nāt. He solves all the internal disputes of the Mer caste as well as those of the other castes living in the village. He is

generally the richest (in the sense of possessing a great landed property and sites for building houses in the village) or one of the richest persons among the villagers.

The Patel is the head of the assembly of village elders; the assembly is known as panchāyata which literary means a committee of five elders, but it often has more or less than five persons. Of this panchāyata the Patel is the sarpanch, i.e., the head of the assembly of the elders.

In olden times the Patel used to select the members of the village assembly. The selection was not made arbitrarily. The general opinion of the people was heard and a wise member <sup>from</sup> among the village merchants (Baniyas or Lohanas) was never omitted.

The Patel takes active part in all the religious and secular functions of the village. He takes initiative in raising subscription for common activities. He looks after the up-keep of the village herd, the occasional repair of the building of village office (known as chorā) and temples and sinking of a common well or pond. Moreover it is his duty to protect the village boundry, public property and standing crops. He also arranges to provide free or hired carts to the government servants or casual guests. He takes personal interest in all the activities of the village community, helps the government servants and officers in performing various duties. In bygone days when forced

labour or vēth was demanded by the state, it was had through the Patel of a village.

A special word, namely, chovatio is used for a member of the village assembly. Chovatio is in fact a representative of one of the (Mer) lineage segments of a particular village. It is the duty of the chovatio to safeguard the interests of the people of the lineage segment to which he belongs.

For the past several years a local officer known as police-patel is appointed in every village. The principal duty of the police-patel is to help the government revenue collector, namely talāti, and to look after the general welfare of the village public. To do his work efficiently he has to seek full co-operation of the chief Patel of the village. He reports local crimes to the nearest police head-quarter and helps the police officers in pursuing and tracing the criminals. Generally, the police-patēl comes from the people of a village but now-a-days in bigger villages, one, not a resident of a particular village also is appointed directly by the government, as the police-patēl of that village.

A village police-man known as pasāyato is appointed to help the police-patel in executing his duties. A pasāyato or police-man is generally a poor man. He may be a member of Mer caste or sometimes a Koli, a barber (Hindu or Muslim)

or also an illeterate Brahmin. A pasāyato is always under the obligation of the police-patel or the sarpanch of the village and so he is serviceable to both. Besides, he is helpful to any family on occasions such as marriage and religious festivals. He mixes very freely with all the members of his village. He knows the ins and outs of almost every villager. His pay is small but he gets, in addition, some gifts of grain and fodder at harvest time, if he is liked by the people.

## II

A Mer village is a single economic unit made up of various castes and sub-castes. The Mers are obviously in majority and they are the principal cultivators in a Mer village. As peasants they remain as the nucleus of the economic strength of a village. Yet, they have to depend upon the minority of other professional castes in various respects. It is learnt from the history of the foundation of many villages that the Mer chiefs first invited the people of the artisan castes to settle in a new village. The Mers promised them maintenance and even gave sites (for building houses) as gifts in a village. These artisans are known as vasavayā (now the word is corrupted to vasvayā) which means that these people are made to settle. The various castes in a Mer village are interdependent.

Material culture of the Mers, including housing, clothing, woodwork, agricultural implements, is well developed and this is the work done by the artisan-castes. They need a carpenter to prepare wooden plough and other tools of various types, and a blacksmith to prepare hoe, sickle and other iron tools and weapons. A barber is likewise indispensable for shaving, A potter for supplying all types of earthen ware is also there. As a matter of fact, a potter, a tailor, an oil presser and a shoemaker or cobbler have not been considered very essential for a small village, because the people of such village go at any time to the neighbouring big villages and purchase necessary things or get them done by putting fresh orders.

In return for their services the artisans receive a fixed amount of grain from the Mers. This return given in grain is known as āth and it is paid annually after the harvest season is over. The quantity of the return (āth) depends on the number of ploughs (sānti) a family has. Here, a plough or sānti\* means a certain amount of land, varying from forty to fifty vighās of land. A family possessing one plough-land should pay  $1\frac{1}{2}$  maund grain known as two sai ( 1 sai = 20 pāli =  $1\frac{1}{2}$  maund). This is paid only for repairing existing tools and not for making new ones. Urgent

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\* "The sānti or plough of land varies from about thirty-three acres in easily worked land to twenty-five acres in the stiffer soils."1

Plate IV

(a) Crushing the  
grains:

The corn-ears of jawār are crushed under the hoofs of the bullocks and the wheels of the carts. The kin and the affines of the family are the main assistants. Kansabad, February, 1953.

(b) Payment in grains: The day-wagers who reap the harvest are paid in a quantity of grains. Kansabad, January, 1953.

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repair falls under a different category. For instance, a plough has to be urgently repaired during ploughing season, the carpenter gets a special quantity of grain known as pāyarni pāli which is two seers of jawār. Similarly a blacksmith repairs the hoes, sickles, etc., and receives thirty seers (one sai per vighā) annually, but takes extra grains for preparing new tools.

The annual payment, āth, given to a barber, known as Valand or Hajam, is not fixed on the amount of land that a family possesses but on the number of heads he shaves. He does his job at some concession rates, i.e., for shaving three heads he charges for only two, for four, three, and so on. A boy is considered as a 'mature head' only when moustache appears on his face. Moustache is symbol of adulthood as well as manhood and the growth of soft hair on upper lip marks this stage. It is also the duty of a barber to prepare hubole-bubble, (hukā<sup>k</sup>) for the guest of a family, and shampoo him and shave him when necessary. The guest offers him some money as a gift when he leaves the village; this is an extra amount which a barber gets over and above what he receives from the host in guesties.

A shoemaker is known as Mochi who sews the leather-bag known as kosh with which people draw out water from the well to irrigate the farm-land or vādi. He also repairs wornout shoes and other leather articles on terms of annual



payment of grains, āth, but demands extra payment for a new pair of shoes, saddle, etc. In the absence of a cobbler, a village Chamar (tanner) of the Untouchable caste does the work of repairing the leather-bags, etc. The village tailor, sui, falls in the same category as that of the cobbler, but in case of a potter, Kumbhar, the terms of payment seem to have gone down day by day. The earthen pots which were freely used in the olden days, have now been considerably replaced by metal utensils, which have decreased the demand for earthen ware. This is the reason why a potter loses ground as an indispensable member of a village community. But, he is paid in grain at the time of harvest when he supplies wanted as well as unwanted pots to every family. His services are, however much in demand when some one marries in a family. On this occasion he provides big water pots (gorā) and small pitchers which are necessary to store and carry water for the large number of guests. And at death, on the 11th day, he provides about 80 earthen pots for the funerary ceremony named ghadasun. Sometimes a potter and his wife work merely as family servants and earn their living in addition to their own work of pottery. These artisan-castes are seldom found to cultivate land as a subsidiary occupation.

Though no special festival is observed in the harvest seasons, it is the happiest time for the artisans, because over and above āth the artisans are entitled to ask for gifts,

māgani, while the work is going on. The artisans directly go to the fields, present some pots, wooden toys, etc., to the Mer peasants who in return give a generous quantity of grain-on-the-sheaf. I have seen a potter pressing unwanted goods on a farmer and getting a good quantity of grain, known as kampo.\* The professional beggars like aśetics also come to receive gifts when harvesting is going on. The Mers give them gifts of grain-in-the-seaf to receive good wishes and blessings for their prosperity. The act of giving gifts to a Brahmin brings righteousness or punya as against pāp or sin, acquired by doing unholy deeds. A Mer is, therefore, more generous towards giving gifts to a Brahmin or to an aśetic.

### III

As a matter of fact the relationship of the Mer peasants and the craftsmen of a village is similar to that of the parents and their children. The craftsmen take

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\* The term kampo generally refers to the quantity of grain-in-the-straw as well as fodder which an average man can carry on his back. A kampo is given in every harvest season and it is different from the annual payment called āth.

The custom of giving gifts in māgani is still prevalent in Mer girāsdāri villages. But this is not prevalent among the Mer peasants of Bhayati and Ravala villages where they were prohibited to remove anything from their threshing floor before the local revenue collector or the Bhayat had taken payment in crop-share.

humble pride in saying that they are the children (via) of a village as a whole. Many years ago artisans received a share from the sweet-meats that every Mer family prepared on festive occasions. So it was not necessary for these people to cook on festive days. They happen to collect so much cooked food that they distribute surplus quantity either to the mendicants or to the Untouchables of the village. People consider the artisans to be the real beauty, rup, of the village, because the upkeep of a village depends entirely upon their valuable services. The brotherly treatment that they receive from the Mers, strengthen the ties of affection among the village population.

A cowherd or a shepherd is found in every Mer village. He is a Rabari or Bharwad by caste. He looks after the cattle of the village, herds them together in the outskirts of the village and takes them out for grazing. He is therefore, popularly known as govāl (corruption of the Sanskrit word gaupāl). A cowherd is not concerned with all the families in a village because now a days all families do not possess milch animals. He is paid in cash as well as in kind, but the terms of payment, known as varat, vary from person to person. When a calf is sent with the herd, he gets a fee of one maund of grain and the charge is known as hēravanī which means charge for making that calf accustomed to herding. If a pregnant animal happens to deliver a young one while in his charge, he demands special gift in molasses

from the owner. It is very important to note here that people attach different values to the sex of a calf. If a cow gives birth to a bull-calf or a buffalo to a she-calf they give more than the fixed amount to the herds-man. While in the case of a she-calf of a cow or a bull-calf of a buffalo they give only the fixed amount. The explanation offered is that a bull-calf of a cow is more useful because there is a shortage of bullocks for ploughing the fields. However, the she-calf of a cow is comparatively more important than the bull-calf; because, it is destined to provide bullocks as well as milk through new cows. In short a bullock is useful as it is a draught animal (for ploughing, drawing carts, etc.) while a buffalo is useful exclusively as the milch animal. It is also given as an item of bride-wealth to a girl. On the whole the bull-calf of a buffalo is considered unfit for ploughing or cart-drawing and therefore it is an uninvited guest.

There are at least two or three families of Untouchables or Dheds found in every village. A member of the Untouchable caste, especially a leather tanner (chamār) is needed when an animal dies in a village. It is his duty to carry away a dead animal to a distant place and dispose it off. People pay him in grain for doing this work, which they regard as defiling and degrading <sup>to</sup> their position. In some villages they work as professional leather tanners or weavers for which they are paid in cash or kind. During the harvest

season, the Untouchables work as labourers on daily wages. The most important ritual function that they do is to accompany the peasants when they start for sowing the first seeds before the new crop-year begins. At this time an Untouchable walks ahead towards the field with the bag of seeds, and the farmer follows him behind with his plough and a pair of bullock. In this context he is known as chhāsio (lit., a carrier of butter-milk) or ganēshio (lit. a representative of the elephant-headed god Ganesh who is the remover of obstacles). The presence of an Untouchable is supposed to scare away all the evil spirits on the way and ensure success for the sowing activity. He also conveys to other relatives the news of someone's death in a village. In this context he is known as mēlo or impure whom people receive with anxiety and disgust. When the mēlo goes from village to village carrying the bad news, he gets annas four from the relatives of the deceased. Besides, they give him grain-flour in order that he can prepare his meals. It is significant to note here that the people do not give cooked food to a mēlo because he performs such a mean duty. An Untouchable is also a drummer and as such is indispensable on all festive occasions. He performs similar other duties in addition, for which he may be paid in cash, grain or old clothes. He is poor, and he exists entirely on the mercy of the high caste people.

Reference has been made to the importance of the trading castes, i.e., the Banias and the Lohanas in a Mer village organization. They lend money to the Mers at a high rate of interest and help them in distress. Their assistance is greatly sought for the marriage and the funerary ceremonies, when expensive dinners have to be given to the caste fellows living in the village. Some people mortgage gold or silver ornaments or agricultural land to the money-lenders.

## IV

The Brahmin is a priest. His office is hereditary. A hereditary priest of a Mer village is known as gāmōt and his right to hold that office is known as pātalo which literary means pedestal. This gives him a right to act as priest at every house in the village on all ritual occasions. It is also his duty to substitute another Brahmin in his charge if by chance he is not able to act as a priest. If any man ignores him and brings an another Brahmin he (gāmōt) has right to ask for explanation from that man and he stops the other Brahmin from usurping his rights.

A village where I stayed two months had an illiterate gāmōt, who had inherited the priesthood from his father.

Because of his inability to do his duty, he consented to allow another Brahmin to come in his village to do his work. The outsider was given this right on the condition that he should pay half the amount of the fees and the provisions to the gāmot. Thus he asserted his right of priesthood in the village. Occasionally a quarrel takes place between the gamot and the substituted priest. A sensible outsider would not like to intrude upon the right of a village gāmot, but if he is requested to do so, he would ask the employer concerned to consult the gāmot. However, if an outsider priest usurps the right of a gāmot, the village head-man enforces the usurper priest and the employer to give more than half the income to the gāmot. Sometimes a Brahmin enjoys the right of gāmot in villages more than one.

A gāmot also looks after the principal shrine of a village. But it is likely that a Brahmin other than a gamot or some man of Bava or Sadhu caste may be appointed to look after the shrines and to perform the morning and evening worship, pujā. Those, whose main profession is to worship (pujā kāravi) deities are popularly called pujāris. These professional worshippers, pujaris, receive alms in cash or kind from the people of the village.

The quota of grains and fodder given to a pujāri in the harvest seasons is known as māpun; one māpun is equal to 12 seers (six pēli measures). A family possessing two

sānti of land, pays two māpun (pl.) according to the rule laid down by the village panchayata. A Brahmin or a Sadhu is paid māpun before the new grains are taken home from the threshing-floor. Besides, these people get alms known as sukhadi (lit. a kind of sweetmeat prepared from wheat flour, molasses and clarified butter). The sukhadi and māgani (to which I have referred already) are the alms of the same category, but the only difference is that sukhadi is asked by religious beggars like Brahmins or Bavas and Sadhus while māgani is asked by the people of artisan castes. People consider it mean to carry new grains home without giving some quantity towards alms. They believe that the product of agriculture is not the result only of their labour, but it is also a gift of nature or god. Every creature has his own share in these products. Therefore, they give grains to the people who come to them, freely distribute new fodder to their animals and keep a portion of standing crops unweeded in the fields so that birds may eat the grains.

## V

The various castes are not useful only to the Mers of a village, but they are also helpful to one another in many ways. For instance, a Brahmin may not be directly useful to an Untouchable, but when his own cow or buffalo dies, he sends for an Untouchable and pays him for removing the



dead body of the animal from his verandah. Similarly he needs the help of a cow-herd, tailor, carpenter, blacksmith, goldsmith, cobbler and merchant on various occasions. Thus the people of each caste or sub-caste in a village depend on the others at different times and in different contexts. The structure of the village community of the Mers studied here is with a few variations, a widespread feature of the villages of Saurashtra, and the following observation throws additional light on the subject.

" The average percentage of the classes who make up a village community are according to Sir G. Le Grand Jacob, two families of carpenters, two of blacksmiths, two of tailors, two of potters, one or two of shoemakers, two of barbers, four of shepherds, eight or ten of Dheds, three or four or Vantias (Baniās) and eight or ten of watchmen."<sup>1</sup>

I think that the strength of such a village is less than two thousand people. The average strength of the subsidiary castes in a Mer village is approximately the same as that given in this statement.

## VI

The general pattern of the solidarity of different castes in Mer villages remains the same. And the observation of Prof. M.N. Srinivas about the solidarity of an Indian village stands true. What he says of Coorg villages is true

of the Mer villages also; viz., "Caste ties cut across village ties, while village ties both limit the extension of caste ties beyond the village and stress the interdependence of various castes forming a local community."<sup>1</sup>

The internal solidarity of a village based on co-operation between castes assumes two forms, one positive and the other negative. The positive solidarity urges the people of a village to lead a harmonious life, while the negative is one when majority of the people unanimously boycott a person or a member of a family who does not obey general rules of the village panchāyata. When a particular person does not obey the decisions of the panchāyata, the head-man may order the rest of the people to boycott him. The head-man would order the artisans, the merchants, the Untouchables and others not to help such a man. The pressure of non-co-operation becomes so much that the man concerned has to surrender to the rules of the village assembly. The fine inflicted upon such a disobedient member is not very much. He has only to pay some money to the assembly and has to distribute fodder to the village-herd or bread to dogs and grains to birds. All these acts of kindness to animals constitute religious and ethical values and the man who performs them is said to achieve liberation from the sins previously committed.

The responsibility of maintaining the solidarity of the village rests entirely with the head-man. It is one

of the most important duties of a head-man to protect the prestige of the village. The significance of this pride is compared to that of the nose known as nāk. Thus nāk represents prestige. The term 'gām nu nāk' which means the prestige of the village, is a thing of general reference. In this context the limit of a village is not confined merely to the area covered by the house-sites (gām tal) but it includes the farm lands cultivated by the villagers. Any outsider who happens to damage any property of the villagers or insult or threaten a man or kill an animal or birds in the limits of the village, is looked upon as the enemy of the village.

The root cause of rivalry between Munjo Patel of the village of Khistri and Natho Modho of Modhwada village lay in the transgression of the village limit. According to the informants, the Sindhi associates of the great out-law Natho Modho used to kill peacocks within the limit of the village Khistri, where upon Munjo Patel asked Natho to stop his men from killing peacocks (the act of killing a peacock is considered inauspicious or sinful among the Hindus). When Natho did not yield to Munjo's demand, the conflict began. In spite of the fact that Natho and Munjo belonged to the same lineage, i.e., Sisodia lineage, the enmity between them extended even to the villages of Khistri and Modhwada to which Munjo and Natho belonged respectively. After many struggles and setbacks Munjo Patel <sup>did</sup> succeed in poisoning Natho through the husband of Natho's Brahmin sister (when a woman

of other caste is adopted as sister, she is called dharamni bēn which literary mean 'sister by religion'.) Consequently, the Mer of Modhwada village and those of Khistri became enemies and the former swore not to have water from the latter. The act of boycotting food and water of some relative is known as apio, and the Mers of the village Modhwada are said to have continued the act of apio against those of the village Khistri till recently,

This is an excellent example showing that the village solidarity can at times prevail over the lineage solidarity and the local community has meaning and strength. Here the concept of 'village pride', gām nu nāk comes to the forefront. People of Modhwada were proud of the brave Natho, he was in fact the 'prestige' of their village; and as he was killed, their 'prestige' was wounded.

There is an interesting example where the Mers of one village decided to fight on behalf of their village Brahmin whose cow was stolen by a Mer of another village. The Mers of Kotada filed a suit against a Mer of Kansabad who took away the cow of the Brahmin of Kotada. As a matter of fact the cow belonged to the Mer of Kansabad, but as he let loose the cow for a couple of months he lost the ownership of the cow. According to the rules he ought to have declared the loss of his cow to the village panchāyatas of the neighbouring villages, but he did not do so. The cow strayed in to Kotada, and as for a long time, no claimant came forward

to take it, the panchayat of Kotada held an auction for it and the Brahmin bought it. The owner in Kansabad had thereby lost his rights over the cow, and later on one day when he forcibly carried away the cow from the herd, he was accused as a thief by the Mers of Kotada. Finally the dispute was settled in favour of the people of Kotada. The point to note here is that the entire village fought on behalf of the Brahmin. The matter was looked upon as one in which the rights and prestige of the village as a whole were involved.

## VII

The custom of distributing presents of dates (Arabian khajur) to the people of one's community or to those of one's village is known as lān. Lān is generally a voluntary gift distributed on various occasions, but I am at present concerned only with the lān given on the marriage of a son. The act of distributing lān begets prestige and the man who does it very lavishly achieves higher social status in a village.

A marriage lān is never denied to any one who comes to take it. In fact every family of a village is entitled to receive a share of lān. It is generally distributed by the women-folk of a family and it is received also by the women of every family in the village. The custom of

distributing lān in big villages is slowly disappearing, or becoming restricted to the members of a single caste. In this context I should say that I have not studied the working of lān in a big Mer village but have learnt this from informants. In small villages, this custom of lān works as cementing medium between the Mers and others. Because Mers are in a great majority in such a village, the acceptance of marriage lān from Mers has forced the others to return it on the principle of reciprocity. In a small village called Kansabad I have seen a Rabari family distributing lān to the whole of the village on the marriage of a son.

It is on this level that the people of all the castes, except the Untouchables, meet on common platform. The number of 'dates' to be given in one unit of lān per family is not fixed. Generally the women go with a bell-metal bowl (tānsali) to receive it; and the giver gives two to three handfuls of dates.

The custom of giving lān falls into two broad divisions, one simple, and the other multiple. In the case of 'simple lān' even a joint family receives one unit of lān; while in the case of 'multiple lān' a joint family gets as many units of lān as there are married sons in the family and if there is a farm-labourer, sāthi, working on yearly contract, he also gets for himself a unit. It is also an important feature of multiple lān that the family of the Patel or head-man receives one unit of lān more than the others.

Similarly any family that possesses a 'sword' receives an additional lān. The headman is honoured because he is the leader of the village, and the family with swords is honoured because the sword represents strength for protection. This shows how the Mers value bravery.

As a matter of fact a man can distribute lān whenever he desires. And a rich man who aspires after displaying his wealth and prosperity, also distributes lān. Normally dates are given, but other things also may be given. The custom of lān though slowly disappearing now, is a very powerful weapon granted to a rich man for winning higher social status in the village or in the caste to which he belongs.

There is another social custom which symbolises village solidarity and which gives full scope to a rich man to show his wealth and generosity. The custom is known as 'dhumādā bandh nāt jamādavi' or 'dhumādā bandh gām jamādavun'; it literally means 'to give smoke-stop caste-dinner' or 'to give smoke-stop village-dinner'. This makes it clear, I hope, that no kitchen stove of the caste-man or that of the village people need be lit on the day, for cooking. In other words, these are such dinners that none in the caste or village is required to light the stoves, as every one is fed at one or two common stoves.

When a man offers dhumādā bandh (smoke-stop) village dinner, it becomes the duty of the village people to give full

co-operation to the man offering the dinner. When the flour mills did not exist, it was not possible to get readymade flour in a large quantity from any source. So, it was the duty of the women of the village to take some quantity of wheat from the family concerned and grind it as their own quota. This act of grinding a small share from the total quantity of wheat to be used in preparing pan cakes (mālpudā), showed a sense of village solidarity.

The village population is divided into two main divisions at the time of a village-dinner. All the castes who take food from the Mers form the first division viz., artisan castes and others such as Rabaris, Ravalias and Untouchables. Therefore, dinner for them is cooked at the same stove. The people of higher castes, viz., Brahmins, Banias, Lohanas and sometimes mendicants form the second group. These people have a separate cooking stove where the Brahmin-cooks cook. More co-operative effort is shown in the bigger stoves of the Mers where majority of the people take part; but on the small stoves of the Brahmins no one else than a Brahmin can take active part in cooking. Brahmins cannot take much co-operation of Banias or Lohanas in cooking because they believe that food or water touched by non-Brahmins gets polluted.

Anyway, the whole village shows its harmony on the day of village-dinner. The main topic of the people's talk centres round the dinner and the man who gives it. People



Plate V

- (a) A marriage gift  
(lān):
- On the occasion of the marriage of the son of a Rabari, the lān in Arabian-khajur is distributed to all the Mer families of the village. Kansabad, December, 1953.
- (b) The deity Vachhada Dada:
- The shrine of the deity Vachhada Dada. A statue of a cow (symbolising a herd) whom Vachhada Dada saved from the cattle-lifters is also seen. Khambhodar, November, 1954.

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praise in high sounding words the generous act of the man. They also prepare a scheme for honouring him on behalf of the village. People raise a fund by subscriptions and publicly present a head-gear (pāghadī bandhāvē) to the man. The act of presenting head-gear is considered to be of great honour. The acts of offering dinner to the village and of presenting a head-gear in reward to the man concerned raise the prestige of a village and its solidarity in the eyes of the outsiders.

### VIII

The principal folk-deity of a Mer village is Vachhada Dada (m.). In times of wide-spread disease, or long draught, the people in past used to approach the medium of this deity. The medium invokes the deity in a proper manner and he achieves communion with the deity. He declares the commandment(hukam) of the deity. The commandment usually tells them that they should appease the deity by offerings which would put an end to the draught and disease. Thus the people of the village perform a collective propitiatory ritual known as jawāranun meaning offering. On this occasion the people of all the castes unanimously stop their daily work and go to the seat (thān) of Vachhada Dada and make offerings generally of cooked rice and cocoanuts. Village unity of a high order is expressed during the periods of

epidemics and natural catastrophe.

The unity of the village is most clearly seen when a family suffers a calamity in the form of death of a member or of fire in the house. A Mer family whose member dies does not cook on the first day. Other people of the village including relatives do not like the bereaved family (children and others) to remain hungry on the first night. So they all go to the bereaved family with a loaf and give it to them. Thus practically a heap of loaves is to be found with the bereaved family. It is out of question whether the bereaved family needs so many loaves or not, but as a duty the people of the village give without fail a loaf per family. On the next day the bereaved family distributes surplus loaves to the dogs and the Untouchables of the village. The high caste people when in bereavement do not accept loaves from the low-caste people who earnestly want to help them in the days of grief. So the low-caste people bring a quantity of flour to the bereaved high caste family and request them to cook food and not to remain hungry. Thus the people of the village express their deep feelings for one another and forget petty quarrels or disputes in such times.

People stop any important work when fire breaks out in a village. All the able bodied persons rush out to help in putting out the fire. Men and women set out with pitchers and earthen pots, draw water from the wells or ponds

and help in extinguishing the fire. Children also help in collecting handfuls of dust or sand which they throw on the fire. The unfortunate family that suffers a loss due to fire receives consolation and if necessary, some monetary help also from the people of the village. At this time too most of the people forget petty quarrels or rivalries and help one another.

## IX

Most of the Mer villages have a common property known as gām jahāmpā fund, i.e., the fund of the village gate. Generally, gām jahāmpā fund is the income drawn from a plot of land jointly owned by the villagers and managed by the council of the village elders. This land is leased on fixed rent or crop-share to some one for cultivation. Preferably a Mer or a Brahmin peasant cultivates such a land. The Patel does the management of the gām jahāmpā fund with the help of the panchāyata. It is from this fund that the Patel spends money for the welfare of the village. In the times of draught or scarcity, the Patel purchases fodder to feed the village herd (gām dhān) and thus retain the cattle wealth. Whenever a band of religious mendicants happens to come to the village, they are welcomed and treated as the guests of the village and are given provision or rations. Now-a-days, the Patel allows the folk actors (known as Bhavaya) to put on

their shows on condition that they give a share of their income to the gām jahāmpā fund, or towards buying fodder for the village-herd.

## X

Gām jahampa fund is not the only tangible property of a village; it also owns a bull known as dhan khunt, chorā or meeting-house, the temples in it and a few wells or a tank. And the prestige of the village, i.e., gām nu nāk, lies in keeping them in good condition. Other things while not exactly owned by the village, also come under the purview of gām nu nak: for instance, a brave man (mātiāi jan), the honour of its women-folk, and especially mothers and sisters (man-ben), daughters-in-law and daughters (vahu-bēti), a Brahmin priest (gāmōt), a watchman (pasāyato), a cow-herd (govāl), a medium man (bhuvo) and the village-herd (gām dhan). Any outsider who misbehaves or injures any one of the above persons incurs the wrath of all the villagers.

People employ bullocks, i.e., castrated bulls in agricultural work and in drawing carts. But every villager keeps a bull for stud purposes. It is known as dhan khunt which is purchased either out of the common fund of the village or by raising a special fund. It moves about in a village freely; nobody may beat it when it is grazing in a private field.

This facility is extended only to the village bull and not to other animals. The animals other than the village bull, are impounded in the village pound (dabo) while found straying and grazing into somebody's field.

A dhan khunt which is given a trident (trishula) brand with a red-hot iron bar is called ānkēlo sāndh, meaning graduated bull. His services are loaned to a neighbouring village which does not possess one for its purpose. In such cases either the bull is taken to that neighbouring village or the herds-man of the village concerned brings cows to the village where it lives.

In past days the thieves used to steal away the cattle herd (dhan) of a village. On such occasions people had to unite to fight against the thieves. There are a number of stories narrating the sacrifices of the people in saving a village-herd. They consider the village-herd to be the real wealth, and pride, nāk, of the village. Memorial stones, or pallas, have been placed (on the outskirts of a village) in the name of these brave men who died while saving the village-herd. The most popular deity in this area, Vachhada Dada is supposed to be one of the daring youths, who died in a battle with the thieves who were leading away the herd of his village. It is said that Vachhada Dada was being married when the cattle-thieves raided the village. He left his bridal seat, rode his horse and gave a chase to the thieves.

He succeeded in bringing home the village-herd, but he and his noble horse died of the severe wounds received at the hands of the thieves. People still worship the stone figurine of this noble horse. Now the people recognize the stone figurine of the horse as the deity Vachhada Dada. Whether Vachhada was a Mer youth or not is not clear but the ideal for which he died is cherished by the Mers. The story of Dudo Viram, the Mer of the village Modhwada is comparatively recent; he died while fighting with the Vaghers who came to steal the cattle of the village.

It is the duty of every family of a village to share in the work of providing water to the village-herd. A water trough, known as havēdo, is built near the common well of a village. The head-man takes care to see that every family sends, in turn, a man to draw water from the well and fill the water trough for the cattle. It should be noted that the water from the well is drawn in a leather bag (kosh) pulled by a pair of bullocks. The village police-man (pasāyato) or the barbar informs a family concerned of its turn on a particular day. The village panchāyata takes steps against a defaulter by fining him; failure to pay fine results in the boycott of that family. In some villages however, a man is specially appointed to look after the filling of the water trough (havedo) and so he is known as havēdio (adj.). Havēdio is not paid in cash for this services, but given a common plot of land for personal cultivation (jāt khēd). He also forms



a part of the 'pride' of the village. In times of difficulty he is helped by all.

Many proud Mers have lost their lives while fighting those who tried to molest village women. Honour of women is very important and every villager is expected to defend and protect it. A Mer named Rino Bhojani of Modhwada took revenge on the Rajputs of Baradi (in Jamnagar state) who cut jokes at the Mer women who had assembled at the well to fetch water. Rino and other Mer youths chased the Rajputs who fled to their houses. They plundered the village Baradi, robbed the Rajputs and returned home. The women of the village honoured them, and as a mark of respect covered their heads which they had kept open to show their humiliated condition at the hands of the outsiders.

It is considered mannerless for a woman and a man to move in a village without covering one's head. A man should either put on a head-gear, pāghadi, or, at least tie a small scarf known as mēlkhoriun on the head. In olden days an outsider was actually beaten or driven out of the village if he happened to enter a village with his head uncovered and finely combed. Such a behaviour was considered to be an insult to the elders of the village. It also meant an indirect encroachment upon the honour of the women. However, the mendicants have the privilege to move in a village with uncovered heads. And now-a-days even educated people are not harassed if they go in a village without a cap or a hat. But the

concept of the 'prestige' of the village, gam nu nak, is still strongly prevalent among the villagers who take care to cover their heads while moving in a village.

Similarly it is prohibited to enter a village while riding on a horse. And the man who commits a breach of this rule, meets with the same punishment as the man who walks in a village without covering his head. One who rides a horse in a village bazaar is supposed to harm the honour of the elders. It is considered as a great insult to the brave youths who are also clever horse-men. Such a rude behaviour is taken up as a challenge to the villagers to show their mettle (pani, meaning water) and stop the intruder if at all they have the courage to do so. People take this matter as a great insult to the village 'prestige' or gam nu nak and so they raise brisk quarrel and fight with the man disobeying the rule of etiquette.

The Holi festival (falling in (Feb.-March) also provides an instance of the village solidarity. An earthen pot known as kumbha is filled with gram and water and kept in a pit in the ground on which a Holi (a heap of fire-wood and dung cakes) is erected and burnt. The pot is taken out at midnight from the pit and the future of the next year's crop is predicted by looking into the contents of the pot. If the grams in the pot are well and uniformly cooked a good crop is indicated. While if some portion is only partially cooked or burnt, the crop will not be so good.

A Holi-kumbha is thus a ritual indicator of the prosperity of the village in the coming year. When taken out from the pit, one of the youths of the village lifts the kumbha and takes it round the whole village. Other people follow the bearer of the kumbha with their swords open and guard him in order that no one may thwart the progress and route of the kumbha bearer. If the kumbha is snatched away by a party of outsiders it is believed that the village concerned will meet with drastic calamity or illluck (apshukan) in the following year. And the villagers who would take the kumbha would gain prosperity and invincible power of theft and robbery, against any other village, for a period of twelve years. A thread of hand-spun cotton is also tied round the whole village when kumbha is taken in procession round the village. The thread which is known as sutar is supposed to represent a magical fort which guards the village from any disease or illluck of similar nature.

An act of resistance against a party of imaginary enemies snatching away the kumbha is symbolically enacted in many villages. When the ritual act of taking the kumbha round the village is over, it is taken to the village chorā (the meeting-house of villagers). A party of the people of the same village stands on the platform of the chorā and offers a symbolic fight with twigs to the party bringing the kumbha. At last the men with the kumbha overcome them and the cooked gram are distributed to all the people of the village.

The next day of Holi is known as dhuli-padavo, lit. dusty padavo, the fifteenth day of the bright half of fālguna. On this day the villagers enact another series of symbolic attacks from the outsiders. A party which stands for the village is supposed to win the game against another party which represents an enemy group. As a matter of fact, the form of the game is not the same in all the villages. In some villages the people form two parties and fight with clubs (gotā) of the wet cloth twisted twice or thrice. This fight is carried on near the village chorā where the party representing enemies attempts to climb. In some other villages they fight with sticks, stones and dust, at the gate of the village (i.e. gām jahāmpā). In addition to these, a common game of fighting with stone and clod missiles is also carried on between many pairs of youths who may be near relatives or even brothers. Many people receive serious injuries in this game, but it does not give rise to bad feelings. Besides this, people play many competitive games in which no outsider dares to take part.

Thus the sentiments of the people have always remained towards preserving the solidarity and <sup>the</sup>prestige of their village, either against the people of the neighbouring area or against those of their own caste living in any other village.

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Section V

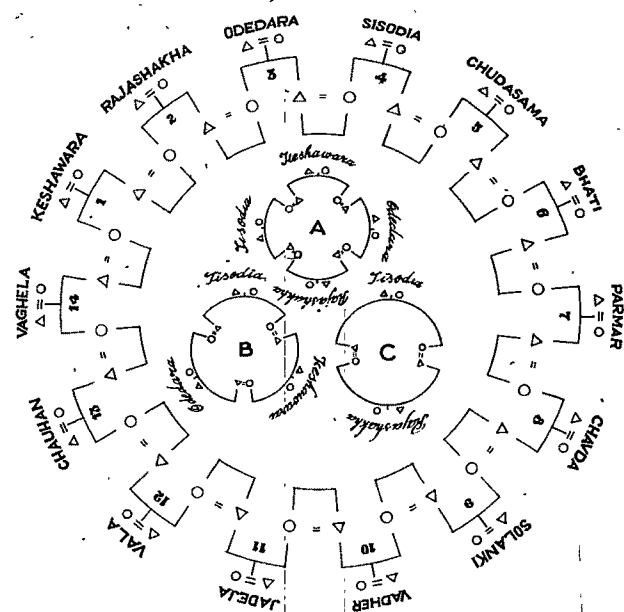
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Section VI

- 1 M. N. Srinivas, op. cit., p. 61.

# CHART - A

## A CONJECTURAL RECONSTRUCTION



Observation : The chart shows how lineage exogamy enables the various lineages to form a single endogamous unit. This is only a hypothetical reconstruction. Actually, a Her lineage prefers to have numerous offinal links with a few other lineages, e.g. A, B & C.