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Department of Anthropology

Witchcraft, Religious Transformation, and Hindu Nationalism in Rural Central India

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Abstract

This thesis is an anthropological exploration of the connections between witchcraft, religious transformation, and Hindu nationalism in a village in an *Adivasi* (or 'tribal') area of eastern Maharashtra, India. It argues that the appeal of Hindu nationalism in India today cannot be understood without reference to processes of religious and social transformation that are also taking place at the local level.

The thesis demonstrates how changing village composition in terms of caste, together with an increased State presence and particular view of modernity, have led to difficulties in satisfactorily curing attacks of witchcraft and magic. Consequently, many people in the village and wider area have begun to look for lasting solutions to these problems in new ways. A significant number have joined a Hindu religious sect, the Mahanubhav Panth, seen as particularly efficacious in matters of healing. Membership of this sect however alters the values and practices of adherents which not only causes conflict with non-sect neighbours and kin but also resonates powerfully with the messages promoted by Hindu nationalist agents in the area.

The thesis engages key areas of anthropological concern: the relationship between individual action and social structure; kinship and sociality; State activity; and religious conversion.

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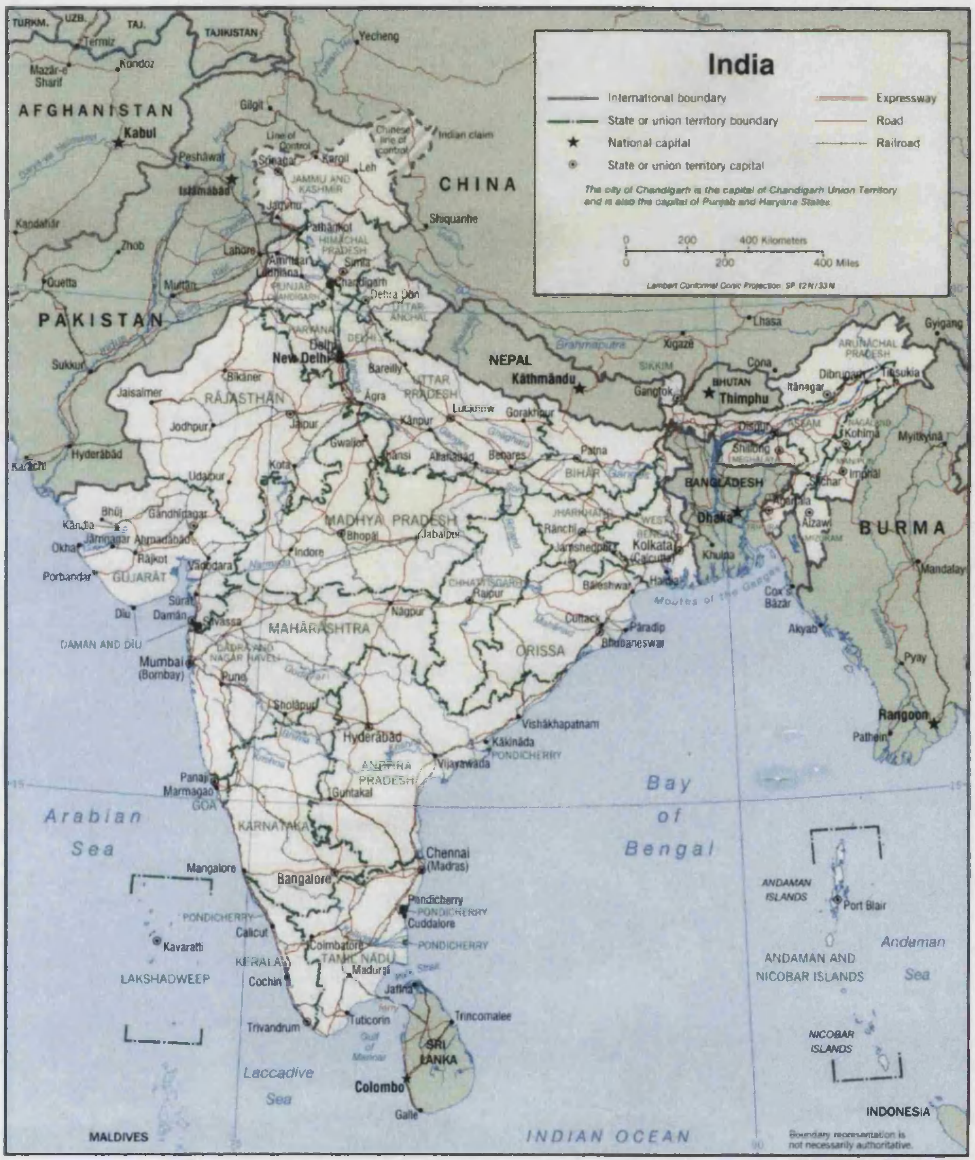
India
International boundary
State or union territory boundary
National capital
State or union territory capital
Expressway
Road
Railroad
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TAJ.
TAJIKISTAN
Kabul
Islamabad
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Thimphu
Dhaka
Rangoon
Colombo
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Chennai (Madras)
Bangalore
Hyderabad
JAMMU AND KASHMIR
HIMACHAL PRADESH
PUNJAB
HARYANA
UTTAR PRADESH
UTTARANCHAL
RAJASTHAN
GUJARAT
MADHYA PRADESH
CHHATTISGARH
MAHARASHTRA
ORISSA
ANDHRA PRADESH
KARNATAKA
GOA
KERALA
TAMIL NADU
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JHARKHAND
WEST BENGAL
SIKKIM
ARUNACHAL PRADESH
ASSAM
MEGHALAYA
NAGALAND
MANIPUR
MIZORAM
TRIPURA
DAMAN AND DIU
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Brahmaputra
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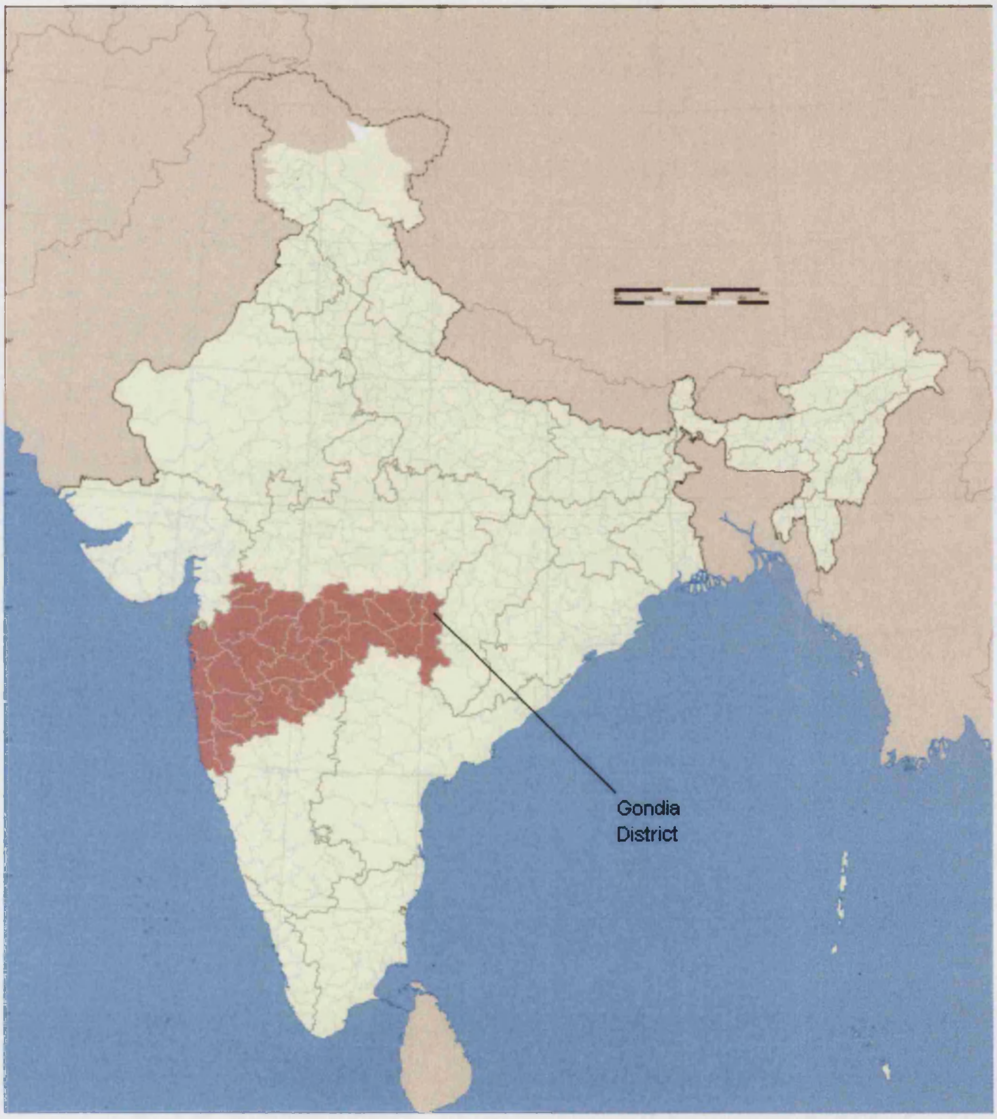
Map 1: India


Gondia
District

Map 2: Locator map for Maharashtra State showing Gondia District.

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Aerial view of Markakasa

Chapter One

Introduction

Brijlal was a happy man and not only because the rains had been good. He was happy because a period of great sadness in his life appeared to have passed. As he tells it, for about seven years beginning around 1993, there had been nothing but pain. Two sons had passed away in infancy and then he himself had been at death's door, struck down by a mysterious illness, sapping him of strength leaving him unable to hold his own baby boy. He tried many remedies, visiting doctors, healers and sorcerers, but to no avail. Finally he was persuaded to go to a temple one hundred kilometres away where he was assured he would find relief. He stayed there for several weeks along with his wife and spent his days in prayer and devotion. Sorcery was determined as the cause of his illness and on Brijlal's behalf God began to fight the affliction. The magic loosened its hold and his health improved; he and his wife decided to join the Mahanubhav Panth, the religious sect that had established the temple. They became disciples of a guru there and returned to their village as changed people. Their lives, so recently characterised by intense pain, sadness and danger, were now transformed into ones of happiness, contentment and safety. When I got to know him, there was no sign of his past woe: he had fully recovered from his illness and he now had two healthy young children. He could farm his fields, drive a bullock cart and ride a bicycle again. His life had changed in other ways too: as a result of membership of the sect he had made a commitment to abstain from meat and alcohol and worship One God (Bhagwan) to the exclusion of all others.

Brijlal was my landlord during my stay in Markakasa, the village in central India where I carried out fieldwork. I slept and wrote in a room of the house and took my meals with his family and in time came to be considered as one of them, "a person of the house". And Brijlal was one of my closest friends and a key informant. One of the few 'intellectuals' of the village, Brijlal loved puzzling over the issues of the day both local and global, and would often come into my room after lunch while I was writing up my notes and quiz me about the headlines and stories in my rather sporadically delivered English-language newspaper. He is a Gond, which is a tribal or *Adivasi* (lit. original inhabitants) community, classified under the Indian Constitution as a Scheduled Tribe (ST), and is the largest tribal group in India spread over several states in the central region of the country. He is not a particularly wealthy man, owning only three-and-a-half acres of farmland, but he is influential, and though only thirty-four years old is considered a *sian* (elder) and an important member of the *panch* (the village's dispute resolution body)[1].

Political activity is an important part of Brijlal's life. He is a volunteer worker (*karyakarta*) for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and is regarded as the BJP's man in Markakasa. The BJP is an integral part of the Sangh Parivar[2], an association of organisations that promote a Hindu nationalist agenda in nominally secular India. Until the general elections in 2004, the BJP had been the largest party in the ruling coalition known as the National Democratic Alliance; though it is the party of government in several States, it now sits on the opposition benches in the federal parliament. The other prominent organisation of the Sangh Parivar, and the ideological engine of the entire movement, is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) which established the BJP as its party political wing in the 1980s, and of which Brijlal became a member at about the same time that he fell ill. Another member of the 'family' which has a particular presence in my fieldwork area is the Vidarbha Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram (VVKA), an organisation which works in areas in eastern Maharashtra (Vidarbha), where Adivasis predominate. Once again, Brijlal is involved in its local activities, attending meetings and acting as a guide for visiting dignitaries. The VVKA, which exists in different incarnations in many parts of India, is principally concerned with what it calls 'uplift' or social development and *dharma jagran*[3]. To this end it runs a boys' boarding house near a high school in a large village 11km away (where Brijlal intends to send his son when he is old enough). It also organises local sports tournaments and distributes free medicine to villagers, and encourages its members to hold regular meetings (*satsang*) where religious matters are discussed and correct Hindu practice taught. The VVKA's overall objective is to keep 'vulnerable' groups such as Adivasis within the Hindu fold and safe from the attentions of Christian missionaries and other 'anti-national elements'.

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[1] This is a separate body from the gram panchayat. The latter is the elected village council.

[2] Literally 'the family of associations'. It has no formal structure and includes workers, students and traders groups as well as religious and anti-globalisation associations. Their common denominator is their engagement whether partial or full in Hindu nationalist ideology.

[3] 'Awakening of Moral Order'.

This simple and partial account of the life of a man I got to know well raises one of the principal questions of this thesis: what, if anything, does the narrative of illness and healing have to do with Brijlal's involvement in the Hindu nationalist movement? At first sight the connection between the two may seem contingent: surely the two parts of Brijlal's life have very little to do with one another; and even if there were some connection, how would the analysis of it be of wider anthropological import? It is my concern here to look at the connections between the personal and the political; between the local world of the people I lived with, and the political and ideological battle of ideas and interest being fought in the larger arena of the nation.

More specifically, this thesis is an exploration of how and why Hindu religious sects have become so popular in Adivasi areas of eastern Maharashtra and a consideration of the implications of this religious transformation for both the self and local society. Contrary to approaches which suggest that this is part of an inevitable process of a "Hindu mode of tribal absorption" (Bose 1941), or of Sanskritisation (Srinivas 1966), it proposes that membership of religious sects help solve 'being-in-the world' problems, which have arisen because of rapid changes in local society. The consequences of sect membership, however, are not limited to those who join. The practice of devotion restructures sociality with kin and neighbours, and also reveals the dangers of such relationships. Adherence to the sect also provides a commitment to the values of vegetarianism, teetotalism and regular worship, which are understood by new sect members as key to improving society more widely. An approach which explores the experience of religious transformation not only helps us better understand the complex motivations for changing religiosity, but also forces us to rethink key questions of traditional concern to Indian sociology such as status and prestige. It also puts one in a better position to analyse the ways in which commitment to certain practices can be mobilised for political projects by Hindu nationalist activists.

At the level of people's lived experience, there appears to be a crisis in the control of witchcraft and magic, a crisis caused by the unavailability of satisfactory solutions for the resolution of illness caused by malignant mystical attack. This crisis has its roots in the increased presence of the Indian State but also in the inability to migrate in order to escape misfortune. This had led a growing number of people in the area to seek relief, as Brijlal did, from a Hindu religious sect called the Mahanubhav Panth, which is regarded as particularly efficacious in dealing with attacks of witches and sorcerers. Membership of this sect protects people from further attacks of witchcraft and this in turn produces a commitment to practices such as vegetarianism, teetotalism and time set aside for daily worship. The sect and these practices not only have the effect of transforming sociality with others and creating a new sense of self but also become part of a broader discourse of the constitution of modernity. Full participation in modernity for those who come from marginal areas is bound up with a distancing from the wild (*jangli*) ways of the past and of others in the present, which serve to stigmatise Adivasi people and prevent total national identification. These attitudes resonate with practices which are locally regarded by Hindu nationalists as representative of 'correct Hindu behaviour' that serves to strengthen the Hindu community by marking people as unambiguously Hindu. I emphasise then the apparent coincidence of values that enables people like Brijlal to see in Hindu nationalist ideology some resonance with the experience of their own lives, and which makes the nationalist message all the more appealing. I describe it as coincidental because the Hindu sects like the Mahanubhav that have become so popular have no discernable connection to the Hindu nationalists; nor do Hindu nationalist activists seem aware of the growth in sectarian membership and the implications that has on their level of support.

In the next section I suggest some ways in which the ethnographic material presented in this study can be framed. It is not intended as a summary of the chapters which comprise the thesis but rather a discussion of some of the themes which cut across chapters. A brief exposition of the experience of doing fieldwork follows that, and a chapter outline appears at the end of the Introduction.

Orientations

Religious experience and nationalist identification

The idea for this study was born out of a frustration that Hindu nationalism in India was being discussed in the academy largely as a political force that swept all before it and that those marginal groups in society the nationalist movement targeted – in particular Adivasis and Untouchables – were represented as being somehow duped through social or economic enticements into believing in the righteousness of such a movement (e.g. Hansen 1999: 103-6). Some of the analysis that followed the massacres of Muslims in the state of Gujarat in 2002 centred on the fact that it seemed to be those such as Adivasis and Untouchables who were doing much of the killing in rural areas: the conclusions were invariably drawn that years of Hindu nationalist activity in villages in the area and anti-Muslim propaganda had radicalised elements of the population (see Yagnik and Sheth 2002; Balagopal 2002; Lobo 2002). I do not want to suggest that such propagandising in the state which has been called Hindutva's laboratory is of no importance at all. But such accounts which place action and agency firmly in the Hindu nationalist activists' court effectively prevent us from asking other salient questions: why might Hindu cultural and religious nationalism as ideology and practice appear attractive and meaningful, not only for people who took part in the violence or are members of nationalist organisations, but also for those numerous others who have no clear party political affiliation?

These accounts of Hindu nationalist activity mentioned briefly above do not explore in any great depth the local contexts of social, economic, and religious change that are taking place in areas where Adivasis and other marginal communities live. This thesis offers an ethnographic exploration of the environment in which Hindu nationalism operates and attempts to gather support. In so doing, it takes the phenomenon of Hindu nationalism as its background and its end point, rather than its beginning. In particular, I focus on people's changing religious lives and look at how people who come to adopt certain practices might find the message of Hindu nationalism appealing. In common with others such as Van der Veer (1994) and Kapferer (1997), I suggest that the logic and symbolism of nationalism operates at a level beyond the immediately political and resonates with the most fundamental existential crisis human beings can face: that of falling ill and being close to death, and then being cured. At the heart of this is ritual. As Van der Veer writes: "What seems to happen in religious nationalism is that ideological movements give a new interpretation to the cosmological understandings communicated in religious ritual. The nation is presented as an extension of the self and nationalism as part of religion, dealing with shame and honour, the illness and death of the person..." (1994: 84).

I do not suggest that an instrumentalist approach is of no value. On the contrary it is essential, as the study by Froerer (2002, 2006) demonstrates. She examines the ways in which political Hindu nationalism is introduced to a mixed Hindu/Christian Adivasi community in Chhattisgarh. She focuses on how RSS activists use local disputes to promote a nationalist agenda by transforming ethnic identity in the image of wider concerns of the threatening 'Other'. But such an approach is not sufficient to understand the complexities of the issue. The question one needs to ask, in addition to how Hindu nationalist agents use local disputes to spread their ideology, is why the targets of their ideology may be attracted to such ideas in the first place. Searching for and examining the answers to this question are essential if we are to understand the long-term sentimental attraction for people of Hindu nationalism. To neglect to do so reduces religion wholly to politics, and the 'Hindu' element of 'Hindu nationalism' becomes a hollow shell manipulated by those wishing to retain or capture power. Hindu nationalism, in that interpretation, is the pursuit of political dominance conducted by other means. Anthropologists have to be wary of this reductionism: the religious is just as important as the political and they implicate each other profoundly. The Hindu-ness of the nationalism has to be explained and accounted for in contemporary ethnography. Such unwillingness to engage in the implications of religious transformation leads to accounts of the relationship between marginal communities and Hindu nationalism which privilege the ostensibly political and economic over the religious. Baviskar, for instance, asserts that the "multiple spiritual and cultural meanings embodied in the practices of being *bhagat* [a member of a Hindu devotional sect] now *matter less* [my emphasis] than its potential for recruiting Adivasis to political Hinduism" (2005: 5108). But it is precisely in unpacking those multiple spiritual and cultural meanings, in examining why and how Adivasis and others undergo such radical religious transformation, that one can begin to understand the attraction of Hindu nationalism, and how relations of power are really configured. If it is true that religious or ethnic identities are being mobilised by elites (Brass 1974, 1979), one at least needs to examine how those religious identities not only come to be formed but have such power. As Van der Veer suggests, Hindu devotional movements have long played a role in the formation of religious identity, and though the movements themselves "remained bound to certain regions or social groups so that Hindu identity continued to be fragmented" (1994: 50), a common denominator of something that is recognisably Hindu can be discerned in the discourse and practice of devotionalism (ibid.). Thus it seems that an examination of these devotional sects is especially pertinent.

It may sound like a truism, but Hindu devotional movements are clearly not the same thing as Hindu reform/ revival movements. The importance of Hindu reform movements in the creation of a Hindu identity unified in practice and ideology has tended to be stressed, both in the anthropological literature and in the historiography (see Bhatt 2001). An emphasis on these sorts of politico-cultural movements, such as the Arya Samaj which emerged during the course of the nineteenth century, tends to obscure the importance of already existing religious formations in Indian society such as the devotional sects. Some of the latter, such as the Mahanubhav, were established in mediaeval times. Indeed, the focus on these more recent religious formations naturally privileges the political in any analysis of the emergence of Hindu nationalism because of their undeniably political aims. It is these organisations which are involved in mass programmes of religious change: the Arya Samaj organises *shuddhi* (purification) campaigns of 'reconversion' of Adivasis from Christianity to Hinduism. Similarly, the RSS runs a *ghar vapsi* (homecoming) campaign with much the same end. Away from these spectacular campaigns with overtly political messages and concerns, devotional sects continue to attract adherents for multiple reasons and it is some of these reasons that I look at in detail.

There are resonances at a cosmological level between the conceptions of moral order and disorder of local society, which are primarily associated with the disruptive effects of witchcraft and sorcery, and the symbolism of Hindu nationalism more generally. Witchcraft and sorcery can affect individuals, as the example of Brijlal demonstrates, but people also attribute a sense of dis-ease of the wider community of their village to the actions of witches and sorcerers. This sort of witchcraft is largely attributed to people within the village, and is thus an internal problem. But the threat is also exteriorised by generalised discourses of difference which emphasise the influx of 'different kinds of people' whom one cannot really trust, and which not only change the composition of the village but also make it harder to combat witchcraft itself. This sort of logic has considerable parallels with the logic of Hindu nationalism, with the obsession with an interior 'Other' that needs either to be incorporated or made exterior and expelled (Jaffrelot 1993: 522). There are similar processes at work: just as individuals and villages are attacked from within, and are healed and thereby transformed, so the nation as conceived by Hindu nationalist ideology is under attack and needs to be healed and transformed (Hansen 1999: 10-13). I am not suggesting, however, that the resonances at this cosmological level are what cause people to act in the way that they do. I am simply proposing here that, for instance, the symbolism and ritual of healing is part of a larger cosmological system that goes beyond the individual or the local and is found at the (not necessarily more interesting) level of the nation.

Poles apart? The idea of the 'Adivasi' and Indian modernity

The question of Adivasi-ness runs through much of this thesis. While it is true that in the particular village in which fieldwork was conducted, Adivasi people formed a minority, the area as a whole was nevertheless described as an 'Adivasi area' by locals and administrators alike. Though the condition of Adivasi-ness was located largely in those who defined themselves as Adivasi or members of Scheduled Tribes, there were important restrictions and expansions of this idea. Restrictively, the use of the term 'Adivasi' in this area is meant to refer to members of the Gaita Gond caste. As a consequence of their distinctive life-cycle rituals, their language and dress, and their self-perception that they are the 'pure Adivasi' (which in turn is founded largely on their own perceived distinctiveness), they have come to be identified with an irreducible Adivasi character. By way of contrast, in its most expansive definition, all people resident in an Adivasi area have something of the Adivasi about them. Thus the widely held view that people of any caste in this area were perceived as having less formal education than in other parts of the region, or that people were poorer or more superstitious, was attributed by officials and villagers alike to their predicament of living in an Adivasi area. In all cases, whether restrictive or expansive, the concept of Adivasi is unquestionably linked to that which is backward (*magaslele*) or wild (*jangli*), as opposed to the ways of other Indians in other areas who are more civilised or advanced. Chapters Four and Six highlight aspects of the association of Adivasi with 'backwardness'.

Chapter Four discusses the impediments that have developed in the past fifty years or so, which make the identification and public accusation of witches and those who employ sorcerers much more difficult in Markakasa. Two ritual forms, *Angadev* and *panbuddi*, were used in the past to identify witches and other sources of mystical attack. These forms are no longer available to Markakasa people largely because of what they connote as examples of Adivasi 'backwardness'. *Angadev*, a witch-detecting device, is seen as evidence of Gond superstition and lack of modernity by both non-Adivasi villagers and government officials. In a mixed caste village such as Markakasa then, the *Angadev* is unavailable as a remedy because of a lack of agreement as to its efficacy. Similarly, the ritual of *panbuddi* in which a bride is tested for witchcraft, performed before a Gond wedding, has largely been abandoned because it expresses an ideology of sexuality which runs counter to that which is regarded as modern or civilised by many in Markakasa. In both these cases, the relationship between the idea of the Adivasi and the notion of the primitive is clear. A consequence of this particular articulation of the Adivasi leads to the unavailability of certain measures of witch-detection and conflict resolution.

The discussion of vegetarianism and teetotalism in Chapter Six also demonstrates this association of Adivasi with backwardness. Though Markakasa sect members adopt these food practices in order to fulfil the functional ends of protection from witchcraft, vegetarianism and teetotalism come to express key ways in which Markakasa people distinguish those who are backward from those who have improved (*sudharlele*). People who are *sudharlele* are regarded as more able to participate in modern India as represented through politics and education. The largely Gond neighbouring village of Kedanar is often discussed as more backward than Markakasa, not only because the former lacks the mixture of castes of the latter and is more recognisably Adivasi in composition, but also because of their excessive consumption of meat and alcohol.

There has been considerable discussion throughout the last century and into the present one about the category of 'tribal' and 'Adivasi'. The famous debate between G. S. Ghurye and Verrier Elwin (Ghurye 1943; Elwin 1943; Guha 1999) about the place in Indian society of people classified as tribal was primarily concerned with questions of policy. Were they, as Ghurye proposed, to be encouraged to assimilate or, as Elwin campaigned for, were they in need of special governmental protection to 'preserve their way of life'? Underlying this debate was a fundamental disagreement as to who those called Adivasi were. Ghurye saw them as low status and marginalised Hindus and stressed continuities between 'tribal culture' and mainstream Hindu culture, whereas Elwin, for much of his career, seemed to consider the two in opposition to each other. Others such as Bailey (1960, 1961), Dumont (1962) and Beteille (1987) discussed the sociological usefulness of the term and whether one could oppose it to the category of caste. There have also been several studies which explore the colonial construction of tribe particularly in contrast to that of caste (e.g. Skaria 1997b; Guha 1998). Rather than consider these issues, which have already been extensively explored, I want to focus in this section on the notion of the 'Adivasi' through the context of two political movements that were active in the area where I did fieldwork: chauvinistic Hindu nationalism and the Maoist-inspired Naxalite movement. Both these political projects offer re-interpretations of the notion of Adivasi or tribal which diverge from the conflation in symbolic terms of

Adivasi with that which is primitive and radically other in Indian society. While the former seeks to discourage the use of the word altogether, the latter appears to offer a symbolic re-interpretation of it.

As others have noted (e.g. Froerer 2002; Sundar 2006a), Hindu nationalist organisations such as the RSS contest the word 'Adivasi'. That it means 'original inhabitant' offers a challenge to Hindu nationalist ideology, which stresses that all the people resident within India today are autochthonous to it and have always been Hindu.[4] VVKA activists around Markakasa told me that 'Adivasi' was a mischievous invention by India's erstwhile colonial rulers, which had the purpose of dividing the population. In their interpretation, the concept of Adivasi needs to be seen less as a specifically ethnic term (as suggested by the restrictive understanding above) and more as a condition of geographical being (as suggested by the expansive understanding). In this respect, contemporary Hindu nationalist thinking recalls Ghurye's position. For the RSS and VVKA, 'vanvasi' (forest-dweller) is a more appropriate label since it does not differentiate on the basis of caste. It is merely a descriptive geographical term that can be opposed to the categories of *saharvasi* (city-dweller) and *gaonvasi* (village-dweller). This neologism was met with hostility from some in Markakasa. On one occasion, a couple of VVKA activists went from door to door handing out leaflets to villagers explaining the function and activities of the VVKA. A Gond man, politically active in the Congress Party,[5] publicly challenged them on the use of the word 'vanvasi'. Returning the leaflet he had been handed, he argued that the replacement of 'Adivasi' was part of a plot by the BJP to rewrite the Constitution and revoke rights to government benefits and reserved public sector jobs that Adivasi people were entitled to. Other villagers gathered around and started to hand back the leaflets too. By erasing the concept of 'Adivasi' as a special category of people, the Hindu nationalists were accused of denying that Adivasi people were in need of more assistance than other people; in a sense therefore, and paradoxically so, the activists appeared to deny that Adivasi people as a particular group or caste were more 'backward' than any other in the area.

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[4] Which has the implication of course that Muslims, Christians and others are 'really' Hindus waiting to come back to the fold.

[5] Campaign speeches in the run up to the 2004 General Election by the Congress Party, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) all mentioned this apparent BJP promotion of vanvasi over Adivasi and the threat it represented. The BJP speeches I heard never mentioned 'vanvasi' but always spoke in terms of Adivasi. Vanvasi was used far more by VVKA activists.

At the other end of the political spectrum, the Naxalite insurgency in central and eastern India has gained ground in largely Adivasi areas. Maoist-inspired, its ultimate aim is the overthrow of the Indian state. While it is presented as a class rebellion of the peasantry against exploitative landlords, moneylenders and government officials, it has also taken on the characteristics of caste conflict in many parts of the country, particularly in Bihar and Jharkhand. Though I discuss the Naxalite insurgency in more detail in Chapter Four and argue that it has drawn the State ever closer in both imagination and fact to Markakasa people with implications for how witchcraft is dealt with, I want to focus here on the idea that the Naxalites in and around the Dandakaranya region (the Gond areas of eastern Maharashtra and southern Chhattisgarh) are interpreted by local people as an ethnic movement of Adivasis (principally Gonds) against non-Adivasi outsiders. This identification of the Naxalites and Adivasi ways of being in turn suggests a possible symbolic re-working of the 'Adivasi as primitive' into the 'Adivasi as modern'.

The Naxalites have been present in and around Markakasa since the early 1990s and visit the village periodically, though there have been no general meetings held for a number of years. I had the opportunity to meet local Naxalites but declined to do so because I would have had tremendous problems with the police had they found out. Thus the analysis which follows is based on Markakasa people's impressions of the Naxalites they encountered.

Naxalites were seen as Adivasi people and in turn Adivasi people were regarded as their most fervent supporters. In Markakasa, small squads would regularly visit a number of Gond houses and ask for food or shelter, and enquire about goings-on in the village. When the names of captured or killed Naxalites appeared in newspapers, there would be considerable commentary that the insurgents always seemed to have Gond surnames. Their close identification with Gond-ness was often highlighted through language. Markakasa people said that the Naxalites spoke 'pure Gondi' and would not readily switch to other languages. They asked Adivasi people to speak Gondi to their children in order to protect their *sanskruti* (culture) from others. When they visited villages, all the songs they sung at the beginning and end of meetings were in Gondi.[6] While their Gond-ness was stressed, the Naxalites also seemed comfortable in the milieu of modernity. They were credited with having special telephones which they carried around in the forest and which they used to communicate with one another. On their feet they wore special boots which helped them run silently through the forest to avoid detection by the police. According to Markakasa people, their leaders were well-educated men who spoke English and had gone abroad. This interface between modernity and the Adivasi was well expressed in an Indian film that was fairly popular in the village while I was there.

Laal Salaam (Red Salute) tells the story of a Gond man who hails from a small village in an Adivasi area[7]. He becomes one of the first fully qualified medical doctors in the state and is doing rather well for himself. One day he hears of an atrocity perpetrated by police and forest officials on people in his home village and when he returns to investigate becomes the subject of violence himself. Outraged and angry he joins the Naxalites and begins to wreak revenge on those who abused him and his fellow villagers. What is interesting is that this man had been the epitome of modern India for Markakasa people: being a Gond he had nevertheless become a doctor, a position he had given up to enlist with the Naxalites. Though characterised by Gond-ness, the Naxalite movement in the film is presented to village viewers as profoundly modern.

The relationship between modernity, Naxalites and the idea of the Adivasi also becomes apparent in the treatment of gender relations. Naxalite women were often described by Markakasa villagers as taking leading roles in meetings, and they were often the perpetrators of violence (against men). A Markakasa man recounted to me how he was walking down one of the village lanes in the middle of the day and out of nowhere a bicycle came hurtling towards him and almost knocked him over. He shouted insults at the woman who was riding the cycle. The woman just looked at him and rode off. He recognised her as a Naxalite that he had seen several weeks earlier as he was walking through the forest, and for the next few days he was terrified that she would come back with the others and beat him up. When I asked people about why women became Naxalites, one of the most common answers I received was that the women who joined were Gonds, and Gond women were strong and unafraid of men. This perceived strength and independence are paradoxically a source of shame, which has led to the abandonment of the ritual of panbuddi, (discussed further in Chapter Four). Panbuddi expresses the idea that women (and men) do have choice in matters of sex and love, an attitude which is regarded by Markakasa Gonds as 'looking bad' in front of other castes who do not share that view. The ritual is seen as a component of Gond-ness that enables other castes to regard them as backward or primitive or lacking proper culture. The fact that Gond women are seen to participate in the Naxalite movement then perhaps reconfigures this attitude. Instead of the association of Gond-ness or Adivasi-ness with 'backward', the modernity of the Naxalite movement lends an aura of modernity to a view of gender relations and sexuality otherwise seen as paradigmatically primitive, shameful and 'other'.

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[6] Nandini Sundar (2006b) on Salwa Judum and Bastar – promotion of Gondi by Naxalites.

[7] The filming was actually carried out in neighbouring Gadchiroli district.

Discussing conversion

A focus on religious experience to understand both social change and changes in sociality, leads one naturally to an examination of religious conversion in India and elsewhere. It is striking that conversion within Hinduism (from non-sectarian to sectarian, or from one sect to another) has received far less attention[8] than conversion from Hinduism to Christianity (e.g. Eaton 1997; Viswanathan 1998; Clarke 2003), or to Buddhism (e.g. Burra 1996; Fitzgerald 1997). Yet as the discussion in Chapters Five and Six demonstrate, becoming a different kind of Hindu has profound implications for self and society too.

The anthropological literature on conversion is vast and it is not possible to review it all here. Rather, I want to discuss the ways in which the material I present on religious transformation may be usefully examined in the context of some current anthropological thinking on conversion.[9] There appear to be three sets of issues.

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[8] Though see Sharma (1977), Dube & Chatterjee Dube (2003), Hardiman (2003), and Sarkar (1999).

Firstly, as others have noted (e.g. Hefner 1993: 20-25; Robbins 2004: 84-87), theories of conversion tend to fall into one of two broad camps: the so-called 'utilitarian' approach and the 'intellectualist' approach. The former tends to emphasise the social benefit, whether material or moral, of converting to a new religion (e.g. Laitlin 1986; Peel 1977). The latter instead tends to see conversion as an attempt at meaning-making on the part of persons or communities faced with changed social and cultural circumstances (e.g. Horton 1971).

Secondly, there is a debate in the literature between those scholars who wish to highlight the discontinuities produced by conversion – and thus the radical nature of the religious transformation for self and society – (e.g. Meyer 1998; Robbins 2003; Engelke 2004; Keller 2005) and those who rather emphasise the essential continuities in society and culture despite the fact of changed religious affiliation (e.g. Sundkler 1961). As Robbins points out, this emphasis on continuity naturally lends itself to the utilitarian approach: since religious affiliation is changed for reasons of gain, people who convert "...rarely come to understand that world religion as anything more than a means to locally defined worldly ends" (2004: 85). Robbins notes that anthropologists can claim therefore that so-called 'traditional religion' survives despite the appearance of a world religion such as Christianity (ibid.).

Thirdly, there is a divergence among scholars between those who direct their analysis to the act of conversion itself, and those that focus on why people stay committed to a particular religion once they have converted (e.g. Keller 2005). This latter approach recognises that what makes people join a particular religion may be quite different from what makes them stay affiliated. In his study of the conversion to Christianity of the

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[9] Anthropologists studying conversion in India, whether from Hinduism to Christianity or from 'little tradition' Hinduism to 'great tradition' sectarian Hinduism would stand to benefit from paying attention to these wider debates in the anthropological corpus. The recent collection by Robinson and Clarke (2003) for instance makes little reference to this wider literature.

Urapmin of Papua New Guinea, Robbins (2004) attempts a synthesis of these two periods in the life of converts. He suggests a two-stage model of conversion, one in which utilitarian concerns give way over time to intellectualist ones as people begin to understand the religion that they convert to (ibid: 87).

These debates have a number of resonances with the sort of religious transformation I describe in the thesis. As I show in Chapters Five and Six, joining the Mahanubhav sect produces profound discontinuities in social life: becoming an adherent of the sect is not only the consequence of social change but is truly transformative, changing society (and notions of society) in return. The kinds of practices demanded of sect members are markedly different from the observances of non-sectarian village Hindus and are tremendously disruptive of kinship and other relations. New conceptions of sociality and personhood, which are supported by the practices and doctrines of the sect, come to be important. And yet, new adherents do not talk of their 'conversion' (*dharma suikarna*) as a 'complete break with the past', as the Ghanaian Pentecostal Christians in Birgit Meyer's (1998) study do. Rather, while accepting that they have become different people, Mahanubhav devotees still see themselves as full members of their caste group and work hard to be recognised as such. Similarly, while kinship relations are transformed in some areas (such as in the worship of household gods and sharing a kitchen), they remain unchanged in others (such as the pooling of household labour).

When we turn to look at motives for conversion we can discern elements of both the 'utilitarian' and 'intellectualist' approaches. All the Mahanubhav adherents I spoke to had joined the sect for a definite and unambiguous purpose: to help cure an intractable illness caused by witchcraft or magic. But also evident was a clear sense of an 'intellectualist' motivation: that the incurability of the illness led to a loss of ability to make meaning and gain personal satisfaction from the range of actions (from medical doctors to sorcerers) one would ordinarily have pursued. In my analysis in Chapter Four, this loss of meaning-making is in part a consequence of state policies, both in the colonial past and the post-colonial present, such as increased police (and thus state) activity because of the decade-old Maoist insurgency, and effective implementation of legislation designed to protect the integrity of Adivasi landholdings. As I discussed above, these state policies are motivated in part by the consideration that Adivasi people and the areas in which they live are more 'backward' (and thus in need of more attention) than the rest of India.

Finally, like Robbins and others, I found that the reasons why Markakasa people stayed committed to the Mahanubhav sect needed to be examined in addition to the circumstances relating to the initial conversion. This is what I emphasise in Chapter Six in my discussion of the practice of vegetarianism as a consequence of membership of the sect. Whereas Keller (2005) sees a significant difference and discontinuity in motivation between the point of conversion and afterwards for Malagasy Seventh-Day Adventists, I show that the desire to be protected from further attacks of magic and witchcraft is what produces a commitment to the sect in the long term, too. But this is not all that is going on. Practices and attitudes promoted by membership of the sect become part of a local imagination of an 'improved' and 'modern' society, resonating too with the message of various Hindu nationalist actors in the area. Thus, the realisation that membership of the sect leads one to become a 'good Hindu' makes one's commitment to its practices and doctrines all the stronger.

How can we begin to examine ethnographically the questions of motivation for religious change, and the reasons why people remain committed to new religious practices and doctrines? One way would be to use as a tool a focus on the bodily experience of those who join the sect.

Experience and embodiment as method

The body is the key way in which Markakasa people experience and talk about mystical attack, healing and protection. First, the malicious attentions of others, whether they are sorcerers or witches, are generally felt bodily, ranging from the merely irritating to the catastrophic: headaches, exhaustion, blackouts, nightmares, temporary paralysis, madness, death. Then, a cure is sought at a Mahanubhav sect temple, where the body of the sufferer is subject to new disciplines of prayer, time, diet and space. On joining the sect and returning to one's village, these new bodily practices of diet and worship learnt at the temple have to be observed in order that the devotee can continue to be protected. It is appropriate then to approach the question of religiosity and its social consequences in terms of anthropological thinking on embodiment, and the way in which the classic mind/body dualism is collapsed. This method provides an alternative perspective on the reasons why religious change in the form of membership of a religious sect is attractive.

There has been a growth in anthropological thinking about the place of embodiment and experience in the analysis of culture and society (see Connerton 1989; Csordas 1999, 1994, 1999; Strathern 1996). Though we might see this new focus as part of a Western theoretical preoccupation brought about by the increasing instability of the category of the body in Euro-America, the role of the body in social life has a long history in the anthropological corpus as Hertz's (1960) analysis of the right hand and Mauss's (1934 [1979]) famous essay on the techniques of the body amply demonstrate. Recent approaches have, however, emphasised the notion of the 'mindful body', a body which plays an important part in perception and thought. Contrary to certain Foucauldian analyses, they recognise that the body is not only the outcome of social processes but, through experience and emotion and a process of embodiment, is the site of meaningful social production itself. These theories find a natural ally in phenomenology and, taking their cue from Merleau-Ponty (1989), attempt to explain the life worlds of social actors through a focus on experience. In this way, social actors emerge as agents of change. Religious transformation, for example, is not only individually meaningful but also socially transformative. By looking at the bodily and experiential imperatives that lie behind certain practices, a reinterpretation or refinement of existing work on the relationship between religion and politics can be proposed.

In his analysis of the Devi movement in southern Gujarat in the early twentieth century, Hardiman (1987) argues that the Devi was essentially a way in which Adivasis could compete in the struggle over power. It did this by selecting those practices (such as vegetarianism and teetotalism) which were dominant as representative of a powerful strand of pious Gujarati being, and which enabled Adivasis to contest local Parsi oppression (ibid: 164). Similarly he suggests that Adivasis converted to Christianity in north-eastern India because of the desire to emulate and appropriate the power of the Christian colonial authority there. His analysis, however, fails to consider why such practices might be meaningful at an existential and experiential level removed from the question of local politics. One could suggest a functionalist refinement of Hardiman's position: people are not necessarily drawn to practices in themselves but invest them with meaning because of the reasons they come to practice them. Thus, Mahanubhav sect members in Markakasa see the practices of vegetarianism, teetotalism and daily worship as meaningful because they are part of a package of measures that protects them from harm. The experience of pain and suffering, and the transformation to happiness and safety one effects through membership of the sect, produces a commitment to these practices and the desire never to suffer in the same way again. The importance of such an approach is that we can observe the reinterpretation of dominant values by people who join the sect for functional ends.

This thesis is written in the traditional anthropological fashion of breaking down barriers between concepts other disciplines tend to treat discretely, and aims to show how domains of social life such as 'religion' and 'politics' are intimately connected. The orientations I have outlined above set the scene for the ethnography which follows in the main body of the thesis, and I will return to them in the Conclusion.

The experience of fieldwork

I conducted fieldwork in Markakasa for approximately eighteen months between November 2002 and June 2004, and again for a month in April 2005. I had been to India several times during my childhood but my experiences had largely been limited to urban India. I decided to conduct fieldwork in Maharashtra, the part of India from where my family hails, largely because it was a state that has a substantial Adivasi population, particularly in its eastern districts, and also because I was already fairly familiar with the Marathi language.[10]

My main criteria in determining a fieldsite were the presence of VVKA activists and a mixed Adivasi/non-Adivasi population. On my arrival in India in October 2002, I lived in Nagpur, the main city in eastern Maharashtra and stayed with my maternal uncle (*mama*) and aunt (*mami*). After talking to friends of my Mama who knew the area well, and consulting the Census for population information, I decided that a village in Tahsil Deori of District Gondia would be a good place to do fieldwork. I learnt that not only did Hindu nationalist activists in the form of the VVKA have a presence in the area but the mix of people was also unusual: Chhattisgarhi migrants had settled the land alongside Marathi and Gond people.

It was through contact with the Vidarbha Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram (VVKA) that I was able to settle on a fieldsite. I presented myself at their office in Nagpur and asked if I could meet one of their workers in the southern tahsils of Gondia district. He asked me several questions, including the name of my Mama, and after getting permission from the director of the Ashram wrote me a letter of introduction to a schoolteacher and VVKA worker called Mr. Anjankar.

I went to see Anjankar at his house in a small lane where several other teachers lived. As often happens on these occasions, he was not at home and I waited in his living room while his wife found a village boy to go and fetch him from school. He did not take long to arrive and I explained why I had come to see him. I mentioned the names of villages which from the Census and their location seemed suitable, and he offered to take me on a tour of them. He said that he was friends with a man in Markakasa (one of the villages on my list) who could probably rent me a room in his house. We jumped onto his motorbike and set off. After about twenty minutes of winding roads through the forest we came to Markakasa and parked the bike in front of a large house. Anjankar explained to Brijlal who I was and why I was there and he agreed to take me in. He had had many people stay with him in the past he told me, mostly teachers posted to the village school: his was a good house, and I would have no problems living there.

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[10] Though this turned out to be less useful than I thought because of the range of different languages spoken in Markakasa.

I used the VVKA to find a fieldsite in order to allay their fears about my intentions: I thought that since I had arrived in the village through their introductions I was less likely to face problems from local activists. My reasoning was not entirely sound, as I realised when I was interrogated, around a month after my arrival by visiting higher-ups to the area, about my work and reasons for choosing to do it in this area of the country. The Sangh regarded this part of the district as 'sensitive', since Christian missionaries had worked hard to convert parts of the population but had largely been unsuccessful and the Sangh was anxious to keep it that way. They were concerned that my research would in some way be used to help the Christians discover why they were meeting with such little success. The fact that I am a Maharashtrian Brahmin[11] partly allayed their fears, and I was bluntly told that had I been a European the Sangh would not have permitted me to continue fieldwork in the area. Nevertheless, the men I met were deeply suspicious of my supervisors, who in their eyes were in all probability Christians who had sent me to India as their unwitting pawn.

As is the case with most fieldworkers, some villagers were rather suspicious of my presence too. The timing and manner in which I arrived in the village may have not been entirely propitious. After I had made my initial visit to Markakasa with Anjankar, I told my landlord Brijlal that I would return in a couple of weeks with my belongings. Meanwhile, a friend who was travelling in India came to Nagpur and I suggested she accompany me to the village and spend a night there. We arrived at Markakasa, dumped our luggage in my room and then set off on a walk around the village. We decided to go around the perimeter, walked through a patch of forest and emerged on the other side of the village. The lanes were deserted. I later learnt that some of the villagers had seen us walk out of the forest, remarked that my friend was wearing green combat trousers and concluded that we were Maoist fighters and rushed into their homes: the insurgents had called for a three-day *bandh* in the area, which meant that villagers could not work in their fields, and we were assumed to be to checking that the order was being observed.

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[11] Many members of my extended family in India are active or were at some time involved in the RSS and its affiliates. The closeness of my family's association with the Hindu nationalist movement was brought home to me by my discovery of my maternal grandfather's photograph album where I found old pictures of V. D. (Veer) Savarkar, the principal ideologue of Hindutva, attending family gatherings and birthday parties. I did not explain all this to the Sangh people I met.

Some of the older men, on learning that I was from England, became concerned that I was working for the British, attempting to resurrect the Raj using their village as a base. My identity never seemed clear to them and was a source of much confusion. I am British of Indian origin, having never lived in India before and from a Maharashtrian Brahmin family. I assumed that when I replied to questions of my caste status I would cease to be viewed as a complete foreigner. But it was clear that people could not conceive of a world without caste and assumed that all people wherever they lived had it. Paradoxically then the fact of being a Brahmin did not naturally mark me as an Indian or a Hindu. Bizarrely, for me, I was often asked if I was a Christian. My woeful language abilities must have made me appear even stranger. Suspicions quickly abated after my Mami's first visit to Markakasa a couple of months into my fieldwork. She was an instant hit, and, coming from a farming family herself had plenty of appropriate and interesting questions to ask the villagers. From then on, I was seen as less strange, as having a connection to India that the villagers understood better. Mami visited several times after that and when my cousin got married in Nagpur, Brijlal and my ritual friend Ganeshyam (see Chapter Three) were invited to the wedding. Ganeshyam in turn telephoned Mama and Mami to invite them to his wedding in Markakasa in May 2006. On the part of Markakasa people, my Mama and Mami represent a link to me even though I have now left the village. They know they can contact them and have a message passed onto me.

I found the combination of novelty and familiarity disorienting at first. I did not ask questions about the meaning of *puja* (worship) or why people ate only with their right hands: these were questions I had asked and had had answered throughout my own life. Asking questions such as these would have been as ridiculous as asking what feet were for. But I quickly realised that my lack of questioning on issues that I thought I already knew the answer to would prejudice my data more than necessary. So I swallowed my pride and started acting dumb.

I quickly settled into the rhythms of village life. As I mentioned above, I rented a room in Brijlal's house and he provided me with meals and his wife washed my clothes. His household consisted of his wife and their two young sons; sharing the same courtyard and entrance was the house of his brother-in-law and elder sister and their three children. It was winter when I arrived, and for most people the main agricultural season was already over and the grain bins were full of newly harvested rice. December was a perfect time to begin fieldwork: the weather was temperate; people were mostly idle or occupied in light tasks and so more willing to talk; and the cool mornings and evenings meant that there was a reluctance to move away from the fire around which one sat and chatted. Brijlal's was a lively house and there were always people dropping by to exchange gossip and news. It is placed somewhat outside the main settlement of the village and beside a path which leads to the school, the village council (*gram panchayat*) building and the fields beyond. To the front of the house is a large open space (*maidan*), which leads down to a small lake circled by mango trees where people bathed and washed their clothes. People liked coming to his house because from the veranda one could watch the world go by and enjoy the cool breeze in summer, away from the stifling heat and still air of the main village (*basti*). I was fortunate that Brijlal is the sort of man who likes collecting people; he took me under his wing and I quickly got to know a wide range of villagers.

I restricted most of my research to Markakasa and did not conduct any significant amount of fieldwork in any other place. In many senses however, the fieldwork was multi-sited since I often accompanied villagers on trips to other places. Much of the fieldwork was conducted relatively informally. I spent the first six months trying to identify what seemed to be important issues for people themselves and building relationships with Markakasa's inhabitants. My first task was to make a plan of the village and I recruited a village youth who was recovering from a bout of malaria to take me on a walking tour, making sure I included every house. I showed this to my landlord who over several evenings patiently gave me the name of every head of household in the village and their caste. In those first few months I also collected the bulk of the thirty genealogies of village families. They were invaluable, not only in determining how people in the village were related, but also as tools for eliciting narratives of in-migration to Markakasa, life-histories and marriage patterns. Sometime further into my fieldwork, I consulted the land register held by the village accountant (*talathi*; *patwari*) and recorded ownership of land by household. In my final two months I conducted an extensive household survey recording education, land ownership (including how and when the land was acquired), rice production, income, debt, migration, marriage age, location of wedding, rate of brideprice, incidence of divorce and ritual friendship. Apart from these fairly structured forms of research, the majority of my time was spent visiting people in their homes, accompanying them to the fields and forest and talking to people I found at gathering places in the village such as the tea and paan stalls and the shop.

My research was conducted in a mixture of languages. As I explain in greater detail in the following chapter, four languages were spoken in Markakasa on a daily basis: Chhattisgarhi, Gondi, Marathi and Hindi. Of these, I had reasonable fluency in Marathi when I first arrived in the village. Though the village is located in Maharashtra state, Marathi is certainly not the most common language spoken there, the lingua franca being Chhattisgarhi, a dialect of Hindi. At first all my conversations were carried out in Marathi, and though my proficiency in that language increased greatly I was restricted in the range of people I could speak to: most people understood Marathi but they were unable to conduct detailed conversations in it, feeling more comfortable in Chhattisgarhi. I picked up the latter fairly quickly and began to talk a strange mixture of Marathi and Chhattisgarhi. I only ever had a basic knowledge of Gondi, a Dravidian language spoken mainly by Gonds, and certainly could not follow detailed conversations.[12]

Outline of chapters

Chapter Two introduces the village of Markakasa where I carried out fieldwork and provides a brief sociology of caste, livelihoods, space and religious affiliation.

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[12] Gondi was sometimes used in conversations specifically to hide what was being said from me.

Chapter Three begins a discussion of relations between villagers by looking in detail at how and why people form ritual friendships with one another and introduces the importance of witchcraft. It argues that ritual friendship is a way of extending sociality beyond one's immediate household in a manner that is safe and free from the risk of magical attack or witchcraft. In this respect it is contrasted with relations between agnatic kin and brothers in particular, relationships which are seen as particularly prone to malicious spiritual attack. What is emphasised in the comparison is the essentially disinterested nature of ritual friendship contrasting with the interested relationship of brotherhood. The existence of cross-caste ritual friendship also reminds us that locality-based forms of belonging are important in qualifying the difference implied by caste, by the recognition of similarity between ritual friends.

Witchcraft and sorcery are important phenomena among the people of Markakasa. Chapter Four looks at witchcraft in more detail, but in contrast to much of the work on witchcraft in India, which focus largely on witchcraft accusations, I examine here the impediments that have developed over the past fifty years to dealing publicly with this sort of mystical attack, both for individuals and for the village as a whole. I suggest these impediments have developed in this part of Adivasi central India for the following reasons. Firstly, migration to another village in an attempt to escape witchcraft or unexplained misfortune has become more difficult, partly as a result of changes in legislation, which have reduced the supply of alienable land in Adivasi areas. Thus, whereas in earlier times people could have 'solved' the problem of malicious attack by migrating, nowadays, short of moving permanently to the city, which is generally seen as undesirable, people who suffer such attacks cannot seriously consider escaping. Secondly, earlier waves of migration to the area have changed the villagers' perception of the nature of their community: from being a village of one type of people, it has become a 'mixed village' (*panchrangi gaon*) with different castes, languages, and ways of doing things. This has meant that there is a lack of consensus as to the value or effectiveness of certain village-wide anti-witchcraft measures, such as the clan-god *Angadev*, that could have been employed in the past. Similarly, on an individual level, due to differences concerning ideas about sex and marriage, testing potential wives and daughters-in-law for witchcraft has become less desirable as Adivasis try to avoid "looking bad" in front of other castes. Thirdly, the increased engagement of the state in the area, and in particular of the police, as a result of the Maoist insurgency, has made dealing with suspected witches more problematic. The police bring with them an alternative vision of Indian modernity, one which has no space for what they regard as anachronistic and superstitious practices such as witch-testing and ghost-finding. This has come to be expressed in their opposition to the use of the *Angadev*, which to the police (and other local administrators) is symptomatic of the failure of Adivasis and the Adivasi 'community' to develop or improve, despite the wide range of government policies in place to ameliorate their condition.

The cumulative effect of these impediments has led to the increasing popularity of a particular Hindu religious sect, the Mahanubhav Panth, which has gained a reputation locally for healing people affected by malicious spiritual attack and for providing permanent protection. In Chapter Five I examine how people are healed through ritual at the sect's temple and the resulting transformation from suffering to happiness they undergo. I also demonstrate how membership of the sect affects one's relations with kin, neighbours and caste-fellows, particularly how there is an attempt to limit sociality (with both divinity and man), seen as the cause of much misfortune in the past. In addition, the increased incidence of religious meetings (*satsang*) in the area indicates that a clearer sense of sect belonging is being articulated. Pilgrimage back to the temple where one was cured is an important part of devotion but it also creates a sacred geography proper to Maharashtra and an engagement with its language, through which identification with the nation in religious terms is made. Widening the discussion somewhat I also look at how, within the past year, a couple of households have converted to Christianity for the same reasons as those that join the Mahanubhav sect: to cure intractable illness caused by witchcraft.

In Chapter Six I look at the consequences of sect membership in terms of changed dietary practice – namely vegetarianism and teetotalism – and how the power of the transformation from suffering to happiness makes these practices meaningful for sect members. I examine how it is a concern for protection from further harm which drives adherence to these practices rather than the conventional explanations of social mobility or Sanskritisation. But it is also clear that these practices become part of a more general way of thinking about 'wild' (*jangli*) and 'improved' (*sudhārlela*) which finds resonance not only with local VVKA activities to discourage meat-eating and drinking, but also with the sermons of *sādhus* or 'world-renouncers' associated with the Hindu nationalists who visit the area from time to time. I suggest that the message of these politico-religious Hindu nationalisms is appealing to those who have embraced the practices advocated for different reasons.

Plate 1: A view of Markakasa. Note the blue Gond tombs.

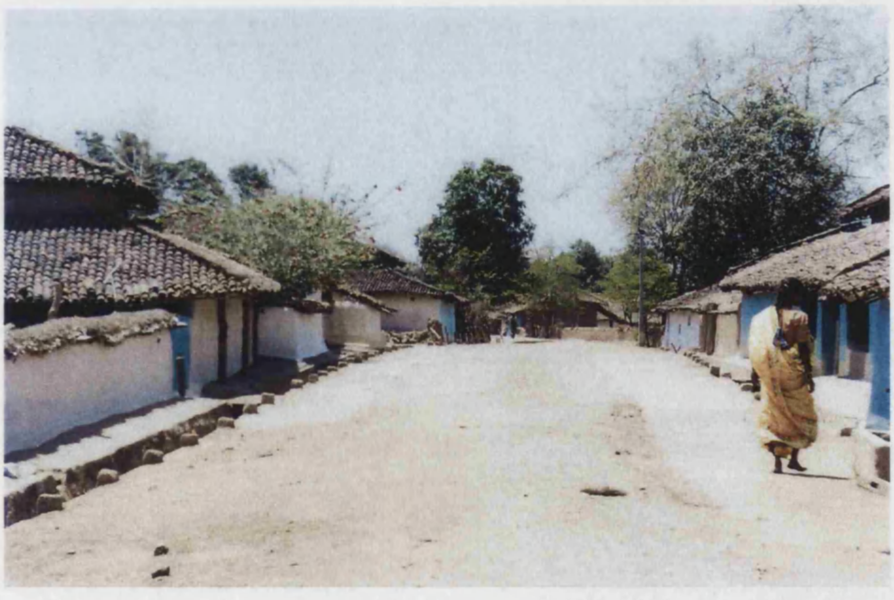

Plate 2: A village street. The road was widened and rebuilt by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO).

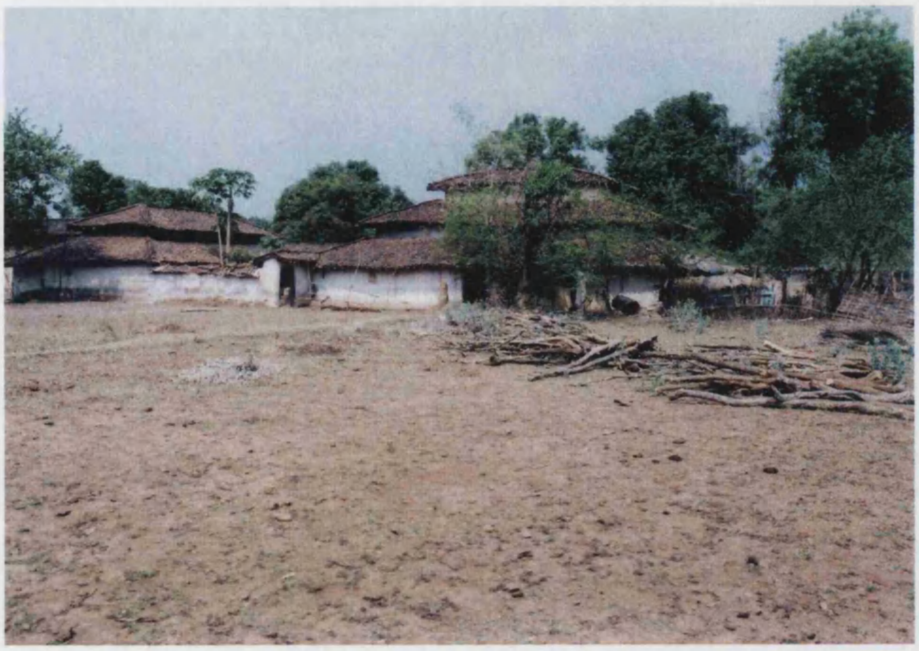

Plate 3: A large Markakasa house, home to three households. The upper floors are used to store grain.

Plate 4: A village street.

Chapter Two

The Setting

As one drives east on the road to Calcutta from Nagpur, central India's largest city and winter capital of the state of Maharashtra, the busy plains watered by the Wainganga River give way after the small town of Sakoli to more hilly terrain, and the air cools slightly as the forest cover increases. Signs appear on the roadside asking drivers to be careful as the highway rises and curves round and falls. The tall hills of the Navegaon National Park loom in the distance. Spied from the road, blue tombs topped with small statues of horses begin to appear in the fields and groves and one knows one has entered Gond country. After two sets of hills, one turns off the national highway at the small town of Deori and heads forty kilometres south to the village of Chichgarh nestled on a plateau surrounded by dense forest. Following the road which skirts the village, one passes a Ram temple on a hill before plunging back into the forest. One emerges into a landscape of rice fields, the forest having receded to the north, and Markakasa announces itself with a set of three blue tombs by the side of a lake surrounded by mango trees.

Markakasa is a small settlement in central India at the eastern fringes of the state of Maharashtra, in the borderlands with the new state of Chhattisgarh. Located in Gondia District, the official administrative village (*gram*) is actually composed of two hamlets (*tola*), Markakasa and Herpar, though in local imagination they are regarded as two separate villages (*gaon*). The former is much larger, and this is where I lived and did fieldwork. Markakasa is surrounded on one side by forest and on the other by paddy fields, and has a population of 626 evenly split between the sexes and distributed among 122 households. Approximately 120 of its inhabitants are below the age of sixteen. *Gram* (administrative villages) in this area tend to be small, having populations of no more than eight hundred, and many are composed of several hamlets (*tola*), often regarded as villages (*gaon*) in their own right. Distances between one village (*gaon*) and the next are not great, three or four kilometres at the most. The area is overwhelmingly rural; the nearest town is Deori, the site of the sub-district administration, which has a population of 10,000 and is forty kilometres away.

In colonial times, Markakasa was part of the Chichgarh *zamindari* (estate) in Bhandara District[13] in the Central Provinces. The District Gazetteer of 1908 describes the area thus:

> "This estate is situated in the south east corner of the Sakoli tahsil bordering on the Nandgaon State and the Chanda District. Its area is 240 sq. miles, a large proportion of which consists of unculturable [sic] hill country covered by forest" (Russell 1908: 196-7).

The village of Chichgarh itself had a population of about 500 in 1908 and the area surrounding it was one of least attractive in the district due to the density of the forest. Revenue was comparatively low. As the Gazetteer continues,

> "the worst country is that around Kaoliwara, Nishani and Mahsuli and again between Rajoli and Chichgarh; this consists almost entirely of hill and forest" (ibid: 225).

The *zamindari* was held by a family of the Halbi[14] caste who had received their *sansad* (grant) from the Gond kings of Chanda. The family still lives in the area, in a village outside Chichgarh. Heavily indebted after having mortgaged much of his land, the scion has political aspirations and has campaigned for several years to be allowed to contest the Maharashtra Assembly seat for the Congress Party. In colonial times, the administration of the *zamindari* was regulated by the *Wajib-ul-arz* or Record of Rights which stipulated that there was to be a manager (*diwan*) for the estate. This Diwan was hereditary and the post occupied by a Marathi Kunbi family. The descendants of the Diwan live and hold land in the neighbouring village of Kedanar. The Zamindar, who was referred to as the

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[13] Bhandara District was split into two in 1999 – the easternmost portion became the new Gondia District.

[14] A caste categorized as a Scheduled Tribe. There are very few members of the Halbi caste in the area.

Raja by Markakasa people, was permitted to take free labour (*begar*) of "four days work in the year from each plough with ploughman and bullocks for his cultivation in the same village and of one days work of a man from each house for thatching his houses" (Russell 1908: 159).

The village was first settled by a man called Burri, who left his natal village in what is now Chhattisgarh, and Burri's descendants became the Thakurs (hereditary headmen) of Markakasa. The current Thakur, Drukh Singh, was born in 1936, and Burri is his great-great-grandfather (FFFF). Markakasa was most likely founded by Burri between 1860 and 1880. It seems that for many years the village remained small, consisting of no more than two or three households at the edge of dense forest. Over the past sixty years however, the village has grown rather dramatically, with many migrants arriving and buying up farmland. Migration has slowed of late, partly because of the enactment of a law in 1974 restricting the alienation of Adivasi-owned land.

Markakasa has two parallel modes of governance: the *gram panchayat* and the *sian panch*. The *gram panchayat* is the lowest tier of government and is a body consisting of seven members, each elected by one of the wards of the gram. It is headed by a *sarpanch* who as *primus inter pares* is invested with more authority and powers than the individual *panchayat* members. While I was living in Markakasa, the post of *sarpanch* was reserved for a Scheduled Tribe woman and occupied by a Gond widow from one of the more powerful families in the village. In the past the post of *sarpanch* has been reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs, former Untouchables), Other Backward Castes (OBCs) or left open. Some of the wards of the *gram* are also reserved (by caste and gender). These are reviewed every four years by the district election authorities, and the reservations rotated between the various categories of people. At the time of fieldwork, the *gram panchayat* consisted of five men (one Gaita Gond, one Mahar, one Dessau Gond, two Telis) and two women (one Gaita Gond, one Mahar). The *gram panchayat* is responsible for administering local government works projects, allocating communal land, collecting taxes and charges and recording births, deaths and marriages.

The *sian panch* ('council of elders')[15] is an informally composed body of village elders, though not all village 'elders' are actually old. Some men in their thirties and forties are regarded as *sian*. And some elderly men are not 'village *sian*' and do not attend these meetings. The *sian panch* organises village festivals and rituals, but its main function is resolving disputes of all kinds between villagers. It is a multi-caste body (both 'clean' and Untouchable) but its members have authority as individual men and not as representatives of their caste. Even if there is a dispute between members of a single caste (e.g. a husband and wife, or two brothers), a multi-caste *panch* will meet to interview the parties and facilitate a solution. As such, the *panch* is not dominated by any one caste, and two of the most respected *sian* are members of the Untouchable Mahar caste. The *panch* is acephalous: all members are equal and decisions are taken by consensus. The Thakur's presence (or that of one of his sons or brothers) is generally desirable, especially when arranging village rituals, but his word does not carry any more weight than that of the next man. The *panch* generally consists of men, but the village *sarpanch*, who was a woman at the time of fieldwork, was often asked to attend its meetings too.

In many respects these two bodies of village governance operate independently of each other. Though the *sarpanch* and certain *gram panchayat* members also attend *sian panch* meetings, they do so in their individual capacity as *sian* and they are not regarded as any more important than other *sian*. There seems to be a fairly strict separation of powers and domains. While both the *gram panchayat* and the *sian panch* employ villagers as assistants (*chaprasi*), their roles are clearly demarcated too. Thus, while the *gram panchayat chaprasi* draws a government salary and records the death of villagers, it is the *gaonti chaprasi*, paid in grain by his fellow villagers and directed by the *sian panch*, who is the town-crier informing the village of a funeral.

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[15] Linguistically, compare *sian* with the Latin *senex* (old man; elder) from which we derive Senate, *senatus* or 'Council of Elders'.

Plate 5: Village children playing kabbadi *in preparation for an inter-school tournament.*

Plate 6: A Gaita Gond sian.

Space, caste, and religious affiliation

Markakasa is a mixed village, a *panchrangi gaon* ('five-coloured village') in local parlance, and consists of twelve castes[16]. Most of the villages in the area do contain such a mixture of castes but in many, Gaita Gonds tend to be in an absolute majority. Markakasa is interesting in that respect because the three largest castes in the village (Gaita Gond, Teli, Mahar) have roughly the same strength in numbers (see figure 1). Though the Gond Rawat cannot marry Gaita Gond, in Markakasa they are co-opted at life-cycle events as members of that caste. The two Untouchable castes are the Mahar and Mochi.

Figure 1

Caste (Traditional Occupation)[17]	**Households**	**Language**	**Government Category**
Gaita Gond (farmers)	29	Gondi	Scheduled Tribe
Mahar	29	Marathi	Scheduled Caste
Teli (oil-pressers)	25	Chhattisgarhi	Other Backward Caste
Dessau Gond (farmers)	11	Chhattisgarhi	Scheduled Tribe
Rawat (cow herders)	9	Chhattisgarhi	Other Backward Caste
Sidar (farmers)	6	Chhattisgarhi	Scheduled Tribe
Mochi (cobblers)	4	Chhattisgarhi	Scheduled Caste

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[16] The sole member of the Rajput caste is not usually counted in this reckoning: she is seen as a temporary resident.

[17] According to Markakasa people.

Kevat (fishermen)	3	Chhattisgarhi	Nomadic Tribe
Gond-Rawat (cow herders)	2	Gondi	Scheduled Tribe
Lohar (blacksmith)	2	Chhattisgarhi	Other Backward Caste
Nai (barber)	1	Chhattisgarhi	Other Backward Caste
Rajput[18]	1	Marathi	Forward
Kallar (distiller)	1	Marathi	Other Backward Caste

There is currently no clear spatial division of the village by caste. All castes, Untouchable and clean, live mixed up and side-by-side and there are no parts of the village which are associated with any particular caste. This is unusual further to the east in plains Chhattisgarh but was a common feature of villages around Markakasa. It has not always been the case however, and though the village seems seamless to an untrained eye there are at least five different neighbourhoods (*para*). There is a part of the village which is still referred to as *mochi para* (the cobbler's quarter) and though it now has a mixed population of clean and Untouchable, there was a time about sixty years ago when the shoemakers and tanners would have lived separately from the rest of the village. The oldest part of the village is the area around the Thakur's house, *thakur para*, which only has two castes: overwhelmingly Gaita Gond along with the descendants of the *kotwal* (village watchman), the first Mahar to settle in the village. Even here Mahar houses are found among a cluster of Gond ones. As the village grows, however, residence along caste lines may be becoming more salient. Members of the Mahar caste for instance have built new houses in one particular area of the village, which is now called '*SC para*[19]'. But even this is in no way apart from the rest of village, and nor does it mean that other Mahars do not continue to live alongside 'clean' castes. Locality and proximity are important even within a village of six hundred people, and members of each *para* (regardless of caste) have strong senses of belonging and prejudices about the other *paras*[20].

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[18] This is the village kindergarten teacher (*anganwadi masterin*), who has lived in Markakasa for eleven years.

There is no clear hierarchy of castes in Markakasa and people of all castes only make a clean-Untouchable distinction. The dominant caste both in terms of numbers and land-holding is the Gaita subdivision of the Gonds, though it is not necessarily seen as the most pure or prestigious: Brahmins, for instance, used to refuse to perform rituals for them, while at the same time servicing the Teli caste[21]. Among the Untouchable castes, Mahars rank higher than Mochi. Among the clean castes, there is very little interest in ranking one caste higher or lower than another. Castes which straddle the boundary between clean and Untouchable are the service castes of Blacksmith (*lohar*) and Barber (*nai*).

There are no parts of the village public space which are off-limits to the Untouchable castes. All use the village teashops and wells, though this did not used to be the case. Even as recently as the late 1980s, Mahars and Mochi were handed water from the well and were not permitted to touch it. But people come and go from one another's houses without regard to caste and close friendships develop across the clean-Untouchable divide (see Chapter Three).

The ethnography presented in the chapters which follow is not of 'a people' (Gond people; Adivasi people) but of a village in an Adivasi area and of the people who live in it and identify themselves as 'Markakasa people.' Nevertheless, Markakasa is a village of many castes and caste is an important source of identity. What follows is a brief presentation of the three main castes in the village: Gaita Gond, Mahar, and Teli, and an exposition of changing religious affiliation.

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[19] 'SC' referring to Scheduled Castes, the administrative term for Untouchable castes.

[20] Froerer (2006b) makes the same point in her discussion of friendship among children in central India.

[21] This in any case has little effect in practice since Gaita Gonds never express the intention to employ Brahmins.

Gaita Gond[22]

As mentioned above, the Gaita Gond caste is the dominant caste in Markakasa in terms both of numbers and land-holding, a pattern which is repeated in the majority of villages in the area. From discussions with various Gaita Gonds, it seems that the areas in which they live in greatest concentration are southern Gondia District, northern Gadchiroli District, and Rajnandgaon and Kanker Districts in Chhattisgarh. Beyond these areas, I was told, one would encounter other types of Gond (Raj Gond, Maria Gond) with whom marriage was not desirable. Gaita Gonds claim Gondi as their 'mother-tongue' (*matrubasha*) and distinguish themselves from the other sub-caste of Gonds in the village – the Dessau Gond – by asserting that the latter's mother tongue is Chhattisgarhi. Though some of the Dessau denied that this is what made them different, they, unlike the Gaita, spoke Chhattisgarhi at home and their life-cycle rituals were more akin to those of other Chhattisgarhi castes than those of the Gaita. In addition, whereas the Dessau Gonds divide into four exogamous phratries, Gaita Gonds have only two - *saha dev* (six-god) and *sath dev* (seven-god). Their kinship world is thus fairly simple and is divided between *bhau* (brothers) and *sorye* (affines). Gaita Gond kinship terminology is almost identical to that collected by Simeran Gell for the Muria Gonds of Bastar (see Gell 1992: 43). No doubt influenced by the politics of reservations (positive discrimination), many Gaita Gonds like to claim that they are the 'real' or 'pure' Adivasis as opposed to the other Scheduled Tribe castes in the area.

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[22] Gond sub-castes have been the subject of various anthropological studies throughout the last century: e.g. A. Gell 1980, 1982, 1986, 1997; S. Gell 1992; Furer-Haimendorf 1948, 1979; Elwin 1943, 1947; Grigson 1938. I am not aware of any work done among the Gaita subcaste.

Mahar

The Mahars are the largest Untouchable caste in the village, and the most widespread in the region. Indeed they are found right across the state of Maharashtra and constitute over a third of the state's Untouchable population. Karve notes a Marathi saying, "*jithe gaon, tithe maharwada*", translated as "wherever there's a village, there are Mahars" (cited in Zelliot 1996: 87). Equivalent to the English proverb, "there's a black sheep in every flock", it expresses their ubiquity and extremely low social status within the local hierarchy.

In common with several other north Indian Untouchable castes, the Mahars' traditional role was that of village servant (*kotwal*)[23] who acted as watchman, messenger and, most importantly in the context of his untouchability, the removal and disposal of dead cattle. In return for these services the Mahar *kotwal* received an annual grant of grain and a small amount of land. In Markakasa, the first Mahar family to settle in the village became *kotwals* and they are still referred to as the "kotwal household" (*kotwal ghar*). They are one of the wealthiest families in the village, with fourteen acres of good quality land. After 1960, the *kotwal* ceased to be paid in grain and became a government employee drawing a salary. In 1985, the functions were taken over by the *gram chaprasi*, and the *kotwal* became the village land registrar's assistant.

The Mahars of Markakasa identify closely with India's most celebrated Untouchable leader, Bhimrao Ambedkar. Ambedkar was a Mahar, educated in India and overseas, who from the 1930s exhorted his caste-fellows to protest against their status. In contrast to Gandhi he argued that no reform of Hindu religion could eliminate Untouchability and in October 1956 in Nagpur he converted to Buddhism. Mahars in and around Markakasa followed suit a few years later. The conversion was talked about in terms of a changed religiosity as well as a more general change in a mode of life. For example, the traditional

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[23] While the same title is used in Chhattisgarh, it denotes a different office. In Maharashtra, the *kotwal* was and remains an assistant, nowadays to the village land registrar/accountant (*talathi, patwari*). In Chhattisgarh, the *kotwal* is an official with important local powers, akin to the position of *gram sevak* in Maharashtra.

Mahar occupation of goat-herding was abandoned following the conversion because Ambedkar asked Mahars not to pursue demeaning occupations. All Mahar homes in Markakasa contain images of Ambedkar and the Buddha and it is to these that worship is offered. All but three of the Mahar households in the village describe themselves as of the Buddhist religion (*bouddha dharma*): two households have converted to Christianity and one to the Mahanubhav sect.

The Mahar conversion to Buddhism has not changed their position as Untouchable in the village or local hierarchy, although, as mentioned above, their access to water and other facilities has changed. Nevertheless the conversion and association with Ambedkarite politics and social action has transformed the Mahars perception of the caste system and they rail against the unequal treatment they sometimes receive. While I was living in Markakasa, several village meetings were held at the instigation of the Mahars to discuss what they perceived as slights by the clean castes. The discussions focused on commensality, which I discuss a little later in the Chapter. Though in many respects the discrimination is blatant, there is not in Markakasa that extreme division between clean and Untouchable one finds in other parts of rural India.

Despite the poverty of most Mahars in the village, they are aware of the progress made by some of their caste-fellows, especially in the field of education. It has been estimated that, while they comprise only 35% of the Scheduled Caste population of Maharashtra, Mahars hold up to 60% of public sector jobs reserved for Untouchables (Deliege 1999: 197). This perceived success is commented on by both Mahars and people of other castes in the village. The first and only teacher produced by the village is a Mahar man (from an exceptionally poor household) and, though he does not now live in Markakasa, his name is mentioned frequently when discussing the relative success of the caste in taking up opportunities offered by the system of reservations. Similarly, the first girl in the village to pass her Standard XII[24] examinations (which happened in 2003) is a Mahar. Outsiders too provide examples of Mahars 'getting on': two of the four teachers at Markakasa Primary School are Mahars from other parts of Vidarbha.

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[24] Roughly equivalent to English A-levels.

Teli

The Telis in Markakasa are all Chhattisgarhi-speaking and most trace their origin to various villages in what is now Chhattisgarh. Though traditionally oil-pressers, they have all abandoned that occupation and now see themselves primarily as farmers. The first Teli family to move to the village came from the neighbouring hamlet of Herpar. They left following a series of thefts from their house which they attributed to a ghost (*bhut*) and so decided to set up home alongside the handful of Gond families in Markakasa. Sometime in the 1940s, a trio of Teli brothers arrived fleeing scarcity and poverty in the Chhattisgarh plains and, as they had no land, began making roof tiles which they sold in the larger and more prosperous villages of Chichgarh and Kakodi.[25] Their respective sons are now prominent Telis in the village.

The Teli caste is closely associated with the Kabir sect and the membership of the latter in the village is exclusively Teli. The three brothers and their families were the first to join the Kabir sect some sixty years ago, after they had moved to Markakasa. The reasons for this conversion were not clear and were rather contradictory: some talked about their forefathers' desire to become closer to God through giving up sin; others mentioned illness and the power of prayer to heal. One can only speculate. One reason might have been to differentiate themselves from their new Gond neighbours, whom they might have regarded as *jangli* (wild) and 'backward'. Certainly there was a considerable amount of tension.

People of all castes would tell me of a time about fifty years ago when the Telis and Mahars came into conflict with the Gonds over the performance of village rituals. This must have been at about the same time that both the Telis were beginning their involvement with the Kabir sect, and the Mahars had converted to Buddhism. The Telis and Mahars protested the use of animal sacrifice at collective rituals such as Sanjori[26], arguing that it was unnecessary and 'backward', and that the Gonds ought to 'improve' (*sudharna*).[27] The Gonds refused to accept their demands, and for a number of years only the Gonds performed collective village ritual. After several village meetings, involving people from other villages too, the villagers agreed to stop animal sacrifice in order to enable the participation of all. As we shall see in Chapter Six, there has been a return to animal sacrifice recently, perhaps as a result of the recognition by non-sectarian, non-Buddhist villagers that the search for unity of purpose, expressed through collective ritual, is no longer attainable given the diversity of religious affiliation.

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[25] Roof tiles began to be commonly used by Markakasa people themselves sometime in the mid 1980s. Up until then most houses were covered with grass. The scarcity of good grass in the forests around the village and the prestige associated with tiled roofs caused the shift, according to Markakasa people.

Markakasa is a village of multiple sectarian formations. The Kabir sect was the first sustained appearance of a different form of religiosity but was restricted in its appeal to the Teli population. The Mahars too formed a 'sect' of their own by becoming Buddhists, most no longer participating in certain village rituals. More recently, as this thesis will explore, significant numbers of people of all castes in Markakasa have joined the Mahanubhav sect, and they too have refused to participate in village ritual. In numerical terms, these three 'sects' taken together constitute nearly half the households in the village. That half the village is reluctant to take part in activities which are seen by the other half to promote the well-being of the village as a whole is matter of concern for this latter group. These problems of unity of purpose and attitude will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters Four, Five and Six.

Commensality and Untouchability

The brief exposition of some the main castes in the village naturally raises questions of commensality: who eats with whom, when and where? While one would expect to see a clean/ Untouchable caste distinction concerning this form of sociality, things are not really all that simple. Public and private events have different rules regarding eating together. It seems that an event classed as 'public' (*sarvajanik*) adheres to a strict equality between clean and Untouchables castes: no distinction is made and all sit together in an unbroken line (*pangat*). At an event which is 'individual' (*vekthigat*) and private, however, no rules of any kind apply; indeed it seems it is up to the man hosting the meal whether Untouchables are sat apart from clean castes or with them. Tensions have grown in Markakasa precisely because of this division of domains. There is disagreement between the Mahars and the other castes, in particular, over whether a village wedding can be considered a public or a private event.[28]

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[26] A ritual conducted before the threshing of the paddy can begin. There are heavy penalties for those who thresh before the ritual is performed.

[27] Of course, this is how the past was presented to me in the present. I have no way of knowing exactly what happened.

Let me provide some examples of *sarvajanik* and *vekthigat* situations to help illustrate the distinction. *Sarvajanik* (public) events include collective village rituals centred on the worship of the tutelary deity Thakurdev. At some rituals a meal of rice is cooked in the sacred grove and the attendant men of all castes, including Untouchable, eat the rice side-by-side. Similarly, the members of a multi-caste (again both clean and Untouchable castes) committee, which was organising the annual bullock-cart races, came to my landlord's house where they were served food and, again, all members sat together mixed up in an unbroken line.

Vekthigat (personal) events include gatherings at individual households. For instance, the wife of a Gond man died and he held a number of feasts in the days following the funeral. Most feasts were attended by large numbers of kin and caste-fellows. For the last feast however he invited only those villagers to whom he felt close. Among these was an old friend of his, a Mahar man, who sat amid the other men and ate with them. No distinction was made. As I examine in Chapter Three, affection somewhat mitigates caste and Untouchability. Likewise, a young Mahar man, Munya, who had worked in my landlord's fields to bring in the harvest alongside men of clean caste, was invited to the house to eat a special feast called *barona*. He too was seated in the middle of the group. Another time, Munya had come to the house and was chatting with us all and was asked to stay for dinner. As it was an ordinary dinner we all took our meal in the kitchen, including him. Since it is the place where food is prepared, the kitchen is generally seen as susceptible to pollution. Yet my landlord and his wife had no qualms about Munya's presence in this most sensitive of rooms. But nor did they regard him as 'clean': after Munya left, my landlady Champa did not wash his dish or his cup and Brijlal's unmarried niece was asked to do it instead. Whether Munya knew this would happen was difficult to determine and I certainly did not ask him for fear of offending him. What was clear was that Brijlal and Champa hid from Munya that he was being treated differently, and this in itself is relevant. It demonstrates that the practice of Untouchability is no longer really legitimate, even in this 'individual' sphere. If one invites an Untouchable to eat with one, one cannot ask him to sit apart.

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[28] In common with the general Indian ethnography, women seem to be less catholic in their dining partners than men, and so their definitions of what is a public and what is a private event are in some respects different to those of men.

The series of disputes between the Untouchables (principally Mahars) and the 'clean' castes concerned the issue of village weddings: were they *sarvajanik* or *vekthigat* events?

The tensions flared up at a Gond wedding in April 2003. It was a double wedding: brother and sister were getting married at the same time in order to save money. As a result, there were more guests than usual, with both sets of new affines (in addition to their guests) present.[29] The Mahars, who would have normally eaten at the wedding feast, were told that there was not enough food for everyone and that they would have to be content with a small amount of uncooked rice (*chawal*). The Mahars were furious. They held a meeting and promptly returned the rice, something which had never happened before. The Mahars I spoke to ridiculed the notion that there was not enough food to go around and said that the only reason they were not welcome to eat was because the Gonds regarded them as *achhut* (untouchable). Keeping the rice would have compounded the insult. Relations between the two sides worsened, with the Mahars saying that they would not now attend any Gond weddings, nor accept rice from them. After talking to some Gonds, it became clear that the Mahars were right: the reason given of scarcity was just a cover. The Gonds were uneasy about the prospect of the Mahars attending the wedding feast because instead of sitting and eating separately, they feared the Mahars would

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[29] Gaita Gond weddings take place virilocally or uxorilocally: both are equally acceptable and there is no particular prestige associated with uxorilocal marriage. Among other castes in Markakasa the rule is clear: the groom travels to the bride's village to be married in her house.

“come and sit in the middle with everyone else”. “How would that look to our guests from other villages?” the Thakur asked me. He told me that their behaviour had changed: in the past they knew their place. But he also repeated the initial assertion that there were now too many mouths and the custom of feeding the whole village was becoming financially impossible. When he was a boy (he is in his late sixties), there were only four or five Mahar households, so feeding them was no problem at all. Now there are thirty, he commented. The Thakur and others also mentioned a perceived lack of reciprocity as another factor which affected the way they saw the issue. They complained that, though Mahars eat at Gond weddings, Gonds cannot eat at Mahar ones. The Thakur gave the example of the recent wedding of Vijay, a Mahar man. Vijay’s family had not made separate dining arrangements for Gonds and others, so people found it impossible to attend. From the Mahar point of view, Vijay and his family were unwilling to accommodate an attitude they find deeply offensive.

The tensions rumbled on throughout the summer wedding season. Mahars were generally not invited to Gond or Teli weddings, and matters deteriorated further when the Mahars threatened to withhold contributions to the agricultural ritual of *bāli* conducted before the new rice of the year can be eaten. A large village meeting was held at the end of September to discuss the problems between the Mahars and the ‘clean’ castes and to attempt to resolve them. A senior Mahar man, Asaram, began the proceedings. He explained to the other castes that the Mahars had noticed a change in attitude towards them over the past year: they were no longer invited to communal feasts and generally felt excluded by the Gond and Teli communities. “When people claim that there is not enough food to go around why does that only apply to the Mahars?” he asked them. “If a Teli household has enough food to feed the Gond caste, why does it not have enough food to feed the Mahars?” He complained openly about the ‘special treatment’ meted out to the Mahar community. They felt excluded, he said, and their only course of action was to withhold their contribution to village ritual. By expressing themselves thus, the Mahars were clearly stating their opinion that it was the right of every villager to attend a village wedding: it was a *sarvajanik* event and they ought not to be excluded from it. And the implication, which everyone understood, was that if they attended a public event such as a wedding they would not tolerate being seated apart from the others.

The response of the 'clean' castes to this speech was mixed. Some people reiterated the view that the Mahars were not being reciprocal themselves: they were demanding to eat at Gond and Teli weddings but were not asking Gonds and Telis to eat at theirs. Others were angry that the Mahars could even consider withholding their contributions to village events in such a brazen fashion and suggested that all exchange (*len-den*) with the Mahars ought to cease. One *sian*, a Teli man, suggested the following compromise: that in cases where the household was poor it should only invite members of its own caste to the wedding feast. If the household had means, then they ought to feed everyone irrespective of caste. This was agreed upon by most present, Mahar, Gond and Teli alike, as the most sensible way of resolving the matter. Curiously though, the issue which seemed to lie at the heart of the problem – the fact of Mahar Untouchability – was not dealt with head on, either by the Mahars or by the others.

A couple of the younger Mahars at the meeting sensed this too and raised the issue directly. The essential problem, they said, was that the other castes thought in terms of *nich-uppar* (low and high), and regarded them as *achhut* and *asprushya* (untouchable) and so discriminated against them on that basis. This was not really taken up and discussed by either the Mahars or the others, but speaking to one of the young Mahars later on, he nonetheless felt a sense of victory in having expressed himself in this manner.

The situation was not really resolved however, and the compromise agreed to quickly broke down during the wedding season the following year. The Gonds and Telis began to argue that weddings were not *sarvajanik* (public) at all but *vekthigat* (personal), and one could invite whomever one wanted depending on the affection one felt for them. It became apparent that very few Mahars were receiving invitations.

Despite this breakdown in relations at the level of the caste, individuals still continued to behave with one another as they had always done, particularly with their neighbours, friends and, importantly, ritual friends.

So far I have only described situations where people of clean caste do or do not sit alongside Untouchables while eating. Do people of clean caste, however, eat food prepared by Untouchable hands? Here again the rules do not seem as rigid as one might expect. At the annual village fair (*mandai*) for instance, when several households set up stalls selling tea and snacks, Markakasa Mahar stall-holders had both 'clean' and Untouchable clientele. Markakasa Gonds and others did not have to eat and drink at a Mahar stall; other options existed. That they did so demonstrated their lack of concern about pollution at this public event.

Commensality and Untouchability remain important areas of conflict in Markakasa. As will be discussed in Chapter Three however, the institution of ritual friendship serves to deny caste in many ways by permitting ritual friendships which cross the clean/Untouchable divide to eat with one another without comment or penalty. As commensality is a key element of sociality, the other transformations it is undergoing will also be discussed in the chapters which follow.

Livelihoods

The land

The major livelihood here is rice agriculture and, since the land is not irrigated, the crop is dependent on the annual rains. Consequently the village only produces one crop a year and the agricultural season is the half-year from June to December. The soil is not particularly fertile: it is unlike both the famous black soil of Nagpur used to grow cotton and the red soil found to the east in the Chhattisgarh plains. Most of the farmland was once forest or scrub, and this is given as a reason by the villagers for its relative lack of productivity. No-one in the village owns a tractor, and rare is the household that hires one from a neighbouring village for agricultural work. Ploughing is done by oxen and the crop transported by cart. Sowing begins in late June following the first monsoon showers moving up from the south-west. There are two methods for sowing used, depending on the quality of the land, its position (high, low, sloping, even) and its ability to hold water. The first, called *perni*, is a method whereby the seed is scattered randomly over a ploughed field; the second is *rohona* where the seed is sown intensively in a very small patch of land, allowed to grow green shoots and then transplanted in a regular fashion over the field. The latter is initially more labour intensive, requires a good supply of water and is ultimately more productive than *perni*, especially for the better quality grains such as HMT. A field that has been sown using the *perni* method, however, requires weeding (*nindai*) more frequently and also needs an additional process called *biashi* (a flattening of the shoots) in order to ensure good growth of the rice.

By mid October, the lower quality grains have ripened and harvesting begins in earnest, usually before the festival of Diwali so that some rice can be sold to finance the purchase of new clothes to celebrate in style. After harvesting, the rice needs to be threshed and winnowed before it is packed into sacks or stored in earthen bins ready for husking or selling. Threshing cannot begin until the village collectively performs the *Sanjori* ritual. The threshing and winnowing is also done without the aid of tractors or machines. An ox-cart is driven round and round over the stalks in order to dislodge the grain. Then the grains are gathered up in wicker trays (*supa*) and dropped in front of hand-driven fans to separate out the chaff.

There are two main buyers in the area: the Co-operative *society* [English word used] run by the state-financed Tribal Development Council (Adivasi Vikas Mahamandal), and local shopkeepers. Though no private shop can buy rice while the *society* is open, this rule is not observed by farmers, shopkeepers or local officials. The shopkeepers offer lower rates than the *society*, but payment is received almost immediately. This is not the case when one sells to the *society*. The *society* lends money to farmers for the purchase of crop or fertiliser and these loans are taken into account when paying for the rice grain.

Thus farmers may be forced to pay off their debts and not receive much cash in return. Shops are therefore always attractive as ready sources of cash.

Cash is most definitely in short supply. Very few people have savings of any consequence, and though some people have bank accounts their use is restricted. Most farmers store their wealth as grain and sell throughout the year as and when cash is needed.

Those who have basic irrigation such as a well or proximity to a lake can grow a second crop after the rice has been harvested. Paddy is not sown again (the water required far exceeds what is available). Instead farmers grow chickpeas, chillies, or vegetables (or a combination of all three), which they then sell at market or to other villagers.

There are large disparities in the size and quality of land-holdings, though there are only a handful of households who are technically landless. Others have such small holdings that they often talk as if they had no land at all. Predictably, the largest single landowner in the village is the Thakur. He has approximately twenty acres of excellent land and his two brothers each have a slightly smaller share. See Figure 2 below for size of landholding per household by caste.[30]

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[30] Does not include all the households in the village.

Figure 2: Landholding (acres) per household by caste in Markakasa

	No land[31]	**1-2**	**2-4**	**4-6**	**6+**	**Total**
Gaita Gond	0	3	5	7	10	25
Mahar	3	13	8	2	1	27
Teli	6	7	2	5	5	25
Dessau Gond	0	3	2	1	0	6
Rawat	1	0	3	3	0	7
Gond Rawat	0	0	2	0	0	2
Kevat	1	0	1	1	0	3
Sidar	1	0	2	1	1	5
Rajput	1	0	0	0	0	1
Kallar	1	0	0	0	0	1
Nai	0	0	0	0	1	1
Lohar	1	1	0	0	0	2
Mochi	0	1	1	0	2	4
Total	**15**	**28**	**26**	**20**	**20**	**109**

The forest

People whose ancestors had settled in Markakasa said they came to the area because of the forest: there would always be plentiful firewood, and timber to build houses, and the sale of bamboo was lucrative. The forest was cut down to make farmland, and one could cut as much as one wanted. In times of famine, one gathered roots, tubers, mushrooms, bamboo shoots, and mahua[32] flowers from the forest, or went hunting for meat. Nowadays there is very little to hunt and Markakasa people only go on expeditions when invited to by people in other villages with more game. The mushrooms and bamboo shoots that grow following the onset of the monsoon are much prized, however, and men and women alike will grab a basket in the morning and head to the forest in order to pick them.

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[31] Also includes those who have less than one acre.

The forest also provides a great deal of freedom from the rhythms of village life. When the agricultural season is over, groups of women often make day-long trips to the forest to collect grass to make brooms and reeds which are woven into mats. They also go in search of huge quantities of certain types of leaves which are made into plates. These come in handy for wedding feasts which take place in the summer. The women are often full of stories on their return home, having spent a lot of time gossiping and exchanging information about neighbours and kinsmen.

A source of gossip to be sure but the forest is also a good source of money, especially in the summer months between March and June when there is very little other work. A major earner at this time is the collection of tendu leaves, which are used to make Indian cigarettes (*bidi*). Households generally earn Rs. 1000-3000 per season. The money comes at a critical time in the agricultural year, and is used to mend the dykes of rice-fields and buy better quality grain and fertiliser in preparation for sowing. For those without land, the tendu leaf money can be used to rent some for the coming agricultural season. The Forest Department sells the tender of an area of forest to a contractor who then sets the rate paid per bundle to villagers. The work is prepared for several weeks in advance: women collect a particular grass which is almost bark-like in appearance and will be used to bind bundles of leaves; similarly, once word reaches the village that a tender has been awarded, everyone sets out to the forest, axe in hand, in order to cut down the old leaves and encourage new growth. Once the tendu season proper begins, most households spend all day on this activity. People set out very early, often at three or four o'clock in the morning. This not only gives them time to reach the deepest parts of the forest where they will encounter greater quantities of good leaves and less competition, but it also means that they will return by late morning before the intense heat of a summer's day can take hold. After lunch, people begin bundling their leaves and then take their bundles to be counted and registered by the *munshi*, a villager paid by the contractor to be their representative.

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[32] *Bassia latifolia*. A flower also used to make alcohol.

Tendu collection has been disrupted in recent years with the intensification of the Naxalite insurgency. The latter demand a cut from the contractors in order to allow the villagers to collect the leaves without molestation. The amounts demanded in recent years have been rising. The tendu season in the summer of 2004 was cancelled because the contractor refused to pay the protection money. The Naxalite involvement in the tendu business is long-standing and had been uncontroversial: villagers recount how the rebels in the past forced the contractors to increase the rate paid to villagers. Now however, with the withdrawal of the contractors, and the reluctance of the state to take over the contract itself, the Naxalites are blamed by many Markakasa people for denying them an income.

Households are also busy in April collecting mahua flowers, which bloom and fall at this time. The flower is used to make alcohol and is sold to local traders and distillers. It is collected legally from one's own trees, and illegally from State-owned forest. Men and women head out to their trees in the morning, spend an hour or two collecting the flowers which have fallen to the ground and return home where the flowers are spread out in the courtyard or garden in order to be dried by the sun. Cattle find mahua flowers an irresistible snack and people have to be vigilant if they are not to see their money disappear into the belly of a cow. Income from mahua sales can be high, with most households making between Rs. 500 and Rs. 1500 over the course of two or three weeks.

State-funded casual work

Work undertaken as part of the Maharashtra State Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS, or *Rozgar Hami Yojna*) is an important source of money too: labourers are paid a standard rate of Rs. 47, some of which is paid in grain. The work includes building tanks (small reservoirs), roads and other development schemes, primarily designed to provide income during the lean months between March and June when grain bins are emptying and, apart from the few weeks of the mahua and tendu seasons, there is little economic activity. Work teams are often mixed caste affairs too and people generally choose to work alongside their friends and immediate neighbours.

Having sketched rather briefly these various facets of Markakasa life, let us now take a closer look at the social transformations underway and their implications.

Plate 7: Harvesting rice.

Plate 8: Harvesting rice.

Plate 9: Taking a break from harvesting.

Plate 10: Laying out bundles of tendu *leaves (used to make Indian cigarettes,* bidi*) to be counted by the* munshi *(second from left).*

Chapter Three

Ritual Friendship

Towards the end of my fieldwork, on a hot summer's day in May, I was sitting chatting to Shamrao and his wife, enjoying the cool breeze on their verandah, when he suggested that since Ganeshyam, the village shopkeeper, and I got on so well, we ought to become ritual friends (*mahaprasad*). We clearly had *prem* (love; affection) for one another, he said, and that was the most important thing in these *mahaprasad* relationships. We were both at the same stage in our lives, young (*jawan*) and unmarried (*kunwara*), so it would be a good match (*jodi*) and make the other villagers happy. It would also mean, he added, that I would have to return to Markakasa at some point. The pull would be all the more powerful if I had a *mahaprasad* to visit and I would of course have to attend his wedding. The best type of *mahaprasad* relationship was when the two friends lived far apart, and how much further could Ganeshyam get than having a *mahaprasad* in London? After all, what was the point, Shamrao continued, of having a *mahaprasad* in the same village: the importance of visiting each other was lost and one just ended up meeting at the teashop? It was not something I had given much thought to before, but it seemed that people were discussing the prospect of my departure, debating whether or not I would keep in contact with the village and were trying to find some way of making me establish a permanent and meaningful link.

That evening after dinner, my landlord and I ventured out to Birbal's *paan* shack to sit and listen to the gossip. Ganeshyam was there, as was Shamrao, and on seeing me he launched into an appeal to both of us to 'form *mahaprasad*' (*mahaprasad badna*). He repeated much of what he had said to me earlier that day and went on to add that not only our *prem*, but the *prem* between our respective families, would increase. I was a regular visitor to Ganeshyam's house and knew his mother and brothers well, and he had attended my cousin's (MBS) wedding in Nagpur. Now, if he ever went to Nagpur again he, as my *mahaprasad*, could always call on my *mama* (MB) and so the *prem* would grow, Shamrao explained. The others sitting there thought it a great idea but the two of us remained strangely non-committal. I, for one, felt uncomfortable agreeing to something as seemingly important as this without discussing it properly with my *mahaprasad*-to-be to gauge his feelings. Having investigated this form of ritual friendship over several months, I was well aware that not all people approved of this particular social institution and indeed not everyone who was 'proposed' to by a friend necessarily accepted.

A few days later, I was sitting out in front of Ganeshyam's shop (one of the village haunts) when my landlord came looking for me and asked whether we had decided to become *mahaprasad* or not. Some of the village elders, including Ganeshyam's mother, had been discussing it and were keen on the idea. If we agreed, we could perform the ceremony on the morning of the day I was scheduled to leave, he suggested. We had a quick chat and Ganeshyam said that, although he was not really interested in "all this *mahaprasad* stuff[33]", the other villagers seemed to think it was a good idea and that we ought to go ahead with it. And so, about a week later, the day I left Markakasa, witnessed by almost the entire village, Ganeshyam and I became *mahaprasad*.

This chapter seeks to explore the structural role of the social institution of ritual friendship, and examines both how people talk about such a relationship and how they practice it. I hope to raise questions about how ritual friendship is opposed to ideologies both of caste and of brotherhood. Regarding the latter in particular, I suggest that the experience of disputes between brothers and the expectation that they will fall out with one another, coupled with a heightened fear of the power of witchcraft and sorcery, especially used within agnatic kin groups, leads people to see ritual friendship as a form of association which is safe from dispute. As such, in ideological terms it is constructed as founded purely on sentiment, unencumbered by material concerns and thus free from the sorts of entanglements that relationships with agnatic kin tend to suffer from. In a society characterised by a fear of malignant spiritual attack, one creates a relationship of ritual friendship that is 'like brothers' but is ideally and ideologically *disinterested.*

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[33] *Maza laksha ya goshti'in var jaasta nai ye.*

Indeed, whereas the relationship between brothers is based on reciprocity, the relationship between ritual friends, one could argue, is ideologically based on that of the gift given without expectation of a return. Sentiment, the notion of *prem*, brings this into sharper focus.

The question of sentiment as the basis of a relationship is crucial since it opens up a wider exploration of personhood, individualism and exchange. Carrier (1999) makes a comparison between two broad categories of self, the western individual and the Melanesian dividual, the latter being one where the self is constituted by the relationships one has with others. Carrier claims that in societies where the latter type of self is in evidence, 'it is difficult to conceive of the spontaneous affection that emerges from internal sources that characterise the western notion of friendship' (ibid: 28). Instead, in Melanesia, for instance 'those who are close to each other are likely to speak about the relationship...in terms of a common situation or structure of relationships that encompasses the people involved' (ibid: 31). The idea that a particular society produces only one particular type of self is unappealing. It is far better to imagine several ideologies of the self existing in any particular society and even different ideologies held by people for different purposes. As I demonstrate below, an analysis of how people talk about ritual friendship reveals that, in Markakasa, it involves two types of self (and thus two ideologies of the self). In one, there is spontaneous affection; in the other, sentiment is discussed as emerging from an existing set of relationships.

Taking the discussion back to ritual friends and brothers, one can also see that, whereas the former is always seen in terms of sentiment and affection (and, as a corollary, involving exchange which is not predicated upon calculation of a return), the latter is characterised precisely by the give-and-take of daily life: sentiment is present but finds its basis in existing kinship relations. Where sentiment is bound up in other spheres of social life, as it is in the relationship between brothers, there is the risk of dispute over land or other resources and jealousy has plenty of opportunity to rear its ugly head. And where jealousy walks, the fear of witchcraft and poisoning surely follows. The ideology of ritual friendship, on the other hand, is characterised by a lack of dispute or argument between the friends. Through the emphasis on affection, ritual friendship in Markakasa becomes in a sense abstracted from a social life grounded in materiality – especially if, as Shamrao said, the best ritual friends are those who live far from one another.

Sentiment is seen as the basis of ritual friendship, founded in the affection two people have for one another. It is not, however, restricted to these two people. Contrary to Pitt-Rivers' (1973) assertion that sentiment among friends is confined and therefore socially unimportant, we can see here that the ties of affection that bind people together are also conceptualised as bringing different families closer together. One could also argue that that the sum of these individual ties of sentiment produces wider bonds between all people in a community such as a village beyond their own personal relations of kinship and friendship. For India in particular, others have looked at locality-based senses of belonging (e.g. Lambert 1996; Froerer 2006b) and have argued that the traditional emphasis on caste in India has relegated the importance of links between people who share a common residence (e.g. a village or a neighbourhood). Taking this line of reasoning further, I would argue that the existence of locality-based relationships enables people sharing the same physical space (a village) to think of one another as essentially the same, something that the ideology of caste works hard to negate. Sentiment is valued here between individuals who are friends, but one could argue that the consequences of sentiment have a wider effect on the imagination of a village community bound together by the ties of locality (as opposed to caste or kinship-based relationships). The importance of such an approach is that it recognises that an ideology which ignores caste, as ritual friendship does, can exist alongside a contrary ideology which affirms caste. Ritual friendship, the sentiment it involves and the ties of affection it builds beyond individuals express the recognition of a fundamental affinity of people (see Rezende 1999) and the assertion of people as the same, an idea that caste denies.

Ritual friendship in Markakasa

Ritual friendship is rather common throughout the Chhattisgarhi cultural zone (Babb 1975; Jay 1973; Prakasam 1992), and though Markakasa is technically in Maharashtra it is only twelve kilometres from the border. Due to migration the majority of people are, in linguistic and cultural terms, recognisably Chhattisgarhi. These then are the borderlands: just ten kilometres away to the west, deeper into Maharashtra, one is hard pressed to find people who have formed these specific types of friendship. The generic Chhattisgarhi term for ritual friendship is *phul-phulwari*, while the word mentioned above, *mahaprasad*, is one of several types of *phul-phulwari*.[34] The name given to the relationship depends in most cases on the substance exchanged at the ceremony creating the ritual friendship. Thus, in mine and Ganeshyam's case, we exchanged *prasad* (ritual gift of the deity) from the Jagannath Temple in Puri in Orissa, which is known as *mahaprasad*. This then comes to signify the name of the relationship and also the title by which one addresses the other. Taking one's ritual friend's name is not permitted, and a small monetary fine or a coconut is imposed for transgressions. Other common substances exchanged include *ganga jal* (holy water from the River Ganges) and *tulsi jal* (water sprinkled into the mouth using leaves of Indian basil, a holy plant). Both men and women can form these types of *phul-phulwari*, but the friendships must be between members of the same sex. *Sakhi* is a type of ritual friendship that occurs between girls only. There is also *sanghi*, which is used by men and is the title one gives to one's mama's son (MBS). A *sanghi* is another form of ritual friend but whereas the relationships created by *mahaprasad*, *tulsi jal* and *ganga jal* could be thought of as 'parallel or agnatic friends', a *sanghi* is technically the son of a man one calls *mama* (MB) and so is a 'cross' category of friend. These last two, *sakhi* and *sanghi*, do not require the exchange of any special substance. Of these five types of *phul-phulwari*, *mahaprasad* is the most common, at least in Markakasa.

People become ritual friends for different reasons and in different circumstances. For some, the friendship was already of long duration before the ceremony and they wanted to formalise and publicise their *prem* (love; affection); for others, often those people who had struck up an acquaintance based on working together in another village or town, the ritual friendship marked the beginning of a more profound relationship. People who had performed the ceremony in their youth or childhood often mentioned that they became ritual friends because they used to walk to school together, play together or share food from one another's lunch boxes. For others it was because they had met working in the same gang on a government work project building a road or reservoir. One young Mahar man became *tulsi jal* with a man from a neighbouring village because they both liked racing bullock chariots and always ended up competing against each other. A Teli woman told me that she became *mahaprasad* with a woman who was visiting relatives in Markakasa because everyone told them they looked so similar and would make a good pair.

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[34] Jay (1973) refers to the word *mitan* which he translates as 'friend' and which is used in the same way Markakasa people use phul-phulwari; Parry (personal communication) too reports the use of this word in and around Bhilai. To my knowledge, Markakasa villagers never used *mitan* to refer to these specific ritual friendships, and indeed the title *mahaprasad* was sometimes used, incorrectly, as a generic term.

For a number of people the *prem* came after the ceremony, since the friendships were arranged by their fathers or grandfathers in order to keep the families close and to strengthen the relationship (*samanda vadna*). In this situation the ritual friendship between individuals is a symbol of a wider union. Pardhu, a middle-aged Gond man with two *mahaprasad* relationships, told me that his first one was made when he was a child of about six or seven years old with a Rawat (cow-herder) boy from a neighbouring village. It was arranged by their parents to ensure that the relationship between the two families would not break (*samanda tutnar nai*). He met his second *mahaprasad* while they were both servants (*naukar*) at the village headman's house and lived and worked there together. They became friends and decided to become *mahaprasad.* Interestingly, Pardhu's younger son has become ritual friends with the son of his father's *mahaprasad.* Though the sentiment for the two ritual friends in cases of 'arranged friendships'[35] seems to be absent, what is in fact being affirmed and continued is the original sentiment that caused the old ritual friendship to be made.

That the children of ritual friends can themselves become ritual friends suggests a tension in the elaboration of the relationship as one of kinship[36]. Brothers or other close relatives cannot become *mahaprasad* to one another, and since *mahaprasad* is conceptualised as being 'like brotherhood', it would follow that their respective children are also to be regarded as agnatic kin, and barred from forming ritual friendships with one another (cf. Prakasam's data in footnote 4). My data demonstrate that existing ritual friends *do* arrange the friendships of their children and in doing so they implicitly deny that they are 'real kin' or 'real brothers'. It suggests that in reality what is being created in ritual friendship is a relationship that looks very much like agnatic kinship or brotherhood but is in fact something rather different.

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[35] This is my category, not one that Markakasa people used.

[36] In his study of a Satnamis in rural Chhattisgarh, Prakasam finds that the children of mitan regard each other as brothers and sisters and cannot become mitan to one another (1992: 202-3). This is clearly not the case for the people among whom I carried out fieldwork.

Whereas caste is relevant in much thinking in other spheres in village life, people are emphatic that it is not a consideration when choosing a ritual friend. Even to suggest it in connection with *phul-phulwari* seemed distasteful to those I spoke to. Those who in other conversations and contexts were the most disparaging of the village Untouchables (Mahars and Chamars) were clear that *phul-phulwari* was blind to caste. Most ritual friendships are formed out of caste, unlike marriage of course which is (almost) always, and ideally, contracted within caste. Jay (1973) claimed that ritual friendships are not made between people of the same caste living in the same village, and are thus clearly about bringing different castes together. I found no such rule, either stated or observed, in Markakasa. Whether this is due to change in rules over time or a question of regional variation is difficult to discern, though Markakasa people certainly did not regard ritual friendship as something changeable. Of the forty-five relationships within the village, thirty-six were contracted with members of a different caste and nine were contracted within caste. Of the seventy relationships that Markakasa people contracted with people from other villages, thirty-eight were with different castes and seventeen within caste[37]. Ritual friendships also crossed the clean-Untouchable divide: of the thirty-six relationships contracted within the village but outside one's own caste, thirteen were between Untouchables and non-Untouchables.

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[37] In two cases, the Markakasa villagers did not know the caste of their ritual friend. For the remaining thirteen relationships outside the village I have no data as to the caste of the ritual friend.

Similarly there does not seem to be a concern to make or avoid making ritual friends with people of the same class: wealthier villagers made ritual friendships with poorer ones; poor with poor and wealthy with wealthy. All in all, the impression is of a rather chaotic 'system'. It was important that the two friends be at a similar stage in their lives: though I was closer friends with my landlord than with Ganeshyam, it was never suggested that I become ritual friends with the former, in large part because he was married and had children and I was not.

The ceremony is not complicated and takes about five minutes to complete. A ritual specialist is not always required. Most people made do with a member of the family or a friend; some people called the village *baiga* or the barber (*nai*). People often chose to perform the ceremony at the time of the annual village fair (*mandai*) or at weddings, in part because it is at these times that the largest number of witnesses will be gathered in one place, and partly because the feasting that goes on in any case at these times can be hijacked to celebrate the friendship ceremony too. Also, as mentioned above, the ideal, according to some people, is that the ritual friend live in another village, and it is at weddings and *mandai* that guests (*saga*) visit the village and old acquaintances from far away are given the opportunity to become something more intimate. The two parties sit on wooden blocks (*pidi*) facing each other and two mounds of clay or mud representing the goddess Gauri (Parvati) and her son, the god Ganesh, are placed on a plate. These then are the divine witnesses to the ceremony. Each friend brings with him a plate which contains a coconut, some money (five or ten rupees, but the same amount in each), a sprig of bound grass, red vermilion powder and a heap of husked rice grains (*chawal*). The two friends anoint the gods with vermilion powder (*gulal*) and then one another on the forehead (*tika*). The sprig of grass is placed behind the other's left ear and then the plates are exchanged between the parties an odd number of times (five, seven, nine), so that they each end up with the other's plate. The friends feed each other the ritual substance (be it *mahaprasad*, *ganga jal* or *tulsi jal*) and then embrace (*beht*). They then feed each other *paan*. The coconuts are broken up and distributed among the assembly as *prasad* (the ritual gift).

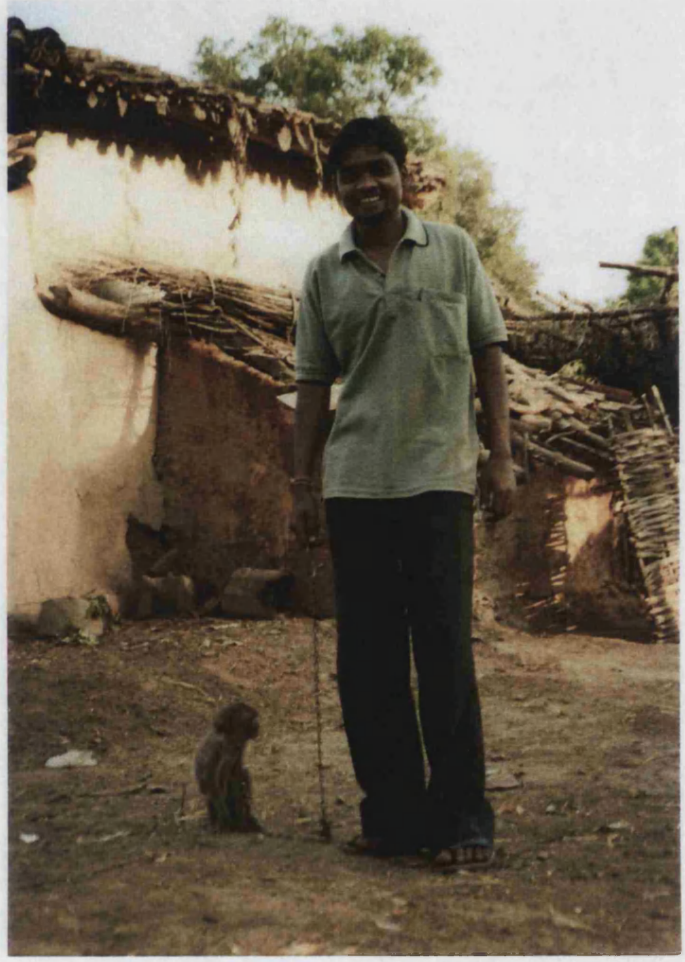

Plate 11: My Mahaprasad (with monkey).

Becoming a ritual friend is not necessarily an individual act. As mentioned above, it can involve a wider class of persons than the two friends. And the relationships that are created are not restricted to these two people. One's ritual friend's brothers and sisters become one's own siblings; their parents are referred to, both when speaking to them and about them, as *phul babu* (flower father) and *phul dai* (flower mother). If the ritual friends become married then their respective wives also automatically become *mahaprasad* or *tulsi jal* to one another without a separate ceremony being required, and the same is often though not always true for husbands of ritual friends. Ritual friendship seems to borrow many of the attributes of 'real' kinship. The following example, of three friends tied by various bonds of ritual friendship, demonstrates both the interconnectedness of ritual friendship, kinship and other forms of belonging, and the differences in terms of caste and class that can exist among them.

Three friends

Naresh, Mukesh, Buddharu and I were sitting together in the middle of Naresh's fields where he had taken us to eat the chickpeas (*channa*) his family had planted there. Wonderfully sweet when eaten raw and chewy if roasted in hay, inviting people to one's fields and giving them bunches of *channa* was a great way to consolidate old friendships and make new ones. Going to the fields to eat *channa* was often employed as an excuse for conducting private conversations and secret love affairs. These three young Markakasa men spend a lot of time together and are good friends, yet they have rather different backgrounds. The ways in which they are 'related' is summarised in Figure 3.

Naresh is a 23 year old Gond from a middle income Markakasa family. They have five acres of farmland which, in a good year, produce sixty-five sacks of unhusked rice. The land is also partly irrigated by a well. This enables them to sow a second crop of chickpeas or chillies once the rice has been harvested in November. They also have a

Figure 3: the relationships between Naresh, Buddharu and Mukesh

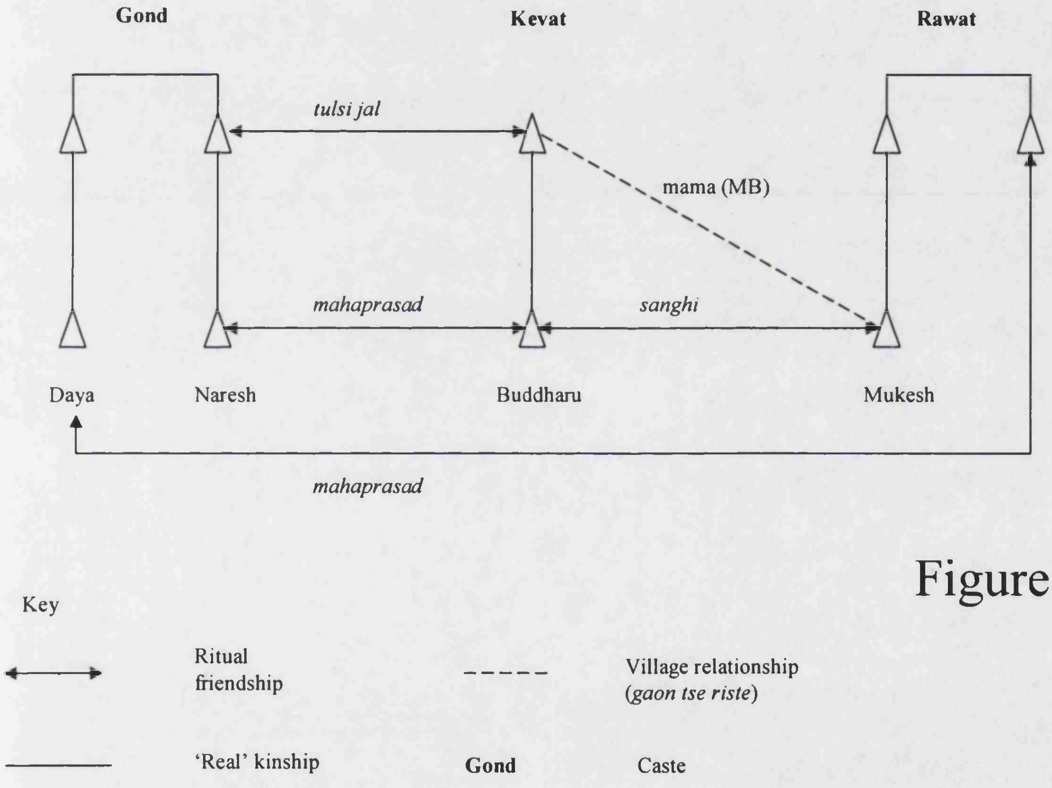
Gond
Kevat
Rawat
tulsi jal
mama (MB)
mahaprasad
sanghi
Daya
Naresh
Buddharu
Mukesh
mahaprasad
Key
Ritual friendship
Village relationship (*gaon tse riste*)
'Real' kinship
Gond
Caste

Figure 3

very large garden which is used to grow all manner of vegetables and pulses. The importance of all this is that the family do not need to sell a lot of grain in order to buy food. Rather, they can sell their surplus vegetables, chickpeas and chillis for money. Naresh has studied up to the tenth standard (equivalent of GCSEs) and, though he failed the first time, he recently retook the exams after a four year interval and passed. He dreams of leaving the village permanently and getting a job as a policeman like his *mama* (MB), who is with the Central Reserve Police Force. As a result of this highly valued and unusual connection, Naresh has frequently travelled to Nagpur and further afield to the city of Pune in the west in order to work.

Naresh has been friends with Buddharu for most of their lives, ever since they were both children. The families were close and their fathers are *tulsi jal*. At their fathers' suggestion, Naresh and Buddharu performed the *mahaprasad* ceremony when they were eleven years old. What was the importance of becoming ritual friends when you were already good friends, I asked. Permanence, they both replied: friendship (*dosti*) can break but *mahaprasad* is for life. It's also a question of trust or faith (*vishwas*), said Naresh: the level of trust you have with a *mahaprasad* is of a different quality.

Buddharu is of the fisherman caste (Kevat-Nishad), though this is not how his household principally earn their living. His father is a *lamsena*, a man who has come to live and work in his father-in-law's household and, though the latter is now dead, his property has not been disposed of among his heirs and Buddharu's father remains landless. They are among the poorest families in the village, renting two acres of rather undesirable land from a Markakasa Gond which produces thirteen sacks of rice in a good year. The family eats ten sacks worth and so relies on a cash income to buy vegetables[38]. Buddharu's father had been fortunate enough to be employed by the local Tribal Development Council rice procurement centre, and both he and Buddharu have migrated in the past to the industrial centres of Nagpur and Chandrapur where they have worked on building sites and unloading coal trucks[39].

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[38] One sack of unhusked rice (*dhan* not *chawal*) weighs approximately 70kg; the average price at which rice was bought in 2003-04 was Rs 500 per quintel (100kg).

Buddharu's *sanghi* is Mukesh, from one of the wealthier families in the village. He is a Chhattisgarhi Rawat (cow-herding caste) and a B.A. student at a college seventy kilometres away. Mukesh's father has a government job (*sarkari naukari*) as a caretaker/dogsbody (*chaprasi*) for the District's Tribal Boarding Schools (*Adivasi Ashram Shala). The family have recently constructed a new (mud) house at the edge of village, complete with a posh brick wall and flower garden. Mukesh and Buddharu became *sanghi* to one another because Mukesh already regarded Buddharu's father as his mother's brother (*mama*) in village relationship terms (*gaon tse rishte*). In the course of our conversation I asked them if they could have become *mahaprasad* instead of *sanghi.* Yes, they could have done, they both replied. Naresh, however, disputed it since Buddharu and Mukesh already have a relationship (*rishte*) through him and so it would not have been possible. Naresh and Mukesh have a village kinship relationship (*gaon tse rishte*): it is an agnatic 'uncle-nephew' relationship, Mukesh calls Naresh, *kaka* (FyB) and in turn Naresh calls him *bhatija* (BS). This in turn has its roots in a ritual friendship between Naresh's FeBS and Mukesh's FyB. Thus, Mukesh and Buddharu could not have become *mahaprasad* because they are not in the same structural relationship to one another. Wherever there appear to be inconsistencies, such as a confusion of generations as in this case, the parties invariably opt for the *sanghi* relationship, which seems to suggest it is a more flexible category of ritual friendship. So all three friends are connected and connect themselves to one another in ways which involve a mix of ritual friendship, village kinship and real kinship. This example is important because it reveals the catholicity in people's formal friendship relations. The three friends are of different castes and of different income levels (one might say class). Mukesh's family earn their primary income from formal sector government employment. They can be considered members of the aristocracy of labour, though admittedly of the shabby variety. Buddharu at the other end is from an exceptionally poor family even by the rather low standards of the village. And yet their relationship is not based on an economic model of patron-client relations. Sentiment does indeed seem to be the sole reason for creating these formal relationship ties. It also demonstrates that ritual friendship in practice is a mix of relationships, all involving ideas of sentiment but also spoken of as being constituted differently: sometimes the friendship is the result of spontaneous affection; at other times and instances it is the result of existing ties of friendship and wider association embedded in other social relations, themselves based on sentiment.

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[39] Seasonal migration occurs in Markakasa but is not common. According to the data from my household survey, about ten people (both men and women) migrate every year in search of work for approximately three months. They are joined by others who are not regular migrants but who have had a bad harvest or are seeking to escape the village for a while.

The content of ritual friendship

What then are the obligations that ritual friends have to one another? These are only loosely articulated. What is emphasised is not what ritual friends should and could do for one another, but simply that they have love (*prem*) for one another. People generally say that if ritual friends live in different villages they ought to visit one another, which is in a sense a result of the *prem* which exists between the two. As mentioned above, life-cycle events such as weddings and death rituals are often occasions when those ritual friends who live a distance from one another may visit. The act of visiting friends and relatives in other villages is an important part of both men and women's lives. Through this act it is possible to create an imaginary landscape of relatedness, in which one comes to conceptualise other villages as linked with one through ties of sentiment. But this has implications between people living in the same village too: not only is the tie between the Markakasa person and his friends or relatives in the other village, but also with people in Markakasa who have friends or are related to residents of that other village. Thus, contrary to Pitt-Rivers' assertion, ritual friendship is capable of creating sentiment that extends beyond the two people who have directly formed the relationship. My landlord Brijlal's family's ties of friendship with a family in another village provide a good example (see Fig. 4 below).

About eighty years ago, a man of the Sidar[40] caste from a village called Patratola, fifteen kilometres away to the east in what is now the state of Chhattisgarh, bought some land in

Figure 4: the mahaprasad relationship between Manu and Devaram

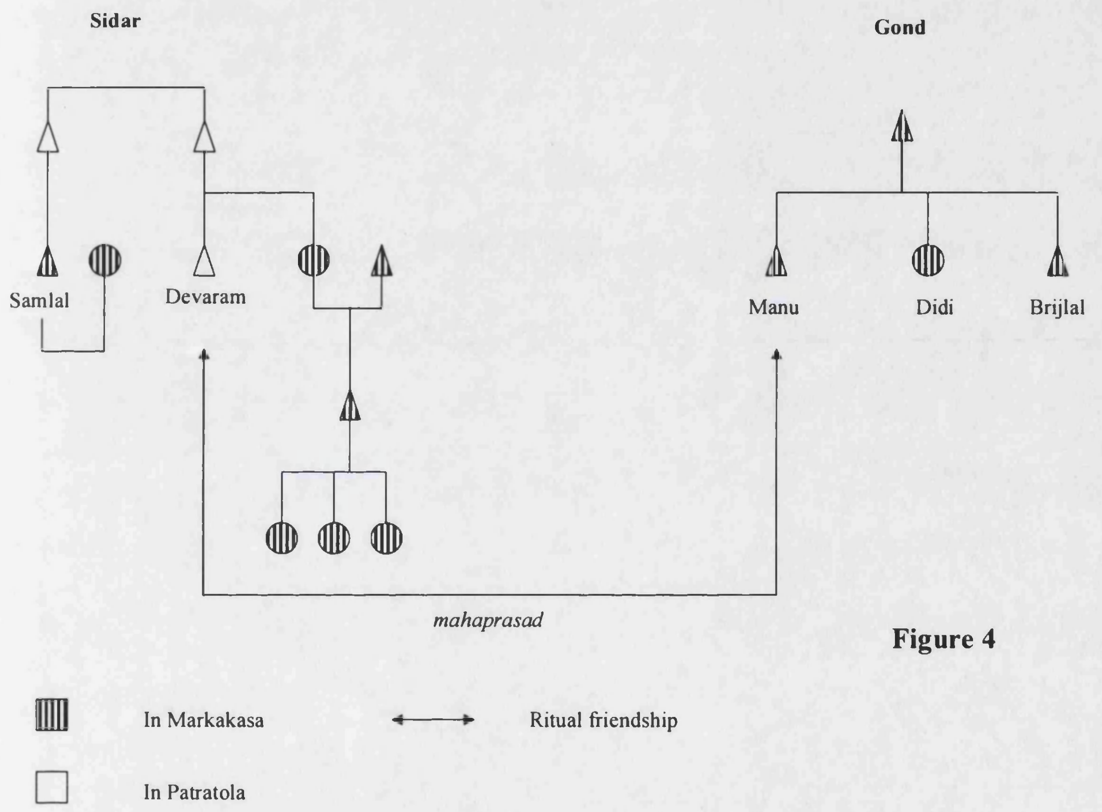
Sidar
Gond
Samlal
Devaram
Manu
Didi
Brijlal
mahaprasad
In Markakasa
Ritual friendship
In Patratola

Figure 4

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[40] A Scheduled Tribe under the Indian constitution and therefore 'Adivasi' but not Gond.

Markakasa and became friends with Mayaram, my landlord Brijlal's father. As he had land in Patratola, too, he would only occasionally visit his holdings in Markakasa and when he did would bring his son, Devaram, with him. Mayaram's eldest son, Manu, worked with Devaram and they helped each other out with their respective fields. In time they became good friends and decided to become *mahaprasad* to one another. Their fathers were happy too since it cemented the relationship between the two families. During Brijlal and his sister Didi's childhood there was much coming and going between Markakasa and Patratola. They would often spend several days visiting each other's households and they considered Devaram their older brother; *his* father was their *phul-baba* (lit. flower-dad), the term used for a *mahaprasad*'s [41] father. The links were strengthened by Devaram's sister marrying and settling on her father's land in Markakasa as a *lamsenin*[42]. Their grandchildren today are very close to Brijlal and Didi's family: they often work together both in work gangs on government projects and as agricultural labour, and are among the most common visitors to the house. In addition, Devaram's FBS, Samlal, who also inherited land in Markakasa, set up a house there and even now shuttles between the village and Patratola. His family is close to Brijlal's, too. Samlal's wife, for instance, cooks and cleans for Manu, Brijlal's brother, when his adopted son and daughter-in-law are away, and nursed his late wife before she passed away. Thus, though Manu's FyB lives in Markakasa, and they have cordial relations, it is to Samlal and his wife (his *mahaprasad*'s FBS and a member of a different caste) whom he turns to in times of need. When Devaram's wife came to Markakasa to attend the wedding of one of the 'grandchildren' referred to above (her HZSD), she contrived to spend as many nights as possible with Didi's family rather than sleep in the houses of her affines and caste-fellows. When I asked her why, she replied that there were tensions with both of the other households relating to old disputes in Patratola and so she felt more comfortable staying with Didi. And this reveals another facet of the nature of ritual friendship that I highlighted at the beginning of the chapter: it is set up in contrast to the kinship relations one might have with one's real brothers (or as in this woman's case her husband's brothers).[43]

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[41] Though it was Manu who was Devaram's *mahaprasad*, the terminology used extended to his siblings.

[42] 'Lamsenin': the wife of a *lamsena*, a man who lives uxorilocally and farms the land of his father-in-law.

Along with visiting, also central is the idea that ritual friends should dine together whenever they can; it was said that one should always invite a *mahaprasad* to dine at one's house. Festivals such as Diwali were important occasions when dining between ritual friends living in the same village would take place. In cases where their ritual friends are members of an Untouchable caste, Markakasa villagers pursue different strategies. People often said that young, unmarried men and women could eat at the house of an Untouchable without censure or pollution regardless if they were ritual friends or not. When young people marry, however, they ought to stop. But this was not an uncontested discourse, as we saw in the discussion of commensality and Untouchability in Chapter Two. When it comes to ritual friends, all those who had conducted ritual friendships across the Untouchable/ 'clean' divide said they had no qualms about eating at untouchable households and they did not think about such things when it came to ritual friends. And of course, Untouchables friends were invited to eat at clean caste households. Caste councils, though active in other areas of life such as marriage and divorce, did not police the 'breaking' of these dining rules.

There is also the feeling that ritual friends should help one another in times of need. The following story illustrates the way in which many people thought about the ideal friendship engendered by this type of relationship.

On more than one occasion (and indeed after my own *mahaprasad* ceremony was performed), I was told the story of Lord Krishna and Sudama. Krishna and Sudama were childhood friends (though not 'ritual friends') who had played together and studied together. When Krishna defeated his evil uncle and took back his throne at Mathura he had told Sudama that if ever he wanted anything he need only ask. Sudama was a poor Brahmin and his ever-growing number of children only increased his poverty. His wife was something of a shrew by all accounts and pestered him to go and see his old friend Krishna, now a wealthy king, to ask for assistance. Sudama wanted to take him a gift, since it had been so long that they hadn't seen each other. All they had in the house however was *poha* (flattened or beaten rice), hardly a suitable offering to a king, but Sudama grabbed a bagful and set off for Mathura. On his arrival, seeing the splendour of Krishna's court, Sudama grew ashamed of his meagre gift and decided not to give it to his old friend. Krishna greeted Sudama affectionately and washed the feet of his guest. But he had noticed the bag of *poha* that Sudama was unsuccessfully trying to hide and snatched it from him. He opened the bag and began eating the *poha* with such joy that his courtiers began whispering about this mysterious gift. "It's the tastiest food I've ever had", announced Krishna. Sudama was happy but felt uneasy about asking Krishna for help. He left without mentioning the reason for his visit. When he got home, it was unrecognisable; where his hut had once stood there was now a beautiful palace. Krishna had known what his friend had wanted and provided it. This, I was told, was how ritual friends ought to behave with one another.

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[43] Bloch's (1973) discussion of affinal and agnatic kinship may suggest a complementary interpretation. He argues, following Fortes, that affinal kinship relationships need to be constantly activated and 'used' in order to be maintained: thus they have force in the short-term. For the long-term however, one knows that it is agnatic kinship relationships which endure and have the greatest moral force. This may be the case here, with 'affinal kinship' replaced with 'ritual friendship' in the analysis. There are a number of differences, however, not least that ritual friendship acts to make up for the failings of brotherhood and in the process is transformed into a different type of social relationship altogether. It is because one knows that the long-term experience of brotherhood may be ultimately disappointing that the ritual friendship based on sentiment has more moral force.

Not everyone thinks *phul-phulwari* is a wonderful institution, however. There are those, admittedly few in numbers, who dislike it because of its caste blindness; in particular the types of associations it creates between clean castes and Untouchables, and the emphasis placed on commensal dining in these sorts of relationships. In this the opponents seem to recognise the social value of these sorts of friendships, that the sentiment they create and express has implications beyond the individuals concerned and their households. There may also be opposition to the institution of ritual friendship because it is not seen as entirely respectable. Jonathan Parry (2001) reports from Bhilai that among (Untouchable) Satnamis ritual friends had rights of sexual access to each others wives. Though this was never clearly articulated in Markakasa, a visiting man from Chhattisgarh told me that when making ritual friendships the criteria people used was to consider his friend's "wealth and wife" (*dhan ao daiki*). For Bhilai, Parry's data suggests that people see ritual friendship as an old-fashioned and un-modern social institution. In Markakasa, however, this idea seems to have little resonance: young men and women who in other respects are concerned with the trappings of urban modernity, as they see it (e.g. clothes, cosmetics, Bollywood film and music), continue to form ritual friendships with one another and most regard these relationships as serious and not to be entered into lightly.[44]

In creating connections between people of different castes, whether they live in the same village or not, people express the idea that sentiment has a value that transcends that of caste. Put in other terms, the idea of difference that is promoted by an ideology of caste is countered by the idea of similarity involved in the ideology of ritual friendship.

The problem with brothers

> "The name of brother is truly a fair one and full of love...But sharing our property or dividing it up, with the wealth of one becoming the poverty of the other, can wondrously melt and weaken the solder binding brothers together. Brothers have to progress and advance by driving along the same path in the same convoy: they needs must frequently bump and jostle each other. Moreover, why should there be found between them that congruity and affinity which engenders true and perfect friendship?"
>
> - Michel de Montaigne in *On Friendship*

When I asked people in the village about the nature of the relationship between ritual friends, they would often reply that forming *mahaprasad* creates a bond like that of brothers, like the closest of brothers, and that it is even closer than brothers because there is no self-interest involved or reason to argue; there is *sirf prem* (only love, affection). The proof that the relationship is only 'like brothers' is that the children of ritual friends can themselves become ritual friends, an act that would be prohibited if in fact what was conceptualised was the making of brotherhood. Thus it is misleading at the level of analysis to lump together ritual friendship and kinship (especially the agnatic forms of friendship and agnatic kinship), despite the apparent similarities in the content of the relationships between the two types of relatedness. I suggest that we can uncover the true meaning of ritual friendship if we instead oppose the categories of ritual friendship and brotherhood. Let us take a closer look at the relations between brothers.

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[44] The *mahaprasad* relationship is classed as 'non-joking': it is not done to make fun of your *mahaprasad* or to joke around with him. A certain decorum and respect applies.

Brothers are regarded as the closest of all kin relations but the relationship is also recognised as the most difficult to maintain successfully, especially after the brothers marry. Before marriage, brothers are seen as working happily together for the good of the common household; after marriage, however, with the arrival of wives, brothers become selfish and quarrelsome. This is, of course, as it is seen from the male point of view, but women as wives share these views too: that the relationship between brothers is fraught with difficulty. The ideal household is where all brothers, along with their wives, live together and work together without division or jealousy. But this is seen as too lofty an ideal to realise and as a consequence people often said that having more than one brother was a recipe for trouble.[45] In fact, most households in the village have at one time or another been seriously divided because of disputes between brothers. Two of the castes in the village, the Mahars and the Desau Gonds, have each split into two factions as the result of fraternal quarrels. Brothers (and their wives) are seen as intensely jealous of their siblings. The most common cause of disputes is over land and inheritance. At least until their father dies, brothers and their families farm the land together and hold the grain produced in common, though if married they often keep separate stashes of petty cash earned through selling labour. Maintaining this arrangement can, however, be difficult and in several cases a division of property (*hissa*) has been made in the father's lifetime, so that brothers farm separately and hand over a portion of their grain to their parents. Moreover, accounts are certainly kept of how much labour one brother's household contributes to the other. The disappointing experience of brotherhood for many is in sharp contrast to the idealised conception of ritual friendship.

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[45] Thus, though strictly speaking the ideology of brotherhood involves harmony, the experience of failed fraternal relationships leads to the creation of an almost-ideology of brotherhood as problematic.

I returned to the village in April 2005 for just under a month's worth of fieldwork, and a series of incidents involving my *mahaprasad*, Ganeshyam, highlighted the interested/disinterested dichotomy between brothers and ritual friends. Ganeshyam, as I said before, is the village shopkeeper. In a tiny space less than two metres by two metres, he stocks a rather wide range of household goods; he also buys and sells unhusked rice, mahua flowers (used to make alcohol), tamarind, and other farm and forest produce. The shop turns a handsome profit, and many people praise Ganeshyam not only for his fair rates and prices but also his commercial skill. He is the youngest of four brothers and a recent incident affected relations between them.

April is the time when the *mahua* flower, which is used to make alcohol, blooms and falls and is collected by villagers to sell. The sale of mahua flowers to private shops, however, is illegal; all mahua must be sold to the State's Tribal Development Council (*Adivasi Vikas Mahamandal*), which guarantees a 'fair rate'. For Ganeshyam, the buying and selling of mahua can be highly profitable but it is also dangerous. Forest officials regularly conduct raids, and the transportation of mahua between merchants which often takes place at night is risky and subject to interception. Tractors transporting mahua had been caught on two separate occasions in the area that month and had been confiscated by the Forest Department along with the flowers. According to Ganeshyam all the traders were jittery. But he could not sit on his mahua any longer; he was short of money and needed to sell it on. So one day before dawn he sent three bullock cart loads off to his buyer. Unfortunately, fifteen forest officials were waiting for them and impounded the carts and the produce. Ganeshyam rushed to the Forest Office as soon as he heard and managed, with the help of a local leader from a neighbouring village, to persuade the officials to release the carts and the mahua in exchange for a large sum of money. On his return his brothers, Durga and Dayal Singh, berated him for his lack of judgement in selling the mahua. The income that he would have made was eaten up by the bribe he had handed over. His sister-in-law, Durga's wife, also began to criticise him suggesting that the shop had lost enough money, and that they ought to shut it and Ganeshyam should do something else. Durga and Dayal Singh agreed. This was a surprising statement since everyone knew how well the shop did and that it was as a result of the income from the shop that the household had grown so wealthy. Ganeshyam said as much to his brothers and sister-in-law. Angry and upset, he went to open his shop for business. Later that day, he came to my house and told me what had happened. "I can't understand why they're behaving like this", he said. "I had to sell the mahua. And that's what business, running a shop, is like: you have to pay people off all the time. My brothers don't understand that because they don't run the shop. How can they say I should close it down? They don't like seeing me doing so well, that's what the problem is. They can see that I'm getting to know lots of important people, traders, and they can't bear it. They can't bear the fact that it's because of me that the household runs at all and if any of them want money it's me they come to." That evening he stayed and ate with me and came again the following evening too. He said that he just did not feel like eating at home with his brothers. The atmosphere was bad and his mother was crying all the time. Though he has other friends in the village, it was striking that he chose to come to my house, the house of his *mahaprasad* while he was fighting with his brothers. Compared to the intensely interested relationship he had with his brothers, our relationship was disinterested in that neither of us could constrain each other's action, nor were we involved in each other's household affairs. Significantly, whereas brothers are expected to fight and fall out, it is said that ritual friends never do.

This discussion of disputes and arguments among brothers (or agnatic kin more generally) is important because such conflicts run the risk of involving magic or witchcraft if not resolved satisfactorily. Malignant spiritual attack (discussed in more detail in Chapter Four) is of two broad kinds: that perpetrated by witches (*tonhi* or *saude*), who may or may not need a reason to attack whom they do, and that initiated by laymen with the help of a sorcerer/witchdoctor (*baiga* or *pujari*). This latter kind of spiritual attack is, according to my informants, most commonly committed by close kin, close agnatic kin in particular, of which one's real brother is the ideal type. While a brother is often accused of attack, it is also common to suspect his wife, who also has an interest in harming her brother-in-law and his family. Consider the following example.

My landlord Brijlal had a longstanding dispute with his elder brother Manu that has only recently been resolved. The relationship between the two brothers has never been good by all accounts. Its most longstanding expression is in a dispute over inheritance and property. Manu, Brijlal's brother, has no children of his own. Instead he adopted a boy some fifteen years ago when the child was eight. Adoption is common in cases of childlessness but the adopted child is usually someone within the family, a brother's son or daughter for instance. The reasoning is simple: 'an "outsider" (*bahar ka admi*) should not eat one's land'. In this case, Latchu, the adopted boy, though a relative (Manu's FZDS), is not of their lineage. Brijlal felt great bitterness over this: Manu ought to have adopted one of *his* own children so that the land would remain in the family; Manu's four acres would instead go to this 'outsider'. In the midst of all these claims and accusations of betrayal, Manu's wife, according to Brijlal, went to see a *baiga* (sorcerer) to ask that he cast a spell (*mantra*) to kill him. Brijlal duly fell ill, with recurring headaches and unexplained weight loss, and was at death's door for the good part of a year.

One could argue that interested relationships such as those involving brothers are susceptible to the use of witchcraft and magic, especially as weapons in the course of a dispute. Ritual friendships are ideally disinterested relationships, and as a result could be interpreted as being free from the types of risks associated with interested ones. The terms interested and disinterested suggest that ideas and theories about the gift and exchange may come in useful in understanding ritual friendship.

In a recent paper discussing ritual friendship in Orissa, eastern India, Uwe Skoda hints at a link between the ideology of ritual friendships and the ideology of the pure gift but does not develop the argument any further (2004: 176). In another paper on ritual friendship in Orissa, Pfeffer (2001), cited in Skoda, makes the intriguing observation that "love, nothing but pure love is expected from and given to the [ritual friend]. They will never demand a buffalo but their alter egos will surely provide for them." Though not expressed in quite those terms, the ideology seems to be very similar to what I have described above. Firstly, that love, only love (*sirf prem*), is the most important factor in a ritual friendship, and secondly, that gifts are given without any expectation of return. This is in sharp contrast with the type of exchange that takes place between brothers: though brothers and their families may appear to give to one another with no expectation of return in the short-term, accounts are certainly kept for the long-term. Over the course of one's life, generalised reciprocity eventually becomes balanced. Sahlins (1974) argues that generalised reciprocity as open-ended responsibility is the sort of arrangement that exists between close kin. The experience of agnatic kinship in Markakasa seems to suggest that over the course of time it has to become balanced, or at least have the semblance of balance, for any sort of relationship to endure. A permanent imbalance will lead to conflict.

Take the example of my landlord Brijlal again. His elder brother Manu and he have now reconciled and they now live and work together. The adopted son Latchu and his wife were asked to go and live in her natal village and renounce their claim on inheriting his land. Manu is much older than Brijlal. He is in his late sixties and can only perform the least demanding of tasks, such as collecting tamarind or mahua. Brijlal supports his brother now; he pays for his medicine and the repairs to his cycle, and sweeps and cleans his elder brother's living quarters, but this is part of the deal. When the childless Manu dies, Brijlal will inherit his land. The acrimonious dispute of more than twenty years standing appears to have been forgotten.

No such accounts are kept with ritual friends: people are expected to give with no expectation of return. When I returned in April, Ganeshyam would insist that I eat with him every evening; after the fifth dinner in as many days I remarked that I felt awkward that I could not reciprocate. (As I ate my meals with my landlord and lady, I found it difficult to invite people to dinner.) "But we're *mahaprasad*," he replied. "That sort of thing doesn't matter, you should eat with me everyday". The motivating force is sentiment and affection; there is no 'looking to the future'.

Seen in terms of reciprocity and the gift, the story about Krishna and Sudama, recounted earlier in the chapter and told to me almost every time I asked someone specifically about ritual friendships, can be considered in a new light. What is appealing about the story is not, as I had initially supposed, that it is a general statement about how friends should behave with one another. Rather, the essential point of the story might be that Sudama cannot ask his friend for anything but Krishna knows what he wants and gives it to him *without Sudama's knowledge.*[46] As Parry states: "the genuine gift is never solicited and the gift should be made in secret" (1986: 461). I am not suggesting that this holds true in reality for the types of exchanges that go on between ritual friends, merely that the ideology appears in contrast to the types of interested exchange that go on between brothers. The gift between ritual friends looks a lot like Maussian 'total prestations', gifts which do not need to be repaid. As Graeber puts it,

> "unlike competitive gift exchange, 'total prestations' created permanent relationships between individuals and groups, relations that were permanent precisely because there was no way to cancel them out by a repayment...No accounts need to be kept because the relation is not treated *as if it will ever end* [my italics]" (2001: 218).

The ritual friendship captures an "image of eternity" (ibid). Unlike the expectation of disputes with brothers (raised almost to the level of ideology), it is said that ritual friends never fall out. This can be seen in the exchanges which take place in the ritual which makes people into friends. As mentioned above, each party has a plate containing some money and rice and this plate is passed back and forth between the parties five, seven, or nine times. The significance of odd numbers is not only that at the end of the process, each party holds the other's plate, but that as a result of this long back-and-forth, the parties become confused as to whose plate they are holding at any point during the exchange. This has two implications: firstly, it suggests that this type of exchange is represented in ritual as continuing indefinitely and as an 'image of eternity' (what else explains the prolonged series of exchanges?); secondly, the fact of exchange becomes irrelevant because of the confusion caused by the passing back and forth - the knowledge that one has given to the other seems to be enough.

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[46] That Krishna is a god is fairly irrelevant in the telling of this story, and the contexts in which I was told it make this clear. It is not Krishna's divinity that is emphasised but his quality as a friend, and he realises what Sudama wants because he has *prem* for him. That the story featured a god is not at all surprising: throughout much of India stories of gods are told in exactly this fashion to signify exemplary behaviour to be aspired to by ordinary mortals.

I should say here that I am not suggesting that the relationship between brothers is characterised by a complete lack of an 'image of eternity'. I am simply proposing that type of reciprocity that goes on between brothers (or other agnatic kin) is subject to change from generalised to balanced (or in Graeber's terms, from 'open' to 'closed' [2001: 220][47]), whereas the ideology of exchange which characterises relations between ritual friends remains permanently 'open'.

This brings us neatly back to a discussion of equality and hierarchy, and the opposition of the ideology of ritual friendship to the ideology of caste. Once again, taking my cue from Graeber, gifts do not need to be repaid between ritual friends because the relationship is not identified with inequality between the actors: "Gifts have to be repaid when communistic relations are so identified with inequality [as in the case of brothers of the same household] that not doing so would place the recipient in the position of an inferior" (ibid: 221). The relations between ritual friends are not characterised by inequality but the relations between brothers (especially those who share a household) certainly are. By not repaying the gifts received from a brother, one places oneself in a position of inferiority in relation to that brother. Take the example of Brijlal and Manu once again. Brijlal provides for Manu and receives nothing in return for the moment. Manu (though older) is put in a position of inferiority as long as no return is made. This situation will change once Manu is dead and makes his return by giving his land to Brijlal. That ritual friends are regarded as equal is supported by the fact that, since sentiment is the basis of their relationship, they are not compelled to make a return: there is no question of an inferior or superior friend.

And yet, are ritual friendships in reality, as they are experienced and not as they are idealised, ultimately about self-interest and is that why people make them? The comment made by a Chhattisgarhi visitor to the village, referred to above, that one looks at 'wife and wealth' in making ritual friends, would certainly seem to support such a view. And the view of some, expressed by Shamrao right at the beginning of the chapter, that ritual friends ought to be from different villages, ideally far away, seems to indicate that friendships are made to expand social networks beyond the confines of one's village and 'to get to know more people' – people one would not otherwise encounter. Interestingly, in answer to my questions about why people *married* less either within the village or to cross-cousins than in the past, I was often told that to do so meant one did not get to know new people, and knowing new people was seen as valuable. By bringing the fear of witchcraft back into the discussion, however, one could alternatively suggest that the greater the distance between ritual friends, the lesser the chance the relationship could become interested and thus susceptible to the types of attack that occur among kin and neighbours. One could look at benefit in two ways: material and moral. Daya, a forty-five year old Teli man, has a *mahaprasad* relationship with a bullock seller who visits the village once, sometimes twice, a year. When I asked them and others why they had become ritual friends, they gave the stock answer: *prem* (love or affection). But it is also clear that for the bullock seller, having a ritual friend in Markakasa means that on a cold winter's night he is fed and housed during his stay while the other members of his party shiver outside under the mango trees. He also has the moral benefit of being treated not as a complete outsider, as his fellow bullock-sellers are, but explicitly as a *saga* (guest/relative)[48] of the village because of his relationship with Daya. It is impossible to ascertain, however, whether this moral benefit would translate into material benefit, in the form of improved sales of bullocks for instance, but certainly in the eyes of Daya's fellow villagers there was a sense that they would get a fairer deal from a man connected with them in this way. Nevertheless, the cornerstone of the relationship is still idealised as being one of love and affection (*prem*), despite the actual experience of the ritual friendship once it is formed, which may involve material or moral benefit. The practice and reality of ritual friendship can be as disappointing as the relations with brothers: friendships made in youth can fall away in later life and, though I never heard of ritual friends arguing or fighting, simple avoidance can be the expression of a disagreement or of a growing-apart. After all, ending a marriage or building a separate house from one's brother signals the end or at least suspension of those respective relationships. But how does one publicly end a friendship? In contrast, however, to the relations with brothers, and wives for that matter, there is a strong presumption that ritual friends do not argue and that it *is* a lifelong association. Though undoubtedly idealised, the point worthy of note is that it is my informants *themselves* who do the idealising, and not the anthropologist who could quite naturally be accused of viewing *their* social world through rose-tinted spectacles.

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[47] Where 'open reciprocity' means that which "keeps no accounts because it implies a relation of permanent commitment" (Graeber 2001: 220); 'closed reciprocity' occurs when "a balancing of accounts closes the relationship off, or at least maintains the constant possibility of doing so" (ibid).

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[48] This is the same sort of relationship I had with the village, as a *saga*, though my status I suspect was both because I had a *mahaprasad* in the village and because I had spent an extended period of time there. *Saga* is an extraordinarily flexible word, meaning 'guest', 'caste-fellow' or 'relative' depending on the context.

Conclusion

Friendship should indeed be seen as a process (Loizos & Papataxiarchis 1991), as a form of belonging that changes over the course of a lifetime: at different points in one's life certain relationships are privileged over others, and parents, peers, siblings, spouses, children, as well as friends fade in and out. Such process has important social significance. But as I have shown here, looking at friendship as structure, and as functional, can also provide valuable insights into personhood and sociality.

By looking at the function of this particular form of friendship in the context of social life in Markakasa, it should be clear that 'ritual friendship' is not at all the same thing as 'fictive kinship'. Despite the fact that ritual friendship is modelled on kinship to a certain degree (e.g. the use of kin terms), what is constructed in ideological terms is a type of association which is ultimately contrasted with kinship, not assimilated to it. The fear of witchcraft or magic, the expectation of disputes between brothers and the accompanying disappointment one might feel about the fraternal relationship contribute in large part, I suggest, to the construction of an ideology of ritual friendship that is typically disinterested and based purely on affection. Where there is no 'interest', at least in ideological terms, one can create a safe relationship not subject to spiritual attack or spectacular dispute. Ritual friendship also demonstrates that sentiment between people of different castes acts as a counter to the ideology of caste in certain spheres of social life, and also that this sentiment extends beyond the two individual parties to the friendship. In addition to affirming the social body of the village by connecting people across caste, kin and class lines and thereby emphasising a fundamental affinity as members of a common humanity (see Rezende 1999) localised in a particular space, ritual friendship creates a landscape of relations with people outside one's locale, which has the effect of reinforcing ties with related people within one's village. This identification does, however, have its limits, and though sentiment and affinity are shown to be possible between people who are in other respects regarded as very different, this difference emerges as significant when people consider the problems of living in a 'mixed village', elaborated further in later chapters.

This chapter has also begun a discussion which will continue throughout the rest of the thesis about the social importance of malicious spiritual attack, either in the form of witchcraft or magic. Here I have shown how it enters into an analysis of the intimate relations between members of a given community and how it informs understandings at an abstract level about the nature of relationships such as friends and brothers. In the chapter which follows, I examine witchcraft and magic more closely and discuss the impediments which have developed to combating spiritual attack, both at the level of the person and the village.

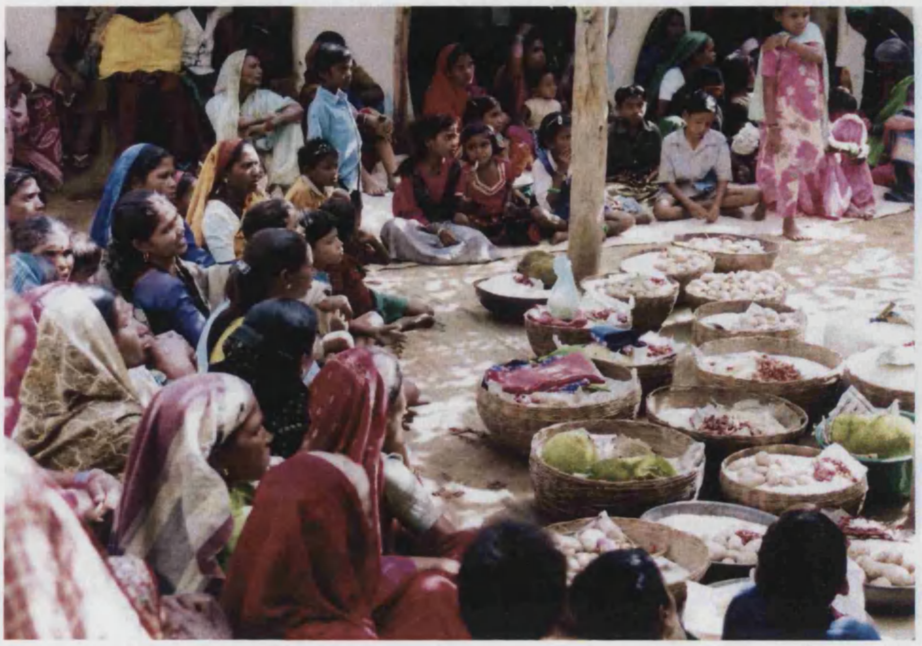

Plate 12: Women gathered for a chikat. *A* Chikat *is an occasion where a gift (usually rice) is made to a household where a wedding is taking place. The gift is generally made by friends and kin and is used to alleviate the cost of feeding guests at the wedding feast. This gift is in addition to that which is offered when the bride and groom are formally greeted by friends and kin during a ceremony known as* tikan.

Plate 13: A Markakasa boy at the chikat.

Chapter Four

Anti-Witchcraft and its Impediments: Migration, the 'Mixed Village', and the Indian State

I was only four months into fieldwork and already thoroughly sick of the food. The rains that year had not been good and consequently very little had grown in my landlord's garden. In normal years, he assured me, there would be runner beans, tomatoes, bittergourd, and various pulses. Nor was anything of interest available in the markets held in villages around Markakasa. I had been eating nothing but aubergine curry noon and night for five days. On the sixth day, as I sat down to lunch and my landlady served me a steaming mound of rice and then the dreaded aubergine, my appetite failed me. I managed a couple of mouthfuls and then asked if I could leave the rest. I hated wasting food but my landlady Champabai reassured me: "Don't worry Desai, we can give your leftovers to the cattle". Evening came round and when I was called to eat I replied that I wasn't hungry. My landlord Brijlal made his way into the kitchen from the courtyard where I was sitting and Champabai said to him, "I think there's something wrong with Desai; he didn't eat lunch and now he says he's not hungry. I think he's got *deet*." "Surely not", replied Brijlal, "he hasn't eaten at anyone else's house recently, has he?" "Well", piped up Brijlal's seventeen year old niece Nanda, "he's been going to the Bakchoriya house a lot to watch cricket on their television. He must have had something there". *Deet*, as I learned through the conversation that ensued, was a type of witchcraft that was performed while the subject of the attack was eating. The witch would watch the victim eat and then would lick her lips and swallow her own saliva. This act would cause the victim (almost always a young person) to lose his appetite; if the *deet* held then the victim would eventually die. "The old Bakchoriya woman, Mukesh's grandmother, is bad", Nanda explained. "Yes, it's true", confirmed Champa, "but don't say anything to anyone, it'll cause *badnami* (infamy; a stain on one's name[49])."

This was my first encounter with witchcraft. Until then, I had been aware neither of its existence nor the problems that it could cause. As the months passed, I began to investigate witchcraft and magic in a more systematic way. I did not find evidence of a 'witchcraft panic'[50], as much of the academic writing describes for southern Africa (e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). Rather, the general feeling among Markakasa people was that witches in particular were bolder now than in the past, because they knew that the villagers could not hold them to account. But this did not translate into a dramatic increase in the incidence of attack compared to the past. The problem was simply that witches or those who employed sorcery could neither be identified nor dealt with publicly. I also observed that the membership of a particular Hindu religious sect, the Mahanubhav sect, had grown considerably in the past fifteen years both in Markakasa and the surrounding area more generally. The connection between the two processes was that people joined the sect principally in order to protect themselves from malicious spiritual attack. The question naturally posed itself: what had changed about the way in which people dealt with witchcraft and why had it changed? Had witchcraft and magic become more difficult to combat?

As I discussed in the previous chapter, fear of attack from witchcraft and sorcery, resulting from the closeness and interestedness of the agnatic kinship relationship, contributes to some extent to the form and ideology of ritual friendship in Markakasa, marked as it is by distance, permanence and affection. In that analysis, the phenomenon of witchcraft was examined (and used as a tool) for what it can tell us about 'traditional' fields of anthropological concern: kinship, reciprocity, the gift and sociality (see also Kapferer 2003: 24). This chapter continues in a similar vein and looks at witchcraft and sorcery somewhat obliquely.

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[49] Though it wasn't entirely clear whose name would be besmirched – that of the Bakchoriya household or that of my landlord's.

[50] Such ideas are in any case hard to quantify and may not have much analytical value (see also Kapferer 2003).

I begin with a general discussion of witchcraft and sorcery in the village. The principal task of this chapter, however, is to examine the *impediments* that have developed, preventing people from dealing effectively with these sorts of harm. These impediments have become more pronounced over the past twenty years, as a result both of increased state interest and engagement in the region and of the changing composition of the village (and other villages in the area like it) in terms of caste and ethnicity. As we will see in the chapters which follow, the fact that witchcraft can no longer be dealt with in satisfactory ways means that an increasing number of people in the area are seeking relief through a particular religious sect, membership of which creates a transformation in sociality. It is also evident that the values and practices promoted by the sect have affinities with the ideology and practices of local Hindu nationalist activists (see Chapter Six).

While the academic literature on witchcraft and magic abounds with studies from Africa (e.g. Geschiere 1997, 1999; Auslander 1993; Moore and Sanders 2001) where the work is engaged with anthropological debates of modernity, economic transformation and religious change[51], work on witchcraft in South Asia has focussed largely on the issue of accusations and violence against suspected witches, particularly in the context of gender (e.g. Carstairs 1983; Kapur 1983; Bailey 1997; Kelkar and Nathan 1991; Nathan et al. 1998; Mishra 2003; MacDonald 2004)[52]. There has, however, been little analysis of the changing ways in which people deal with attacks on an everyday level as problems of existence, and the reasons for and implications of these changes (though see Skaria 1997a for a historical account). This chapter is therefore not a general discussion of witchcraft *as witchcraft* in the manner of Evans-Pritchard (1976 [1937]) and does not seek to raise questions of rationality and causality. Nor is it an examination of the pattern and logic of witch accusations (see Sundar 2001; MacDonald 2004).[53] It seeks to document the problems people face in the context of social, economic and legal changes when attempting to deal with mystical attack attributed to the actions of others.[54] This chapter can be read as an exploration of these social changes through the lens of witchcraft and sorcery.

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[51] See also Meyer and Pels (2003) for discussions of magic and modernity in a variety of settings.

[52] MacDonald's (2004) study is in part an examination of varying perceptions of Indian modernity, especially among different echelons of the police force.

[53] Part of the problem in Markakasa, discussed in more detail below, is that witchcraft accusations by individuals very rarely become officially public (even at the level of the village) because to do so in the context of these new conditions of state surveillance and village heterogeneity would mean a report being filed against the accuser by the Police Patil at the police station, and open conflict between village factions.

There appear to be three broad reasons why impediments to dealing with witchcraft have developed in this part of Adivasi central India. Firstly, migration to another village in an attempt to escape witchcraft or unexplained misfortune has become more difficult, partly as a result of changes in legislation which have reduced the supply of alienable land in Adivasi areas. Thus, whereas in earlier times people could have 'solved' the problem of malicious attack by migrating, nowadays, short of moving permanently to the city which is generally seen as undesirable, people who suffer such attacks cannot seriously consider escaping.

Secondly, earlier waves of migration to the area have changed the villagers' perception of the nature of their community: from being a village of one type of people, Gaita Gonds, it has become a 'mixed village' (*panchrangi gaon*) with different castes, languages and ways of doing things. This has meant that there is a lack of consensus as to the value or effectiveness of certain village-wide anti-witchcraft/sorcery measures, such as the clan-god *Angadev*, that could have been employed in the past to detect witches and ghosts. Similarly, at the level of the household, differences between Gonds and others regarding the control of female sexuality and marriage have meant that a ritual for testing potential wives and daughters-in-law for witchcraft, which also expresses a divergent attitude to sexuality, has become less desirable as Gonds try to avoid 'looking bad' in front of other castes.

Thirdly, the increased engagement of the state in the area, and in particular of the police, as a result of the Naxalite insurgency, has made dealing with suspected witches more problematic. Road-building projects and new bus routes have brought Markakasa people ever closer to local administration; in turn, local administration has better access to

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[54] Following Kapferer (1997, 2003), I hesitate at this stage to see witchcraft as resistance, or as a folk explanation for misfortune, or indeed as a metaphor for wider social processes of economic change or discontent with the consequences of millennial capitalism (cf. Sontag 1991, Comaroff and Comaroff 1999).

Markakasa. Police patrols on the look out for insurgents make this arm of the state more involved in local life than ever before. While local police may share some of the beliefs of villagers in witchcraft and sorcery, they go to great lengths to distinguish themselves from the 'backward' Adivasis who in their blindness support the rebels. Consequently, they attempt to regulate any evidence of 'superstition' in areas under their protection, as part of a wider plan of bringing development and progress to the benighted Adivasis in order to wean them off the Naxalites. The suppression of anti-witchcraft activities is part of a larger political and social project of modernity in India that has a long genealogy stretching back to the colonial period. In contemporary India, it finds expression in the activities both of state actors such as the police, and also of non-governmental organisations such as the Maharashtra Committee for the Eradication of Superstitious Practices who have recently promoted legislation aimed at suppressing 'superstitious practices'.

Before turning to an examination of these three broad impediments, let us briefly consider local ideas of witches and sorcerers.

Witches, sorcerers, and ghosts[55]

The general category of *jadu-tonha* (witchcraft) is wide and includes acts performed by witches proper, magic and spells cast by *baiga* (sorcerers and ritual specialists) and laymen, and extends to the employment of ghosts/spirits (*bhut*). Witches can be both men (*tonha*; *saude*) and women (*tohni*; *saudin*), though most people agree that women are more likely than men to be witches. People can be born with the qualities of the witch and it can be hereditary, but in most cases a witch has been trained and taught spells (*mantra*) by another witch[56]. Witches are most often encountered at night[57]. It is at night that a witch really becomes recognisably a witch in the sense of taking on her characteristics: completely naked, she floats above the ground, and her saliva drips from her mouth, shining like silver. Most of the accounts of witch-attack involve examples of vampirism: the most common method is that the witch will climb onto the roof of one's house and position herself above her sleeping victim. She 'binds' the victim using a spell so that he cannot move or speak, and then lowers down a pipe into the victim's navel through which she sucks his blood. This continues over several nights or weeks until the victim eventually dies. Throughout this experience, the victim is generally unaware of these night visits but gets progressively weaker and sicker. Sometimes, however, the victim does remember what has gone on during the night and experiences it as a dream. If the dreams reoccur several times, the victim becomes aware of the attack and can begin to seek a remedy.[58] The *tonha* or *tohni* is a basic-type of witch. The *saude* or *saudin* is a witch with a greater mastery of spells, and is therefore more powerful and dangerous. Once the victim has been killed, either by the process described above or simply by the casting of a spell, the *saude* exhumes the body after burial and brings it back to life, a feat that requires a fairly advanced knowledge of magic. In an act of cannibalism, he/she proceeds to eat the flesh and drink the blood of the victim.

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[55] Douglas' (1970, 1973) proposition that sorcery and witchcraft are distinctive categories and arise in different social conditions is instructive. Sorcery, in her definition, is conscious, intentional, performed by specialists trained in the art of magic and ambivalent, in that it can be used for both protection and harm. It occurs in societies with complex hierarchies and widely shared codes controlling kin activity and relations with strangers. Witchcraft on the other hand, is always malevolent and is present in societies characterised by looser social arrangements, and where people are more mobile and less stratified. In India, therefore, one would expect to see more sorcery than witchcraft. While noting the importance of Douglas' typology, Kapferer (2003) prefers to see her distinction between witchcraft and sorcery as Weberian ideal types (ibid: 11). "Ethnographically, their character as typified here is often intimately related...The forms of sorcery and witchcraft are likely to occur in different social dynamics and social spaces within the one broad social context" (ibid: 12). While aware of the distinction between the two, witchcraft and sorcery are used fairly interchangeably in the main body of the chapter, largely because Markakasa people seldom themselves distinguished the different types of magic.

What motivates witches (*tonhi* and *saude*) is complicated, and no clear picture emerges: they act interestedly and disinterestedly, the former often in the course of a dispute, though they are just as likely to attack 'without reason or motive' (*binā kāran; binā matlab*). There is also the question of intention that is separate from that of motive. *Deet*, the particular spell allegedly cast on the unfortunate anthropologist, is always done intentionally by witches, whether or not they are acting interestedly. But ordinary people who are not witches and have no knowledge of mantra can also cause *deet* unintentionally by the act of watching someone eat, desiring the food and licking their lips: children eating in front of one another at school were particularly susceptible to this.[59]

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[56] See also Das (1988: 229) for a brief description of the training of witches in Chhattisgarh.

[57] The time just before dawn is especially dangerous for women; the latter are usually the first to wake in their households, and as they make their way to the fields or forest for their morning defecation there is a risk of being accosted by a witch seeking an apprentice.

[58] Another sign that one is being attacked by a witch is the visit to one's house of an owl. Owls are seen as particularly powerful creatures, with knowledge of special mantra which they teach to witches and *baiga*; the former often employ them as familiars.

People who are not witches and have no knowledge of spells do have recourse to sorcerers known as *baiga* or *pujari*, who attack others in exchange for payment. *Baiga* have two principal functions: firstly, they are the main officiates at village rituals and at (Gond) life-cycle events[60]; secondly, they are wielders of powerful spells (mantra), and are employed as sorcerers, diviners and healers. Not all *baiga* are competent to fulfil both functions, however: the main *baiga* of Markakasa, for instance, was simply a ritual officiate with no knowledge of powerful spells, and was referred to rather dismissively as a 'coconut-breaking *baiga*'. Those who *are* sorcerers are sought out to divine causes of illness and suffering, check for possible witchcraft attacks, prescribe cures and to remove misfortune pertaining to the planet Saturn (*shani*). *Baiga* can work for a client who wishes ill on others. They are asked to cause illness, discomfort, death or material hardship for one's enemies. *Baiga* can of course also work on their own behalf, and powerful ones are feared in their communities and among their acquaintances for the potential damage they can do.

Witchcraft is an 'open secret' (see Auslander 1993) in Markakasa. Everyone knows it exists and most (including children) know the identity of established *tohni* and *saude* in the village. Nevertheless, it is not generally a topic that is discussed in public except when talking about witchcraft elsewhere. If the subject is raised in public, people express a marked discomfort, refusing to utter the words '*tonhi*' or '*jadu-tohna*', and instead use hand gestures to signal what they mean. The number and identity of witches (*tohni* or *saude*) in the village differed depending on who one talked to, but there were at least five

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[59] Adults rarely cause *deet* (except if they are witches), largely because, unlike children, they are expected to control their desires. Moreover, they do not often find themselves in situations where they are eating food that is different to that of their co-diners.

[60] However, at certain life-cycle events such as the Gond funerary ritual known as *karsad*, magic in the form of *mantra* (spells) is used to determine the cause of death of the deceased. The performance of this requires a *baiga* (and often several) with knowledge of magic. See also the discussion of the pre-wedding ritual of *panbuddi*, below.

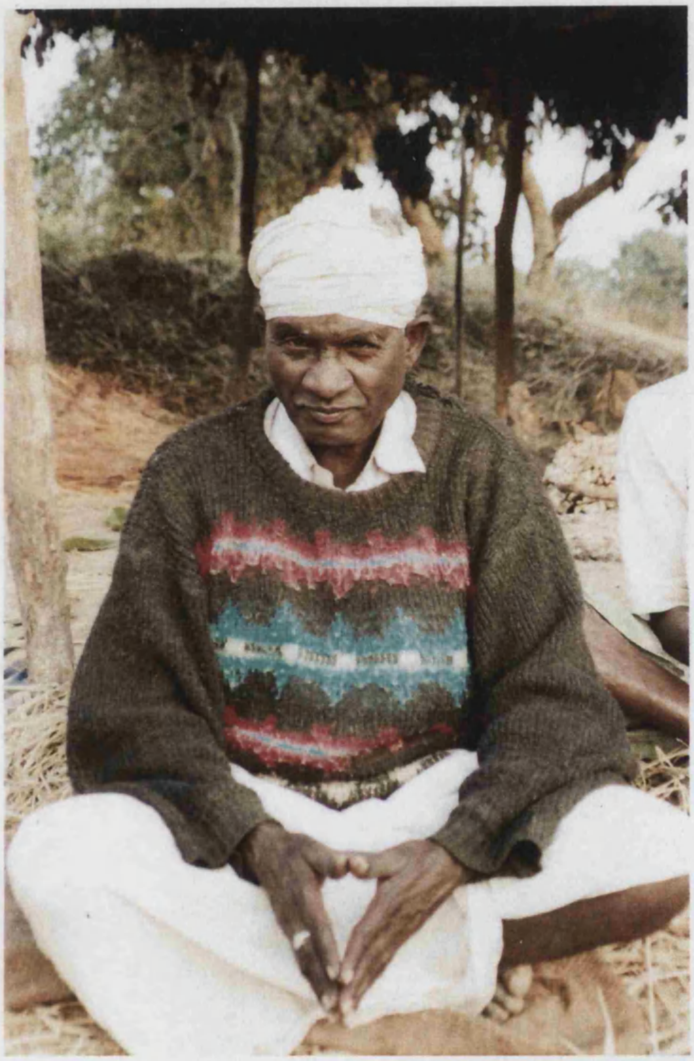

Plate 14: A powerful baiga *from a neighbouring village.*

on whom most were agreed: an elderly Gond widow, two Teli women, a Teli man and a Chhattisgarhi Rawat woman (the last being the witch who attacked me). Beyond these were a number of 'unknown' witches, again a mixture of men and women, about whom there was no sense of an 'open secret'. Individuals had particular grievances against certain people, often kin or close neighbours, whom they suspected either of having learnt witchcraft or of regularly using a *baiga* to work on their behalf.

Ghosts (*bhut*) form a separate category of powerful magical beings which can cause great harm. Though they are most commonly encountered near water crossings or in the forest, they do venture into settlements where, if invited, they will take up residence. Ghosts, I was told, are always looking for a home. In exchange they offer their services: they can, for instance, increase the wealth of the host household or torment an enemy. They appear at night, while one is asleep, often in the guise of a traveller looking for shelter. Typically, they promise to become a servant and, if invited in, they do their master's bidding for a while. Ultimately however, the ghost turns on the master and destroys him. Ghosts are mainly employed for stealing other people's wealth in the form of grain and their use is often cited as explanations of sudden prosperity. The scion of one of the earliest Teli families to migrate to the village was said to have employed *bhut* in this way: they arrived landless and made roof-tiles for a living, and yet they managed to purchase several acres of land and a (since-sold) scooter. The thinking was that their ghost had stolen grain from other households in the village. Ghosts can also torment one's enemies by throwing stones at their homes or by appearing in dreams. Whereas ghosts that are employed by individuals can be troublesome for others individually, ghosts that are not employed by anyone yet live close to or in a settlement can be the source of harm for the village as a community. As we will see in the sections that follow, ghosts are just as much objects of village-cleansing measures as witches.

Resolving disputes, migration, and land reform

Markakasa is not a particularly old settlement, having been founded sometime in the late nineteenth century[61], and has grown largely through migration from other places within a fifty kilometre radius of the village, principally in the last sixty years or so. In the course of fieldwork I collected migration histories of almost all households in the village. For the vast majority of people, names of villages and the circumstances of their departure were well remembered and indeed contact with 'original' villages had in some cases been maintained, often over periods of seventy or eighty years. There was no sense that people were involved in actively forgetting where their ancestors had come from.

One reason for leaving one's home village was to escape circumstances and an environment which seemed to one to promote misfortune, whether articulated in terms of malicious attack or a more general feeling of unease. Examples include the death of a series of children, the inability to recover from a prolonged illness, the failure of harvests and the death of cattle. Another reason was the desire to escape a dispute. As we saw in the last chapter, relationships with kin here, as in many other parts of the world, are often fraught with difficulty. And conflict between kin – agnatic in particular - is common, especially as a result of disputes involving access to land and other resources. Though it has often been analysed solely in terms of economic motivation, migration, either to other villages or to urban centres, is often a way in which people can, through a policy of avoidance and separation, attempt to resolve a dispute. Indeed, the desire to 'resolve' a dispute was a common reason given by many people as to why their father or grandfather (or in some cases themselves) packed up and left. Disputes and witchcraft or magic are intimately connected: the former leads in most cases to an attack of the latter.

Take the example of Bihari, a man of the Teli caste who lives in the same part of the village as I did. About fifty years old, his three sons are all married and Bihari has already divided up his property (land, cattle, plough) among his children, who each give him a share of their harvest. He has in the past couple of years become one of the village's entrepreneurs by opening a largely unprofitable *paan* stall, which he takes on tour during the bull-chariot racing season. The family are originally from a village called Mohgaon, some twenty kilometres away to the north-west, and moved to Markakasa in 1979. Bihari's father had died many years earlier and the family was plagued by problems. Bihari's FFyB (*dokra-baba*) was claiming Bihari's father's land, saying that the division of property had not been correctly performed. This was an old dispute, according to Bihari, one that went back to his grandfather's time. It was a time of great pain (*dukh*): children were falling ill, and the crop failed in years when those of others succeeded. This confirmed what they had suspected: that Bihari's FFyBW (*dokri-dai*) was a *saudin* and was directing her attacks against them in order to seize their land. Unable to live there any longer, the family - Bihari, his wife, mother, sister and FyB's household – sold their land and left Mohgaon. Having bought farmland in the village of Kedanar, they moved to neighbouring Markakasa, Bihari's mother's natal village, and initially stayed with her brother. They then acquired land in Markakasa from the Thakur to build a house of their own. Indicative of the type of obstacles many people face when settling on land in the area, the forest department claimed that it was the original landholder of the plot bought by Bihari and that the Thakur had no right to sell it. He paid a fine and the matter appears to be resolved[62]. Misfortune, however, seemed to follow Bihari: having moved away from a source of spiritual attack in Mohgaon, Bihari suffered magical attacks in Markakasa itself, this time from a non-kinsman but again as a result of a dispute over land.

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[61] This is an estimate based on genealogies of the oldest families to settle the village. Of the two villages (*gaon*) – Markakasa and Herpar - that make up the administrative village unit (*gram*), the latter is the older (and smaller), though I have no information as to when it was first settled.

The attempt to escape witchcraft attacks was not always articulated as related to a dispute. Sometimes there was a feeling of unease and incurable illness, together with the awareness that one was being attacked. Consider Pardhu, a middle-aged Gond man, whose story in some ways parallels that of Bihari. Hailing from Bonde, a village to the south in an area regarded by Markakasa people as wilder territory (*jangalpatti*), Pardhu's father died when he was a boy. His mother took the children to her natal village, Markakasa, and stayed in the house of her brother. In order to ease the burden on his *mama* (MB), Pardhu became a *naukar* (long-term servant) for another village Gond, Buddu Koreti, grazing his buffaloes. After two years of service, Buddu asked Pardhu if he would marry his daughter and become a *lamsena*, a married man who lives uxorilocally. He agreed, and for a while they lived in his father-in-law's household. Tensions appeared to have developed and Pardhu did not like the way he was treated by Buddu. He left Markakasa with his wife and mother and returned to his natal village. Within a couple of years of his return, he fell seriously ill: spots and boils developed on his legs and feet and he felt very weak. The sickness came and went and he found it difficult to farm his land. His mother told him that his father had died of a similar illness and that they should leave Bonde permanently and return to Markakasa. There he recovered, but for several years they had no land to farm as their own. It was his wife's duty, he said, to ask her father for a share of his estate but she never did so. Nevertheless, Buddu did give them some land to build a house, and Pardhu's wife eventually inherited farmland from her mother's family in a neighbouring village.

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[62] The overwhelming majority of houses in Markakasa are built on forest land and are therefore illegal. Most of these householders have at some point been summoned to the sub-district administrative office to answer a charge and pay a fine. The payment of the fine de facto regularises the illegal occupation, and it is understood that the forest department will not ask that the house be demolished.

Of course, there were other reasons why people left their natal villages and came to Markakasa. Famine resulting from crop failure at home was repeatedly mentioned, and this concurs with the historical record of several famines in the late nineteenth and early- to mid-twentieth centuries in both the Chhattisgarh plains and Chanda and Bhandara forests (Russell 1908: 142-44). The area around Markakasa was seen as an attractive place to come for those from the plains because, although the soil was inferior, there was an abundance of forest and unsettled land. The forest itself could provide an income through the sale of bamboo and other produce, and where necessary could be cut down and ploughed.

Overall, there was an impression among Markakasa's inhabitants that people were more willing to move their homes from place to place in the past than now.[63] Of course, these days people migrate to Nagpur or Mumbai to work. I was told that this rarely happened in the past and even now very few end up staying there permanently. Of those who had left the village permanently, there were only two men (and their families) who, as informal sector workers, had done so for reasons unconnected with taking up a government job (which would require relocation). For many young men who had worked as seasonal labourers, life in the city was seen as exciting, with the distractions of girls, 'hotels' (restaurants) and the cinema; but it was ultimately unliveable. Money was plentiful in the city but one's quality of life suffered. One had to *buy* firewood – spindly sticks and branches one would never consider using in the village. The city was seen as a dirty place, full of illness and mosquitoes, where there was nowhere to seek relief from the sun and heat; a place where bathing was difficult and where one had no choice but to defecate in full view of women.

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[63] See also Nandini Sundar (1997: 44-5), who similarly suggests that the rate of migration in the neighbouring region of Bastar in the past was high and the population mobile.

Non-seasonal mobility was bound up with availability of land: in the past, one could arrive in the village, cut down some of the forest and, if one farmed the land for two years, one was permitted, according to custom, to assert ownership over that land. In any case I was told, people in the past (especially Gonds) disliked staying in any one place for too long and farming the same land over again. If they suffered misfortune or attack, received a bad omen or felt uneasy they would leave the village and move to another one.

Moving permanently to another village to escape spiritual attack or a sense of unease has become progressively more difficult in areas where Adivasis live, largely because the supply of farmland has, from the 1960s (in Maharashtra at least), been restricted by state legislation. Under these laws, an Adivasi may not alienate his land to a non-Adivasi without the written consent of the Collector, the highest-ranking administrator in a district. These restrictions were put in place by the Maharashtra Land Revenue Code of 1966 in accordance with certain provisions of the Indian Constitution. It quickly became apparent, however, that in many districts Collectors were granting permission as a matter of routine. The State then enacted two measures to tighten up the regime of non-alienation: the Maharashtra Land Revenue Code and Tenancy Laws (Amendment) Act 1974 and the Maharashtra Restoration of Land to Scheduled Tribes Act 1974. The former imposed stricter restrictions on future alienation while the latter acted retrospectively to invalidate any land transfers made from Adivasi to non-Adivasi in the period from 1966 to 1974 and return the land to the original Adivasi landholder. These laws were enacted in order to protect Adivasi landowners from exploitation by moneylenders and traders, and by non-Adivasis migrating to Adivasi areas and settling the land.[64] Over the past 100 years or so, Adivasi land tenure has decreased considerably. In some parts of central India, Gonds, who just a century ago were the principal landowners have now been so thoroughly displaced that many work as labourers on land they once used to own. Bates (1985: 574), for instance, reports that the number of Gond villages (those where the landlord was a Gond) fell from 205 to 141 in Narsinghpur district between 1866 and 1907 and from 294 to 129 in Raipur district between 1869 and 1912. Indebtedness to moneylenders and shopkeepers was one of the major causes of this process of appropriation: land would be demanded in order to settle debts or bills. Though abuses still occur, they have largely diminished in most areas, due in part to the growth of the Naxalite movement (see below)[65]. In Markakasa, although the Gaita Gonds comprise less than a quarter of the total village population, they hold nearly sixty percent of the available land: their combined landholding is 203 acres while that of the Telis and Mahars (non-Adivasi castes which have comparable population in Markakasa), is 57 and 45 acres respectively. Whereas pre-1974 (1966) Gond-held land was alienable and was sold to incomers, since 1974 this land has ceased to be available. This is the case, of course, for many of the villages in the area. To be sure, though the supply of land available to purchase is far more restricted nowadays than in the past, it is still possible to lease land for less than five consecutive years according to the 1974 law. Farmland available for lease in this way is, however, often of inferior quality, being situated on uneven and sloping ground and thus less productive, and any crop sown here is more prone to failure. The Jhetmal family, a group of four Teli households and relative newcomers to the village, were often discussed as having succeeded in cultivating leased land productively and profitably. Their history demonstrates to some extent the intersections of migration, witchcraft and land law reform.

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[64] Many of the Adivasis I knew, while appreciating the need to protect their landholdings, did resent the fact that they were effectively barred from selling land, which they could no longer farm effectively through lack of labour, and were unable to convert into money which could be used to buy agricultural capital such as tractors or pumps. Non-Adivasis would often complain that while Adivasi people had a lot of land, they were weak (*kamjor*) and unable or unwilling to farm it as effectively as others.

[65] The abuses now generally centre on the benefits Adivasi people receive under government policies to assist Scheduled Tribes, though the perception is that these too have diminished as a result of the Naxalite presence. I was told of several cases, for example, when a local trader 'persuaded' an Adivasi to apply for a subsidised tractor (the cost of which the Adivasi could not afford) so that the trader could use it to transport his goods. The increased availability of expensive medicines in recent years has also caused some local people to go into debt in an attempt to cure protracted illness. Unable to pay the pharmacist, they agree to lease their land for a certain number of years.

The Jhetmal family are Chhattisgarhi Telis and live in the newest part of the village, located at its northern end close to the Gond graveyard where the forest has recently been cut into to make way for more houses. The four brothers, together with their father and respective households, came to Markakasa in 1987 from the neighbouring village of Somutola where they had been resident since 1968. Before that they had lived in Alewada, a village thirty kilmetres away to the north-west. After arriving in Somutola, the Jhetmals had bought land from a Gond in 1973. Unfortunately for them, the enactment of the Scheduled Tribe land legislation in 1974 meant that the sale was retrospectively annulled and their eighteen acres of land reverted to the original owner. They left Somutola because land was available to rent in Kedanar, a village neighbouring Markakasa, and also because Somutola had become an uncomfortable place to live, as one of the brothers, Atmaram Jhetmal, explained:

> "Somutola is a Gond village. There used to be some households of other castes there but they had left over the years and we were the only Teli family left. We weren't treated well by the other villagers because we were the only non-Adivasi there. We didn't feel right. We managed to rent some land in Kedanar [after our land in Somutola was taken away] but we didn't want to stay there because that too is a Gond village and none of our caste-fellows live there. Markakasa has Telis so we moved here."

When I asked why they had moved from Alewada in the first place, the old man Jhetmal told me that the family had been suffering 'pain' (*dukh*) there. When I pushed him on the kind of *dukh*, he said that his family had been the targets of magic (*jadu-tohna*) performed by other villagers. When I repeated this to Didi, my landlord's sister, she said that that was rubbish: the reason why the family had left their village was that Old Man Jhetmal is 'bad' (*kharab*), a practitioner of magic (*jadu khor*) and the Alewada villagers had driven them out. Of course, it is impossible to know which version of the migration story is true. What is interesting is that in both accounts witchcraft and a dispute feature as the reasons for moving.

From 1987 to the present day, the Jhetmals have rented the land of others, mainly Gonds in Markakasa and Kedanar, and are regarded as being very successful. They are admired by many other Markakasa people for working hard on land that Gonds could not make productive, and the amount of money they have in their bank accounts is the subject of much speculation. In the year 2003-04, the four brothers produced between ten and thirteen sacks of rice per acre farmed. And, over the course of several years, they have between them acquired three teams of bulls and three carts, which represent major investments and signifiers of wealth for Markakasa farmers. Nevertheless, the Jhetmals buck the pattern: renters of land are poorer than those who own. Certainly no other landless villager who farms, or farmer with small landholdings of less than an acre, owns bulls or carts. Whereas those whose land-holdings in the village stretch back two or more generations produce between ten and fifteen sacks of *dhan* (unhusked rice) per acre of land farmed, those who have acquired land more recently from non-Adivasis, or who farm rented land, produce between seven and nine sacks per acre.[66]

Those who migrate to Adivasi areas (in Maharashtra) post-1974 face a chronic shortage of land. The best farmland is often owned by Adivasis who, watched by the village *talathi* (government land registrar), are unable to sell. The process of being allocated land by the state is lengthy and expensive, and the land is largely of poor quality. Migrating in order to escape the attentions of witches and attacks of magic in the course of a dispute has become far more difficult, because the security of a living is no longer guaranteed. Those who live exclusively by leased land need to work much harder, and the prospect of buying land has significantly diminished. Though the Jhetmal sons are keen on eventually acquiring land of their own, their elderly father, perhaps affected by the experience of having land taken away from him, is more equivocal: "If you've got *gur* [molasses], it'll attract flies; no *gur*, no flies".[67]

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[66] One sack of unhusked rice (dhan) weighs in at about 70kg. The 2003-04 rate for the ordinary grade rice which the overwhelming majority of farmers sow was between Rs. 480 and Rs. 520 per quintel (100kg). The figures quoted above are based on a household survey I undertook between March and May 2004.

Migration did occur in the past, however, and on a large scale. The result in Markakasa is the creation of a *panchrangi gaon*, a 'mixed village' where people of twelve castes and four languages live side by side. The founding story of the settlement is clear: Burri Netam left his home village of Barritola to the south-east (now in the state of Chhattisgarh) and cut down some of the jungle after obtaining permission from the local *malguzar*. His was the only house at first, but he was soon joined by more Gaita Gond families and then also by a Mahar. The arrival of waves of Chhattisgarhi (and Marathi) immigrants has radically altered the village and the way it does things. The *ghotul-kuria*, a dormitory for youth, ceased to function at some point in the 1930s, a result of the influx of other types of people, I was told (discussed further below). Similarly, the lingua franca of the village has now become Chhattisgarhi, whereas in the recent past it was Gondi and even the non-Gond castes spoke it. On our return from a Gond meeting in an all-Gond village, where Gondi was the only language spoken throughout the proceedings, my landlord lamented (making a comparison): "Our village has become so *dhamdi* [derogatory term for Chhattisgarhi people], even the Gonds are forgetting how to speak their language. It's not pure anymore, it's mixed with Chhattisgarhi." The presence of other castes with other world views meant that certain measures that were in the past used to combat witchcraft collectively at the village level are no longer available. One important example is the *Angadev*, a deity that can detect witches but cannot be deployed in a mixed village such as Markakasa, ostensibly because of differences in opinion over its efficacy.

Angadev: the collective response to village dis-ease

The principal weapon the village as a collective has at its disposal in combating witches and ghosts (*bhut*) is to request the services of an *Angadev* (or in Gondi, *Angapen*), a powerful Gond deity that is adept at detecting troublemakers and unquiet spirits. The *Angadev* is called to uncover the causes of suffering felt by the village as a whole, such as in cases of illness or death of a large number of young people. But the *Angadev* will only visit the village if the village has, as a whole, invited it to come; it will not attend if there is the slightest hint of dissension or unwillingness. In a 'mixed village' such as Markakasa this unity of purpose has proved hard to come by and, despite repeated attempts by certain groups within the village to organise a visit by the *Angadev*, other groups have been equally persistent in their opposition to its presence. The unity demanded by the *Angadev* is significant. A village which invites the god acknowledges that it is somewhat disunited, and that there are within the body of the village people such as witches and others who are causing harm. In a sense, therefore, the arrival of the *Angadev* is evidence that disunity has already been overcome, and its presence is a trace of prior processes of negotiation which re-established village cohesion. Unity of purpose also has a more practical aspect: inviting the *Angadev* to one's village is extremely expensive and all villagers need to be agreed in order to contribute money. The villagers have to bear the cost of transport for the deity and its attendants, animals (goats, pigs, chickens) for sacrifice and feasts, and alcohol. Depending on how long the *Angadev* stays, the whole exercise can cost between Rs. 20,000 and Rs. 50,000, an enormous sum of money.[68]

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[67] In other words: having something will ensure it is coveted by others; having nothing solves the problem.

While I was conducting fieldwork in Markakasa, an *Angadev* was invited to the neighbouring village of Gujarbarga, located 3km away along a dirt road. Though I had heard descriptions of it from my informants, I was thus fortunate enough to be able to see it for myself. The *Angadev* resembles a wooden bier[69], comprising three long, thick wooden poles crossed by two smaller pieces that connect the others across its width. The middle length of wood is said to be imbued with power (*shakti*) and is carved at the front with the head of an animal – in the case known to me, of a horse. The latter is specifically referred to as the *pen* or *dev* (god). The *Angadev* that I saw at Gujarbarga was decorated with a large number of peacock feathers at the places where the length and the width poles crossed; the god itself (the head) was painted bright orange, and the poles were black. This particular *Angadev* had come from its shrine 40km away to the south, accompanied by several *baiga*. Elwin (1943) writes that the *Angadev* is a Gond clan god: the Gonds are divided into a number of clans, the clan name being what other Indians would call the 'family name' (or surname). Each clan has an ultimate home territory (*bhumi*), a place of origin, and this is where the *Angadev* resides[70]. Gell (1980) does not dwell on the clan aspect of the god and refers to the *Angadev* as 'log-gods'. In Markakasa, the *Angadev* is regarded primarily as a *tohni* (witch)- and *bhut* (ghost/spirit)-detecting device, and classed by Adivasi and non-Adivasi alike as belonging to Gond *sanskruti* (culture).[71] The *Angadev* is carried by four bearers, who describe being driven by the *dev* to places where witches live or ghosts are to be found. The landscape is no obstacle for the deity: *Angadev* have been known to take their bearers through lakes, into wells, far out to threshing floors and up onto the roofs of houses in search of *bhut* and *tonhi*.

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[68] This converts to approximately £250 and £650 respectively. The daily wage for a (male) farm labourer is Rs. 25 (30p).

[69] The *Angadev*'s similarity to a funerary bier is noted by Elwin (1943), who suggests that the actual tool of divination may in the past have been a corpse. That the word *anga* means or suggests 'body' in most north Indian languages confirms this for him (*anga* [body] + Gondi. *pen*/Chhattisgarhi. *dev* [god]). In Markakasa the use of a corpse for divination is known as *heyr* and is a distinct ritual. During *heyr*, the corpse of the person struck down by witchcraft is borne by four bearers who are guided to point out the wrong-doer.

I had conflicting reports about why the people of Gujarbarga had invited the *Angadev*. Some in Gujarbarga denied that there was anything currently wrong in the village and asserted that the *Angadev* was coming in order that it stayed that way. Thirty years ago, I was told, a lot of cows in the village stopped giving milk and started dying, and many people were sick. The *Angadev* visited, rooted out the *tonhi* and *bhut* that were causing the problems and everything has been fine ever since. At that time, the elders of the village promised to ask the *Angadev* to return again in the future. The present-day elders had decided, therefore, that now was the time. Others, however, assured me that the

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[70] The idea of *bhumi* was not particularly well articulated among the Gonds in Markakasa; it was regarded as specialist knowledge that only *baiga* would know. A couple of households have Gond calendars, which contain a list of all Gond surnames (or clans) and their *bhumi*, but for the Gonds of Markakasa this seemed to be little more than a curiosity. For them it was more important to know the 'home' village of their *particular* lineage or family, for this is where their household gods (*lonchtun*) reside.

[71] See Sundar (2001: 437), who describes how the state facilitated witch-hunting by renting out the *Angadev* housed in the Maharaja of Bastar's palace at Jagdalpur. She, too, states that the *Angadev* is a clan-god of the Muria and Maria Gonds.

Angadev had been called to detect existing trouble-makers, and that the solution provided thirty years ago needed to be sought once more.

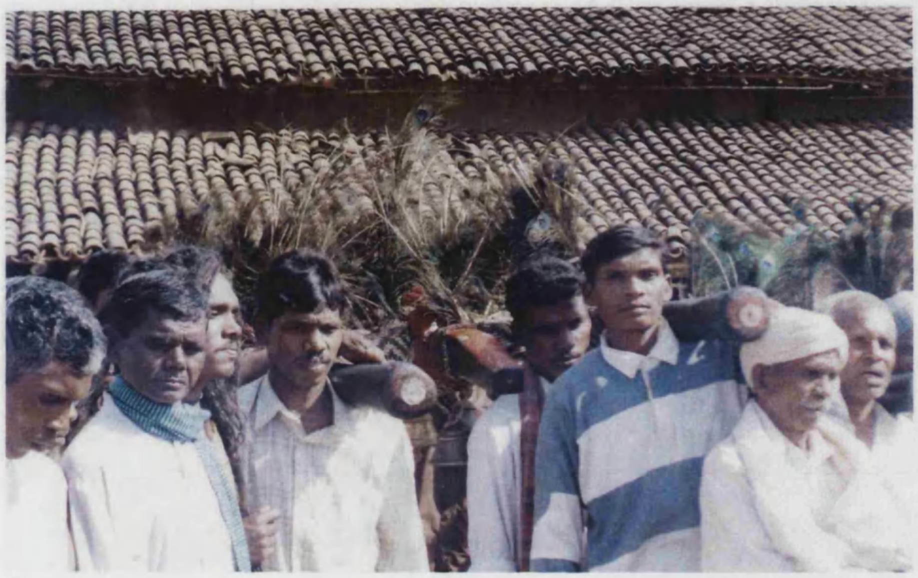

Plate 15: The Angadev with attendants

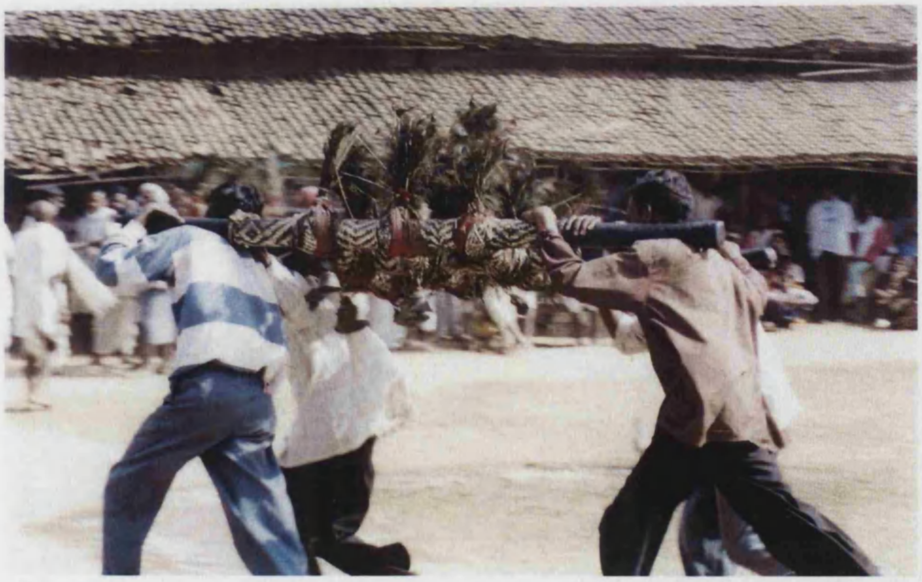

Plate 16: The Angadev at 'play' (khel), *driving its bearers*

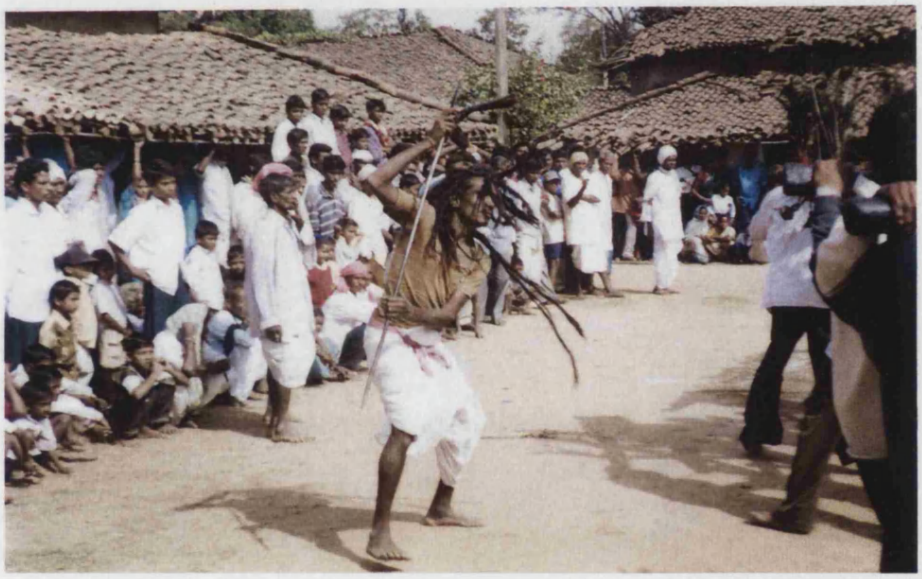

Plate 17: A baiga *becomes possessed while the Angadev plays.*

There are three principal stages of the *Angadev*'s visit to a village. The first is the binding of the village's boundaries (Chh. *sima bāndhna*), whereby the *Angadev* travels the length of the borders, stopping several times along the way while the attendant *baigas* sacrifice animals to it. The binding is said to be done in order to prevent residents leaving the village while the *Angadev* is in residence. Informants described it as a powerful spell that would kill or harm anyone trying to leave. All the inhabitants of a village visited by an *Angadev* must be in residence for the duration of its visit; people working as labourers in nearby towns are contacted and instructed to return home. This residence rule is extremely important and if the *Angadev* is not convinced that all inhabitants will be present, it is said that it will refuse to come at all.

The second, and central, stage is the detection of witches and ghosts (Chh. *tonhi-bhut khojna*). The *Angadev* goes from house to house searching for wrong-doers – witches and ghosts. When it detects a witch[72], it stands in front of him and knocks him with one of the poles that make up its bier. Interestingly, there was lack of agreement as to the significance of this action: some people said that this was merely the act of identifying the witch; others believed that the blow was actual punishment and that the witch would eventually die as a result.

The third and final stage is 'play' (Chh. *khel*; G. *karsana*) and is the entertainment aspect of the visit: the *Angadev* puts on a show. A crowd of spectators gather in the village square, and as the drums beat the *Angadev* rushes around swaying and dancing, sometimes bumping into members of the audience. Here, however, there is no risk of being accused of witchcraft: the *Angadev* is merely 'playing'. At the same time, induced by the drumming, the attendant *baigas* and certain other people, both villagers and visitors, begin to get possessed by the gods (Chh. *dev jhupna*), who come to 'play' alongside the *Angadev*. The scene is incredibly chaotic. Men possessed roll around on the ground, jump into the crowd or flay themselves with barbed chains and all the while the *Angadev* is running and swaying.[73]

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[72] Technically a witch can be male (*tonha*) or female (*tonhi*), but the former term is less common in daily usage than the latter, which is often used to refer to male witches too.

Of these three stages of an *Angadev* visit, I was only able to witness the final one. But this was not through lack of trying. Though I had confirmed the dates of the visit on a number of occasions, and the Gujarbarga people I spoke to led me to believe that I would be able to witness the detection stage as well as the 'play' stage, they had in fact misled me and other 'outsiders' (people from other villages) and given us all the wrong dates. I arrived in Gujarbarga at the appointed time accompanied by several friends from Markakasa. To our dismay we were told that the first two stages had been carried out during the night when only the Gujarbarga villagers were present and that all the 'work' (*kām*) had been done; all that was left now was the element of spectacle. We visited several households (those with whom my companions had some kinship or friendship tie) and asked questions about what had occurred the night before, but received no satisfactory information. We watched and returned to our village by early evening, and the talk in the teashop was dominated by how no-one who had been to Gujarbarga had understood what had gone on. To the extent that we can learn a great deal about a given social situation by 'reading' that which is lied about or left unsaid, that the Gujarbarga villagers had done this was extremely interesting. Why would they lie? Naturally, I was a little put out when I discovered that I would not be seeing any witch-finding and I asked an acquaintance, a man called Girdari, who was the Gujarbarga *sarpanch* (elected headman), to explain why I (and others) had been misled. The reason, he said, was that the activities of the *Angadev* in Gujarbarga were a secret matter, and secrecy needed to be maintained in relation to two groups: people from other villages and the police. As Girdari explained, the concern with keeping things from people from other villages was bound up with potential stains on honour and reputation:

> "It was held at night because we didn't want people from other villages here. If word gets out that such-and-such person's house had a ghost in it

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[73] A. Gell (1980) has an interesting discussion of the *Angadev*'s characteristic movement in the context of an argument about the importance of vertigo and dizziness in Hindu-Gond ritual practices.

> or that so-and-so's wife is a witch then the reputation of that household suffers in relation to outsiders. They might have problems marrying their sons and daughters. So it's best to keep these things within the village; outsiders ought not to know. We don't want the village to get a bad name."

Thus it would seem that though the invitation of an *Angadev* to one's village is a sign to the outside world that something is not quite right within and needs to be dealt with, the honour of the village and of the people in it requires to be maintained nevertheless. The *Angadev*'s insistence on village unity is striking. Not only does it bind the village along its boundaries, thus identifying it physically in terms of geography, but it also prevents any villager from being absent, which marks the village socially. In a very real way then, the *Angadev*, through ritual, brings into being or confirms the existence of the body of the village, a body which is described as having fallen sick.

Girdari's desire to keep the *Angadev*'s visit secret from the police is far more complex, and is indicative of the type of impediments that exist to combating witchcraft and magic at the village level. The problem was that Gujarbarga had been refused the required police authorisation to invite the deity. In the particular case of the *Angadev*, villagers seek assurances from the police that those who accuse others of witchcraft will not be subject to criminal investigation. The villagers in return undertake not to use violence in dealing with a suspected witch. Essentially, the police are asked to adopt a 'hands-off' attitude and the villagers are given control over witchcraft accusations and their consequences.[74] Just as police permission was refused for Gujarbarga, so it was denied about six months later for another all-Gond village, Piparkhar, about 10km from Markakasa. Young people there had been falling ill and dying at an unusually high rate, perhaps eight in as many months, and no medical explanation had proved satisfactory to Piparkhar's inhabitants. While negotiations were taking place with the guardians of an *Angadev* in Bastar, the police refused the villagers' request. On learning of this, the

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[74] See Macdonald (2004: appendix) for an example of just such an agreement between police and villagers in plains Chhattisgarh.

Angadev guardians declared that they would not attend a village which had not received official permission. Police approval seemed to be increasingly difficult to come by. In the past, the *Angadev* would come and go and asking for permission was just a formality; in most cases the village would not bother to inform the authorities at all. The police were stationed far from the village and visited infrequently. Why were the police no longer granting permission for *Angadev* visits? I will return to possible answers to this question below. Let us for now consider why, unlike in Gujarbarga which is an all-Gond village, the use of the *Angadev* to combat village dis-ease in mixed villages such as Markakasa is no longer (at least publicly) considered.

As we saw above, the *Angadev* requires that a village be united in its desire to invite the deity. One reason for this requirement might be so that the *Angadev* is not used in a (at least overtly) political way against a particular household, family or faction within the village[75]. This kind of unity, according to people in Markakasa, was difficult to come by in a mixed village (*panchrangi gaon*) and so the dis-ease that afflicted it was difficult to combat. Many people I spoke to confirmed that "things were not right" in Markakasa and that there was no solution. Bhanu, the owner of the Markakasa tea-stall and a Chhattisgarhi Rawat[76], gave an example of the village's malaise.

"About fifty years ago when I was a child," Bhanu narrated, "Markakasa had plenty of cows and plenty of milk; indeed it was famous throughout the area for its milk – ask anyone: people used to come here from villages all around for it. Then suddenly over a period of a couple of years all the cows began to get ill and died."
"Surely", I said, "they just contracted some illness (*bimari*) that was going around."
"No, this was not a disease. How can you explain the fact that cows were kicking away their calves, not letting them suckle and leaving them to die? That's no disease. Do you see any milk in Markakasa today? We've got the whole forest to graze our cattle and still they can barely produce half a glass. Surely this is a sign that something's wrong here."
"What's wrong?"

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[75] It is acknowledged, however, that the bearers of certain *Angadev* can be bribed into identifying certain people as witches or troublemakers.

[76] There are two types of Rawat (traditionally cattle-herders) in Markakasa – Chhattisgarhi and Gondi.

"Some people here are bad (*kharab*). That's why the village has been ruined (*gaon bigadgehein*)."

There were a number of village men sitting at the tea-stall as this conversation took place, listening and agreeing with what Bhanu said. A Gond man, Buddharam, with whom I had had several conversations about the *Angadev* previously, joined in the discussion:

> "Remember what I told you about the *Angadev*. Well, about three years ago, some of us wanted it to come here but there was no agreement. Some people, the Telis, said that the *Angadev* was a waste of money and a load of superstition (*andha-shradda*), and that it couldn't find *tonhi* or *bhut*. But that's all rubbish. They're just worried that the *Angadev* will find out what they've been doing. We've been trying to invite the *Angadev* for years. But because the village is not united, we cannot bring the *Angadev* here."

Though it was certainly not the case that all Telis regarded the *Angadev* as evidence of 'superstition', when I discussed the *Angadev* visit to Gujarbarga with several Teli men, the prevailing attitude appeared to be one of condescension. The *Angadev* was essentially a hoax, they said, and the Gujarbarga Gonds, in spending such a vast amount of money in inviting it, were prisoners of their own 'blind faith'. But the Teli opposition to the *Angadev* also stemmed from anxieties about the risk of being singled out by the deity as practitioners of witchcraft.

In much of the area around Markakasa and in other parts of Chhattisgarh, the Teli caste has a particular reputation for employing ghosts (*bhut*) and for its women to be witches (*tohni* or *saude*). Villages in Chhattisgarh with majority Teli populations were regarded by other castes as risky places in which to marry daughters, who might either become the target of a witch or, more likely, would be tempted into learning the ways of magic (*jadu*) themselves by becoming someone's apprentice. To my surprise, the idea that Telis (and in particular Teli women) have a greater propensity to be witches was shared by some of my Teli informants, too. The presence of a large Teli community in Markakasa, then, is regarded as problematic. Not only is witchcraft more likely to be performed and ghosts to be employed by such people, but their presence makes the use of anti-witchcraft measures such as *Angadev* more difficult, if not impossible. This difficulty, which is the result of living in a mixed village with other castes, is replicated at the household level where, among Gonds at least, the use of a pre-wedding ritual to test a new wife or daughter-in-law for witchcraft has been abandoned because of what it connotes about Gond sexuality.

The demise of *panbuddi*: sex and marriage, detecting witches and 'looking bad'

There are impediments which exist at the level of collective village action against witchcraft and dis-ease, the most striking being the difficulty experienced in employing the *Angadev*. But impediments exist at the individual level too, and are intimately bound up with ideas of 'improvement' and of 'looking bad' in front of other castes and other types of people, ideas which emerge out of the experience of living in a 'mixed village'.

One of the more individual ways in which to test for witchcraft is a ritual called *panbuddi*. Like the *Angadev*, this is a ritual identified as Adivasi or Gond; unlike *Angadev*, however, it is only Gonds who perform it. *Panbuddi* is carried out the day before a man and woman are married (for *shādi*). It has two purposes. The first is to impress upon the couple the importance of their exclusive commitment to one another. Among Gonds, in sharp contrast to many of the other castes whom they live alongside, virginity is not generally regarded as a burden (cf. Parry 2001: 795-6), and neither men nor women are assumed to be sexually inexperienced when they marry. By undergoing *panbuddi*, the couple formally renounce any previous ties of affection they may have had. One man explained it thus:

> "The *baiga* [Gond ritual specialist] asks them both to come out to the *maidan* [open space] and there they walk around him seven or nine times while he says a prayer and sprinkles water over them. He makes them pure

> [*shuddh*] from anything they may have done in the past in their villages before their marriage. They have to forget the past [their previous loves] now that they are married."

Panbuddi also serves a second purpose: that of detecting witches. During the course of the ritual, the bride-to-be is tested by the *baiga* to determine whether or not she has learnt witchcraft, or whether she is associated with any spirits/ghosts (*bhut*) that may work for her and that she would bring to her new household. The test is performed on behalf of the groom's family and the *baiga* is employed by them. Concerns about possible witches are rather prominent in choosing a new daughter-in-law, and extensive enquiries are made through contacts in her natal village to detect any rumours about her or her family, especially if the natal village is one with a reputation for witches and ghosts. Despite these enquiries, many families also ask that a *panbuddi* be performed before the actual wedding ceremony takes place. *Panbuddi* has, however, ceased to be practiced in Markakasa and in several surrounding villages. The reasons given to me by Gond villagers for its abandonment is that it is considered as 'looking bad' (Chh. *accha ni dike*) in both its aspects: that it is a public yet highly individual test for witchcraft, and that it affirms an ideology of sex and marriage that runs counter to that held by other groups. Let us look a little more closely at this latter point and how the expression of a different ideology might appear shameful or less prestigious.

Some of the most frequent questions I was asked by villagers about life back in Britain were about marriage: how, when, why and whom do we marry. Playing the good anthropologist and trying desperately not to generalise, I would reply that some married at nineteen or twenty, others not until their thirties or later. I added that recently more people were choosing to cohabit before marriage and would even have children before any wedding might take place. Men and women married for love (*prem*), I said. Rather than be shocked by this or find it incomprehensible, as I had experienced in other parts of India, villagers of all castes would comment half-jokingly that British people seemed a lot like Gonds in this regard[77]. Gonds, too, were allowed (i.e. they would not suffer any punishment by their caste council) to live together without getting married and would also often have children out of wedlock.[78] This Gond ideology of sexuality and marriage, in relation once again to specifically Gond activities (in this case, of dancing), found expression at a meeting I attended held at a neighbouring village.

In most all-Gond villages in the area, adolescent boys and girls from the age of twelve to nineteen (or older in some cases) regularly meet to practise dancing, singing and drumming[79]. Mahua daru, the local brew, is often consumed on these occasions by both girls and boys. These dances are then performed at Gond weddings and funerals[80]. In the past, dancing and singing would take place in the area outside the ghotul, a dormitory principally for boys. Though the ghotul had ceased to exist as an actual building in all the Gond villages I visited during the course of fieldwork, this aspect of adolescent association seemed to have survived in the form of these dancing groups. In most of the mixed villages such as Markakasa, the Gond youth no longer danced or sang at all, even though a ghotul building may have existed in the past (as indeed it did in Markakasa)[81]. The responses to questioning about why Gonds in these mixed villages no longer danced was fairly uniform: "that in front of other castes, boys and girls dancing together didn't look good (*accha ni dike*) and they laughed at us".

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[77] I consistently encountered the view that the English language and Gondi had some sort of natural affinity, perhaps in part because of the difference in rhythm and tone between these two on the one hand and the relatively similar sounding group of Marathi/Hindi/Chhattisgarhi on the other.

[78] And love (*prem*) appeared to have value as a basis for marriage, though it seemed to have different meanings depending on the context. On one level, *prem* was regarded as something rather risqué, not respectable and also somehow disrespectful to the families concerned on both sides. But this was a rather narrow, sensationalist view of a 'love marriage'. As a result of this connotation, people would often talk about *prem* in terms of the slightly colder, clinical phrase *man-pasand* (lit. 'agreeable to the mind'), a flexible usage that covered all sorts of motives, from what we would understand as romantic love to merely seeing the prospective spouse and liking the look of him or her. Talking to two Gond young men, Hemu and Latchu, about love and marriage one day, Hemu said that Latchu and his wife Mukta had had a 'love marriage'. Latchu's response was immediate. "No, it wasn't like that at all; we'd been 'talking to one another' for a while but I went to her house and spoke to her parents (i.e. asked their consent for the marriage)." In effect, Latchu and Mukta did have *prem* before they married but Latchu did not want me to think that he had eloped with his wife or acted disrespectfully.

More of the Gond elders than those of other castes had married their wives as a result of *paithu. Paithu* occurs when a woman enters the house of her prospective husband and demands that he marry her. It is then his responsibility to send word to her parents of their intention to marry, and also pay a special bride-price known as *sukh* (ordinary brideprice is *karchi*). Often, this 'entering' will have been pre-arranged between the lovers, who have in effect accomplished an elopement.

[79] These include the 'rello' and 'hulki' dances described by Elwin (1957) and Simeran Gell (1992). These meetings for dancing and singing were collectively referred to as 'play' (G. *karsana*).

[80] Indeed, this is how I discovered the continued existence of the ghotul, an institution I assumed had completely died out. Attending a Gond wedding in Markakasa, I watched a group of young men and women from a neighbouring village dance, and I was struck by how the dancing boys and girls sat together all mixed up to eat their meal at the wedding feast in a way that Markakasa young people certainly did not.

Mahaka is an all-Gond village located about 6km from Markakasa. A meeting of local Gonds from forty villages across three districts (Gondia, Gadchiroli, Rajnandgaon) had been called there to discuss a relationship between a Mahaka boy and girl.

The couple had started 'talking to one another' while dancing and struck up a relationship. This went on for approximately three years and, towards the end of that period, the girl became pregnant and gave birth to a girl. They began living together in an abandoned house in the village and maintained cordial relations with their respective parents. The rest of the village was not particularly concerned that this couple were living together or had had a child before being married; the meeting had been called because the villagers believed the couple were committing incest. Both the boy and girl were from the *sath-dev* (seven-god) exogamous division; as such they were to regard one another as brother and sister (*bhauband*). In past village meetings, the couple had been repeatedly called upon to renounce one another but they had refused and been thrown out of caste. Now the council of village elders (*panch*) convened this general meeting to force a solution, armed with the knowledge that the boy had changed his mind, was willing to break the relationship and return to the Gond caste fold. This general meeting took no issue with the pre-marital relationship or with the birth of the child. Their sole concern was the breaking of the union of an incestuous pair, and it was for this that they were both eventually fined. The assembled Gonds did not offer commentary on the morality of the relationship except to criticise the transgression of the incest rule. The connection with a 'typically Adivasi' activity such as dancing is significant. In the close associations and love affairs (though not necessarily eventually marriage) that it promotes, it expresses the relatively unproblematic nature of pre-marital sex for Gonds[82], a notion that would of course 'look bad' in front of other castes holding contrary views in a mixed village.

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[81] When I asked one of the village elders about the ghotul in Markakasa, he said it still existed in the form of a Gond Youth committee set up in the 1980s, which includes all unmarried but mature Gond boys and girls. Its principal function is to organise the serving of food and refreshments during Gond weddings. Interestingly, the Gonds are the only caste in Markakasa in which both young women and men serve guests at a wedding; the other castes use men only of any age.

A brief exposition of child marriage and bride-service also suggests a divergence in attitudes to sexuality. During discussions of marriage with villagers (of all castes), it would always be impressed on me that the Chhattisgarhi castes (and especially the Telis) married their children very young, in the past at the age of eight or nine and nowadays as young as fourteen (though more usually at eighteen or nineteen).[83] Gonds did not do this, I was told: they waited until children were *acchā jawān* (fully mature), and had always done so. As Parry (2001: 795-97) has observed, the performance of child-marriage in Chhattisgarh in the past expressed the idea that the parties to a marriage ought to be virgins, though he also makes clear that, as a result of the time lapse between marriage and actual cohabitation, one did not necessarily need to lose one's virginity to one's spouse. Though it was now seldom performed, Markakasa people reported that, in the absence of performing a pre-pubescent marriage, Chhattisgarhi castes married the girl to a pot or an arrow (see also Dube 1953; Gell 1992: 245-247; Parry 2001: 796). While some interpret this as a 'holding operation' which attempts to control the girl's burgeoning sexuality (Gell 1992: 246; Yalman 1963), Parry (2001) suggests that the primary marriage (*shadi*) in Chhattisgarh in fact liberates female sexuality. He reports that after *shadi* is performed, girls are free to have sexual relations, unburdened by the need to be chaste. In contrast to Gond attitudes, sexuality is only released after marriage.

That the Gond notion of sexuality differed from those of the Chhattisgarhi castes is also suggested by the fact that Gond men who performed bride-service before becoming

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[82] Though see S. Gell (1992) for a discussion of the tensions that the existence of the ghotul sustains between love, closeness and marriage.

[83] Though I conducted a survey on marriage age, I suspect the findings were not all that reliable: many older Telis, even those who, I learnt from other sources, had had child-marriages would, on seeing my notebook and pen, insist that they had got married at eighteen or twenty. I felt that, in these cases, more informal methods of questioning on this topic resulted in more accurate information. Though child-marriages were no longer performed, of the marriages that had taken place more recently, Chhattisgarhis (both girls and boys) married at a younger age than Gonds, and there were no Chhattisgarhi men over the age of 20 still single, and no women over the age of 18, in stark contrast to Gond men and women.

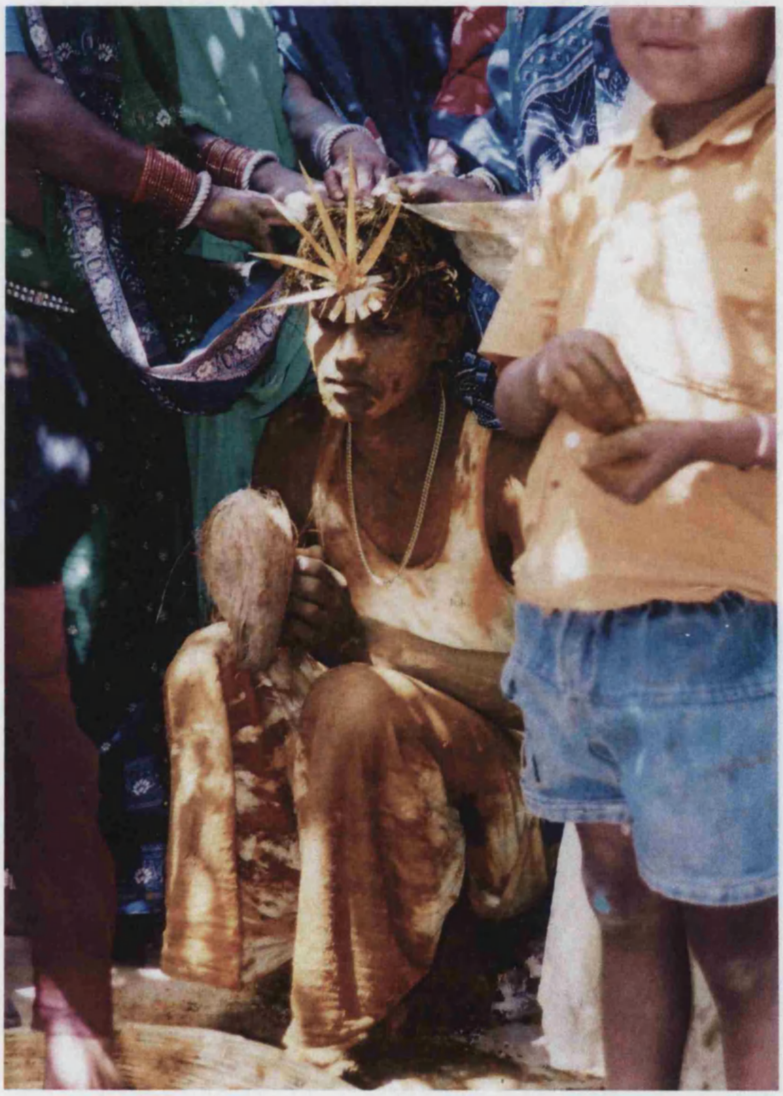

Plate 18: A Chhattisgarhi Teli bridegroom being anointed with turmeric the day before his wedding.

lamsena (uxorilocal husbands) were permitted to have sex with their wives-to-be without the performance of any prior sacrament.[84] In the case of one *lamsena* couple resident in Markakasa, the 'wife' was pregnant and the marriage had yet to be celebrated. One cannot assume, either, that this sexual access is granted in the full expectation that the *lamsena* will marry the woman intended: it is not unheard of for *lamsena* either to leave of their own accord or be kicked out by the erstwhile prospective father-in-law during the period of bride-service. Significantly, I was told by several Teli men that, though men could become *lamsena* in their caste, it very rarely happened, and they would not perform bride-service. Out of the seven current *lamsena* in the village, none were Teli (or indeed of any other Chhattisgarhi caste), and while Gond and Mahar genealogies were replete with *lamsena*, the Teli ones I collected contained none.

That Gonds see no reason for child-marriage or for suppressing sexual access during bride-service suggests that the notion that the parties ought to be virgins has little importance for them. Faced, however, with a 'mixed village', which contains a majority of Chhattisgarhi people for whom the virginity of their offspring *is* of concern, the public affirmation of a counter attitude through the performance of *panbuddi* leaves Gonds 'looking bad'. Unfortunately, since *panbuddi* is also a test for witchcraft it also leaves Gonds without a convenient and useful method of testing for potential witches.

The 'mixed village' then, or at the very least the idea of it, makes the control of witches and magic more difficult, both at the level of the village and for the individual household. For the village, the lack of unity of opinion about the *Angadev* militates against its invitation; for households, especially Gond ones, certain measures to detect witches among in-marrying women appear less attractive because of what the ritual connotes about (female) sexuality.

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[84] This sexual access before marriage was not entirely free of problems, however. Sometimes the father-in-law would govern rather strictly the frequency of sexual relations, leading to conflict with the *lamsena*. This is what happened in the case of the *lamsena* and pregnant *lamsenin* I refer to above: a dispute which arose partly over sexual access led to the *lamsena* threatening murder and suicide.

From the idea of the mixed village, let us turn to the third reason why witchcraft detection and control in this part of India may have become more difficult: the increased presence of the state and of the police in response to the Naxalite insurgency. Recall the comment of the Gujarbarga *sarpanch*, Girdari, who said that the visit of the *Angadev* was to be kept secret from the police since permission had not been granted. How has the relationship between Markakasa villagers and the state changed, and what impact has that had on the control of witchcraft?

Police, Naxalites, and the State

Over the past fifteen years, the eye of the state has become increasingly keener in this relatively neglected and under-governed part of India. This is largely a result of the presence and growth of a violent Maoist-inspired revolutionary movement, often referred to as the Naxalite movement. The police (as representatives of the state) have literally come physically closer to villages such as Markakasa and Gujarbarga than ever before, and bring with them an alternative world-view which is unwilling to tolerate practices (such as the hunting of witches and *bhut*) that reek of superstition or 'blind-faith' (*andha-shraddha*), and are antithetical to their idea of what constitutes 'modern India'. In her recent study of witchcraft accusations and violence in Chhattisgarh, Macdonald (2004) examines the differences that exist between the higher and lower ranks of the Indian police force regarding belief in these types of being: the former subscribe to a 'modernist' vision which takes a dim view of belief in witches and magic, regarding it as a throwback and part and parcel of 'traditional India'; the latter, on the other hand, are more willing to countenance suspicions of magical activity and share in the belief as to their existence (131). Though her argument is entirely convincing and applies equally well to police in the area of my fieldwork, it is premised on the fact that, in much of plains Chhattisgarh (and I suspect in rural India more generally), the lower-ranks of the police are drawn from similar backgrounds to the citizenry they serve. In the Adivasi districts of eastern Maharashtra however, and particularly in the Adivasi dominated areas of southern Gondia and Gadchiroli districts, there is a sharp difference between the lower echelons of state administration (police, teachers, forest officials) and the local population.

Recruitment of the latter into the former, though increasing, is at much lower levels than in other non-Adivasi districts, and thus policemen and others are overwhelmingly 'outsiders', people who regard themselves, and are regarded by locals, as coming from 'a different area' with 'a different atmosphere' (*vātāvaran*).[85] Despite Macdonald's evidence that *objectively* witchcraft is not simply an Adivasi or *jangli* issue and that it is just as prevalent in much of non-Adivasi plains Chhattisgarh, the fact of the matter is that members of the local bureaucracy and police in Adivasi areas do, *as a matter of subjective understanding*, believe that it is more of a concern in these 'backward' areas where they work. This attitude predominates regardless of lower-level policemen's own beliefs in witchcraft and magic. Confronted with people paradigmatically regarded as backward and superstitious, the policeman's response is to deny any similarity.

The Naxalite movement began in the late 1960s in eastern India as a student-led agrarian rebellion agitating for land reform. It exploded into large-scale violence between 1970 and 1971 in Bihar, West Bengal, southern Orissa, northern Andhra Pradesh and Punjab, which receded after the death of the movement's charismatic leader Charu Mazumdar in 1972 (Singh 1995: 133). The People's War Group (PWG) was founded in 1980 in Andhra Pradesh and over the next ten years emerged as the most formidable Naxalite formation in the country (ibid: 106). The founder of the PWG, Kondapalli Seetharamaiah, was arrested in 1984 but after orchestrating a dramatic escape set about consolidating and expanding the movement. It spread its area of operation into eastern Maharashtra and southern Chhattisgarh (erstwhile Madhya Pradesh), both predominantly Adivasi areas. Its ultimate aim appeared to be the elimination of the activities of the Indian state in areas it controlled. The PWG programme consisted of the redistribution of land; enforcing the payment of minimum wages to farm labour; imposing taxes and penalties; holding people's courts; destroying government property; kidnapping government functionaries; attacking policemen (ibid: 108). By the early 1990s, Naxalite violence peaked in Maharashtra with 30, 22, and 37 deaths (police and civilians) recorded in 1991, 1992 and 1993 respectively, and by then the PWG had gained access to landmines as well as guns (ibid: 133-4). The turn of the century has seen a renewed growth in Naxalite activity in Maharashtra, spurred most recently by the influx of Maoist fighters from Andhra Pradesh following the ceasefire there[86]. The figures for Maharashtra are as follows:

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[85] I was unable to obtain official statistics on the percentages of policemen who were 'locals' as opposed to 'outsiders'. Based on my own interviews with junior policemen, however, I would suggest that no more than five percent of the personnel in either the police station at Chichgarh or at the armed outpost nearer Markakasa were from Gondia or Gadchiroli Districts. Most were from other parts of Vidarbha or from western Maharashtra. Conversely, of the three Adivasi men from Markakasa who were policemen, two were stationed in non-Adivasi areas in the northern part of the District.

	2004	2005	2006 (to June)
Incidents (Naxalite)	84	94	56
Civilians killed	9	29	24
Policemen killed	6	24	1

Source: *Parliament Q & A Home Ministry, 2nd August 2006. See* *http://164.100.24.219/annex/208/AU952.htm*

In 2004, the PWG merged with another important Naxalite faction, the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) which operates principally in Bihar and Jharkhand, to form the Communist Party of India (Maoist). Their objective has been the creation of a Compact Revolutionary Zone stretching from the Nepalese border in the north through the spine of central India to Tamil Nadu in the south.[87]

While the Naxalites declare that their struggle is against the perceived oppression of the Indian state and its agents and their ultimate aim is the liberation of the Adivasi peasantry from a neo-colonial yoke, the growth in Naxalite activity has succeeded, at least in this part of India, in bringing the state closer to its citizens. While this is certainly not the case in the 'Liberated Zones', such as parts of southern Chhattisgarh, where the Naxalite presence and dominance appears so overwhelming that the state (as schools, police, health care, roads and transport) has effectively withdrawn (though see footnote 88), in areas where there is more of an engagement between the two sides, there appears to have been an intensification of state activity. Shantha Sinha (1989) observes the same process in rural Andhra Pradesh where, as a result of greater and closer police and administrative contact, "people for the first time realised that their standard of living depended not, as they had so far believed, on the local landlord or money lender but on a much larger and infinitely more powerful entity – the State" (317). An example of this in Markakasa was the construction of a new network of roads in the area by the Border Roads Organisation.

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[86] A ceasefire which has since broken down.

[87] Since 2005, the Naxalite presence in southern Chhattisgarh has been met with a violent response by a vigilante movement known as Salwa Judum, a people's militia sponsored by the state government. The intense fighting has led to the deaths of many people, and an estimated 40,000 people (mostly Adivasi) are internally displaced, now living in refugee camps. See Sundar 2006b.

One of the largest public works projects undertaken by the State in this area in recent years was the building, repairing and tarring of the road network. The work was carried out by a central government agency, the Border Roads Organisation (BRO), a military organisation headed by a Lieutenant-Colonel, and organised into units which complete the commissions. Renowned throughout India for its work on building roads in the most inaccessible and dangerous parts of Kashmir and the insurgency-hit states of the North-East, and along India's tense borders with Pakistan, China and Bangladesh, the BRO was contracted by the government of Maharashtra to build a network of all-weather roads in the Naxalite-affected districts of Gondia and Gadchiroli. A network of tarred roads would allow better access for police and security forces in areas where rebels were known to operate, and also minimise the risk of landmines which could be hidden more effectively on dirt or stone roads. Moreover, the BRO as a military organisation had soldiers at its disposal to guard the construction work from attack by rebels opposed to the project. The work was carried out in phases and is still going on in both districts and across the state border in Chhattisgarh. While the BRO supplied the machinery, materials and engineers, labour was recruited from the areas in which the roads were built. Many Markakasa villagers, both women and men, were employed as labourers on the road-building work during the early phases of construction at various periods between 1995 and 1998.

The BRO left a lasting impression on those in Markakasa who worked for it, and the phrase "*BRO ke zemana mein...*" (in the time of the BRO...) was the reference point used by many to define that period of four years, even when the topic of conversation was not related to the road construction work. The BRO paid its labourers generously and it was seen as a time in which most people were awash with cash. The monthly wage was Rs. 2200, more than double the amount that could be earned on 'ordinary' government works projects, and three times the wage of a farm labourer. When payday came, everyone would receive crisp five hundred rupee notes; for some it was the first time they had seen a denomination that high. Many workers bought consumer goods such as cycles and radios, or a new pair of bulls. It was during the time of the BRO, I was told, that people began to get a taste for eating snacks and drinking tea in roadside cafes, and indeed it was at this time that Markakasa's first *paan* and tea stall opened. Everyone smoked sophisticated and expensive cigarettes ('Bristol'), not the cheap, rustic and more popular Indian *bidi.* Since labourers often worked far from home on other sections of the project, the work provided plenty of opportunities to conduct love affairs too: one young (and pregnant) Markakasa woman recently eloped with a man of a different caste she had met at that time. The BRO did not benefit everyone however: those who required labour for their fields found it difficult to engage anyone at the wages they offered. This is how one man, Ganaram, remembered it:

> "I was sitting in the teashop when Asaram came up to me and asked if I wanted to come and work on his fields for a few days. I had a 'Bristol' hanging out of my mouth and I said that I didn't think I could work for less than sixty rupees a day! [he laughs]. I didn't need to work as a *banihar* (daily wage labourer); I had plenty of money then."

It was not only the generous wages that people remembered about the BRO but the style and efficiency of the operation. The project represented a different 'state' to the one which they had had experience of. The machinery the BRO brought with them was impressive, quite unlike the equipment used by the local Public Works Department (PWD). The engineers and officers, who, I was told, all spoke English with one another, did not tolerate complaints from farmers whose fields bordered the road, and when they realised that supplies were taking too long in coming from elsewhere, they established a cement factory close to their operations. The roads built by the BRO are constantly praised and compared favourably with those built by the district PWD: the latter's roads begin to disintegrate after a couple of monsoons, because of the poor materials used by the contractors (*tekedar*) who lined their own pockets. That sort of corruption did not go on with the BRO, I was told, and as a consequence their roads are of better quality. In short the BRO represented not only a different kind of State, but also a very generous and powerful one, and the project has continued to have great symbolic value. As representative of the modern, good roads are seen by Markakasa people as key indicators of the extent of development of a particular area. Thus, as the neighbouring state of Chhattisgarh was seen in many respects as representing the 'traditional', it was also seen as more backward because of the poor condition of its roads. Indeed, Chhattisgarh's roads were a standing joke and descriptions of journeys there would often include the phrase, "well, you know what their roads are like". The importance of the BRO project was largely symbolic in demonstrating the power of the state in a hitherto neglected part of the country. As I examine later in this section, the engagement of the police has been far more striking and closely involved with the issue of witchcraft.

The Naxalites[88] are a definite presence in Markakasa and the immediate area and have been active here since the early 1990s. Small squads visit the village regularly, going principally to those households where they know they will be fed and watered, and also come to the village shop (owned by my *mahaprasad*, Ganeshyam) after hours to buy soap and biscuits. A general village-wide meeting has not, to my knowledge, been called since 2001, approximately a year before I arrived for fieldwork. On that occasion, the visiting squad woke all the villagers and asked them to gather in front of the Thakur's (hereditary headman) house. There they dragged a village man, Hira, and beat him in front of the rest of villagers. The Naxalites had been told that Hira, who was renting a room in his house to the local forest guard, was passing on information to the latter about the other villagers' illegal timber-hunting forays into the jungle. Substantial bribes were being demanded by the guard, and one or more of the villagers felt aggrieved enough to call in the guerrillas. The Naxalites had let it be known that Hira should ask the forest guard to leave his house. Hira, apparently not believing the information he was given, did nothing. A couple of weeks later, the Naxalites showed they meant business.

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[88] The villagers used a variety of terms to refer to the Naxalites: *naxalwadi* ('naxal-ist'); *jangalwalle* ('those of the forest'); *lal salaam walle* ('red salute people'); or simply by saying *o-man* ('that lot'). They were also referred to non-verbally by making the hand gesture for a gun.

Every village in the area has a story like this to tell, and in many the Naxalites have also killed local people. Both the *sarpanch* (elected head of the village council) and the police *patil* of the nearby village of Piparkhar – referred to above – were killed by the Maoists about ten years ago. In January 2003, a couple of months into fieldwork, two policemen were blown up by a landmine on their way to investigate a Naxalite arson attack on a timber depot fifteen kilometres from Markakasa; the following month, a new, as yet unoccupied government building located about twenty kilometres to the south was attacked and burnt to the ground. In May 2005, a landmine killed seven policemen in a jeep outside a village ten kilometres away. The *sarpanch* of Gujarbarga, Girdari – whom I quoted above – was abducted several years ago and held in the forest for a night. These are just some of the incidents which have taken place locally involving kin, friends and acquaintances of Markakasa people. Information about Markakasa people's direct participation in the Naxalite movement was murky at best, but it seemed that only one person in the village, a woman, had herself been a Naxalite and left the movement a number of years ago; another had been a regular cook for a squad which visited her natal village.

The idea of unity and the mixed village is also a concern whenever the Naxalites are discussed. According to my Markakasa informants, the Naxalites only rather reluctantly engage with *panchrangi gaon* (mixed villages); they prefer villages where Gonds (Adivasis) are the only caste, or at least form a dominant majority. The reasoning is rather straightforward: mixed villages are likely to be more divided and quarrelsome, and Naxalite security and secrecy is compromised where one faction uses the threat of informing the police about the others' links to the guerrillas. The neighbouring village of Kedanar is well-known among locals for being 'open' to the Naxalites: with the village bordered on several sides by dense forest, they come and go as they please and are more visible there than in Markakasa. Kedanar is also seen as a 'united' village in ways that Markakasa is not, principally because the Gond caste are in the overwhelming majority, comprising approximately eighty percent of the households. The Gond-Gowari[89] caste forms a substantial minority in Kedanar. Though marriage between the latter and Gonds is not permitted, the two caste groups nevertheless often work together at each other's life-cycle rituals, especially in villages where there are only a handful of Gowaris (as in Markakasa). Though there are twenty Gowari households in Kedanar, they have for a number of years worked together with the Gonds. Recently however, the Kedanar Gowari community split into two factions ('parties'), with one remaining within the larger Gond fold and the other asserting its desire to operate separately. It appears that a disgruntled Gowari approached the Naxalites complaining about this state of affairs. Two or three guerrillas then visited the village informally and in plain clothes, and let it be known to the two parties that they would rather everyone made up. The leader of the 'separatist' party refused to resolve the issue and, when an 'official' visit was paid a few days later, the leader was roughed up and the factions merged. "The Naxalites talk about unity (*ekta*) when they visit us. They say that all the people in the village should stay united and not let anything divide us."

In response to increased Naxalite activity in the area, in 2003 the police established an Armed Outpost (AOP) in Ganutola, a village four kilometres from Markakasa. AOPs are heavily fortified camps, containing between 25 and 50 policemen led by a Police Sub-Inspector (PSI). AOPs have none of the principal functions of police stations; their sole purpose is to provide a base closer to the forests and villages where Naxalites operate, and from where patrols can be carried out more easily. In an average week, the police patrol for about three days, in a squad of approximately fifteen men, during which time they spend the nights out of base either in the forest or in a village. While I lived in Markakasa, a band of heavily armed policemen in fatigues, looking more like soldiers, would often arrive in the late hours of the evening, use the house of a villager as a base to eat their meal and then retire either to an abandoned threshing floor or the roof of the school to spend the night, heading into the forest before sunrise. The patrol would then reappear in the village a day or two later on their way back to the AOP.

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[89] Gond-Gowaris are classed by the Indian Government as Scheduled Tribe (ST) and are traditionally cattle-herders. In this area they speak a language akin to Gondi. Their surnames are typically Gondi – Netam, Madavi etc.

Not only are the police more visible to villagers than ever before, they are also more accessible and less threatening. The policy appears to be one of engagement with the local populace in order to diminish the attraction of the Naxalite movement. People themselves say that, even fifteen years ago, everyone would either run into their homes or flee to the forest on hearing of the arrival of police in the village. The police were regarded as brutal and being hauled to the station would inevitably involve violence.[90] Nowadays, I was told, even if the *daroga* (chief constable) visited the village, people would not bother to get up and give him a seat. This was bluff of course, and when high-ranking police officers did visit Markakasa they were treated with a certain amount of deference. But the element of fear that people described for earlier times clearly did not exist to the same extent. This was not only the result of their increased visibility but also of a policy of positive engagement. In many ways, local police attempted to position themselves as defenders and advocates of the local Adivasi population vis-à-vis other local state actors such as the *tahsil* (sub-district) office and the Adivasi Development Board.[91]

An example of such 'engagement' was the policy of helping villagers in their dealings with the local administration over the renewal of ration cards. Ration cards are required in order to purchase cheaply priced essentials such as rice, wheat, and kerosene from Government shops. The renewal of these cards had to be done at the sub-district headquarters, some forty kilometres away, and travelling to this town on government work tended to be troublesome and expensive. Typically, the applicant would be asked to submit several copies of various documents and told to return. This would happen repeatedly to the same applicant; bribes were also demanded to process the paperwork. These difficulties came to the attention of the policemen stationed at the AOP at Ganutola as a result of their conversations with villagers in the course of patrolling. The ranking officer, the PSI, decided that they, the police, would collect all the ration card applications and submit them en masse to the *tahsil* office on behalf of the applicants. The PSI at the time was a young man in his late twenties called Sachin. Hailing from more prosperous western Maharashtra, Sachin had seen service in Naxalite-affected areas in the east of the state for three years. His marriage had only recently been agreed and so had his request for a transfer back west, delayed however because of the prospect of a general election[92]. A talkative and inquisitive man, his visits to my house during the course of a patrol always made me slightly uncomfortable: the conversation would naturally turn to the topic of the Naxalites, and he would gently probe me as to whether I had heard any news lately or had an encounter with them. Though I always replied in the negative to both sorts of inquiry, truthfully in the case of the latter, dishonestly in the former, I would then be anxiously questioned by Markakasa villagers at the teastall about what I was asked and whether I had said anything about the *jangalwalle*. Sachin explained why the police had decided to help the locals over the ration cards:

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[90] In 1990, the local police beat a village man so severely that he died of his injuries.

[91] Many scholars have noted that the notion of the 'state' as a unitary, abstract entity is problematic. Different state actors often have different projects and consequently 'the state' is experienced in multiple ways by the citizenry. For more on the Indian state and society see Fuller and Benei (2001), Gupta (1995).

> "That's what's good about being at the AOP in Ganutola: you're in much closer contact with the local people – we see them everyday at the teashop or paantella - and then we meet people in other villages when we go on patrol. We heard complaints about how difficult it was to get ration cards renewed. I asked my superiors in Deori [the *tahsil* town] if we could do something to help: it would help the people but it would also help us [to encourage people to turn against the Naxalites]. We could show them that the police are friends of the people and not their enemies. It's true that the police in this area have behaved badly in the past so we have to change what people think of us."

In their own minds then, they, the police, had become the protectors of the local populace against the petty exploitation perpetrated by local officials. As I mentioned above, villagers were conscious too of a change in attitude and viewed the police with less trepidation than in the past. On the part of the police, this level of involvement, which extended beyond the maintenance of order, was indicative of a wider process of engagement that saw the Adivasi locals as 'backward' and in need of a guiding hand along the path of development and modernity.

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[92] Since the Naxalites had threatened to disrupt the elections, and had left flyers in the village urging people not to vote, the level of security was high. On election day itself, the officials walked several kilometres to the polling centre (the Markakasa school) from a secret location, guarded by a group of ten heavily armed policemen. When the ballot closed, a convoy of armed policemen arrived in several lorries to transport the electronic voting machines to the sub-district headquarters.

One such area is in the combating of what are regarded as superstitious practices, including disapproval of the use of the *Angadev*. As we saw earlier in the chapter, the police have been reluctant to grant permission to the visit of *Angadev* to villages in the area. Whereas in the past such visits would routinely be approved, nowadays the police are less willing to tolerate the practice. A Markakasa villager told me the following story of an *Angadev* visit to a neighbouring village which took place some ten years ago.

A group of policemen on patrol happened to pass through the village at a time when the *Angadev* was in attendance.[93] They asked what the curious looking structure was and on being told it was a god which had the ability to detect witches, the policemen began to laugh. They challenged the villagers, saying that witches were not real and that the *Angadev* could not detect them; they were examples of backward superstition and the *Angadev* was guided by its bearers, not the other way round. How could the villagers not see this? No, countered the villagers, the *Angadev* has considerable power (shakti): for instance, they suggested, it would not permit just any person to pick it up. The police took up the challenge but were unable to lift the deity. What really happened on that occasion is difficult to determine but the truth of the matter is irrelevant. The man who told me this story was trying to emphasise the difference in attitude between the local populace and the police who patrolled in their areas. What is interesting is that the police were seen as presenting the local populace as bound by superstition and they took on the role of challenging such erroneous belief.

The police are just one part of a larger class of local state officials and administrators who see the area in which they have been posted, and the people whom they govern, as fundamentally un-modern and undeveloped in comparison to western Maharashtra or other parts of Vidarbha, where the vast majority of personnel are recruited from. It was constantly impressed upon me that the people here were uneducated, simple and easily taken advantage of, unlike people from other parts of the state or country. This brings me back to my earlier point: though witchcraft is, as Macdonald (2004) suggests, widespread throughout rural (and perhaps urban) India, it is nevertheless associated with 'backwardness' in the minds of officials trained in the ideology of modernisation. The combination of 'backward practices' (witchcraft) performed by paradigmatically 'backward people' (Adivasis) provides a potent composite image of backwardness. The Naxalite insurgency has made certain state actors more urgently and intimately involved in what they see as the problem of 'backwardness': Adivasi people are seen as 'simple' and 'trusting' – characteristics of their 'backwardness' – which, the police suspect, leads to Adivasi collaboration with the rebels. Official intolerance of a belief in witchcraft and of the corresponding measures needed to tackle it, and their much closer involvement in people's lives, means that villagers and villages that are afflicted by witchcraft and a sense of unease find it increasingly difficult to use remedies which would have been effective in the past.

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[93] This is echoed by Sundar (2001: 441), who describes how the fact that a witch had been murdered only came to the attention of the police in Bastar when they were combing the area in an anti-Naxalite operation.

Macdonald's research on witch accusations and police authority in the Central Provinces (where Markakasa was located[94]) in colonial times suggests that, in contrast to other parts of India, police presence there was minimal and largely ineffective (2004: 114), and most policing was left to village law agents who colluded in keeping witchcraft accusations at the level of the village (ibid: 108-14). Even as recently as sixty years ago, at the time of Independence, the police station with responsibility for Markakasa was in the small town of Sakoli, eighty kilometres away to the north-west along bullock cart trails through dense forest. As recounted by elderly villagers, police officers (and others such as forest guards) visited only sporadically, staying at the abandoned *ghotul* building which came to be known as the *sepoy bangla* (the soldiers house). The 1908, Bhandara District Gazetteer mentions in passing that the southern part of the district (where Markakasa was located) was "very jungly and remarkably free from crime" (Russell 1908: 171). In 1906, the proportion of police engaged in the detection and prevention of crime in Bhandara District was one policeman for every 13 sq. miles and 2139 persons (ibid). This compared to the all-Central Provinces figures of 9 sq. miles and 1061 persons respectively (ibid). By 1968, the figures for the District were one policeman to 10.13 sq km and 1370 persons.[95] Thus even in the late 1960s this district was less well-covered than the average district in the Central Provinces at the turn of the twentieth century. One can conclude that the forested areas of Bhandara District were even less intensively policed than the already rather sparsely administered general Central Provinces, as MacDonald demonstrates (2004: 108-14).

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[94] Markakasa was located in Bhandara District in the Central Provinces. In 1999, Bhandara was split into two and the eastern portion, containing most of the forest, and Adivasi population, became the new district of Gondia.

If we examine MacDonald's evidence of a limited police presence throughout much of the rural Central Provinces in the light of Skaria's analysis of witchcraft in the Dangs and Mewar in colonial western India, we can make some speculative observations about the present-day situation. Skaria (1997a) demonstrates how the districts of Mewar and the Dangs differed: whereas the police and administrative presence in the former was in many respects similar to that of the rural Central Provinces, the latter was intensely policed and governed from an early stage. In the Dangs, individual witch killings became more pronounced as village-wide witch detection was suppressed (ibid: 137). In Mewar, by contrast, detection conducted by *bhagats* (diviners) and others continued, and witches could be dealt with effectively at the village level (ibid). This resonates with MacDonald's contention that in the Central Provinces more generally, news of anti-witch activity very seldom reached the ears of the administration. It may also account, rather speculatively, for that curious comment in the 1908 Bhandara District Gazeteer that the *jangli* southern part was crime-free, perhaps indicating that indeed in this part of the Central Provinces, 'crimes' were not being reported but were dealt with at the village level.

In the erstwhile Central Provinces, the process which took place in the Dangs in the early part of the twentieth century has only happened more recently with the expansion of police presence gradually since Independence, and especially in the past fifteen years with the explosion of the Naxalite movement. Not only are the police more present and accessible, but public policy and discussion in India oppose witchcraft and sorcery practices to the idea of modernity: detecting and dealing with witches, and employing sorcerers is seen as hampering India's emergence as a developed modern nation.

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[95] From District Gazetteer (1979) Bhandara District, Maharashtra State (Bombay), p. 580.

Public policy on the specific question of witchcraft has had an effect on how police approach the issue of witchcraft and witch-detection, and how ordinary people come to be aware that in many instances their views on witchcraft are at odds with those of other parts of Indian society. My repeated questions about the fate of witches once they were identified were met with verbal equivalents of shoulders shrugged. A typical response which I heard from several people: "What can we do? Nothing. If we beat them or even have a meeting about them, they can go to the police station and file a complaint against us. It didn't used to be like that. The *sian* (elders) of the village would tie the person to a tree and beat her to stop her doing her *badmashi* (wickedness)."

One recent example is the approval of a Bill for the Eradication of Black Magic and Evil Customs by the Maharashtra Legislature which explicitly bans what are called superstitious practices[96]. The Bill still needs additional approval in order to be formally enacted and the purview of the Bill seems rather wide. It remains to be seen how the courts will choose to interpret it or the police enforce it. The Bill aims to punish those who promote superstitious rituals and contribute to the physical, mental and financial exploitation of people in society. Its main targets are people like *baiga* in their capacity as diviners and sorcerers. Also targeted are the institutions like the Mahanubhav temples which, in the eyes of the sponsors of the Bill, prevent people from seeking proper psychiatric assistance when ill and encourage a belief in witches, ghosts and demons[97]. The moving force behind the Bill is the increasingly active and high-profile Maharashtra Committee for the Eradication of Superstitious Practices (Maharashtra Andhashraddha

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[96] Hindustan Times, 19th December 2005: "One man's crusade led to Anti-superstition Bill".

[97] Ibid, Interview with Dr. Dabholkar, founder and chair of MANS. Indeed, people at a Mahanubhav temple town told me that MANS have visited them and tried to persuade people who had come to be healed to consult a mental health expert instead.

Nirmulan Samiti, or MANS). The Committee is a rationalist, humanist organisation which campaigns across Maharashtra to demonstrate the falsity of what it sees as superstitious practice and unnecessary religious ritual.

Perhaps this increased awareness of the hostility of the state has led to the progressive marginalisation of *baiga* as identifiers of witches and sorcerers, and thus to an important impediment to the proper resolution of mystical attack. Apart from the common complaints about their greed, the most striking disadvantage from the afflicted person's point of view is that *baiga* are not willing to disclose the identity of the attacker for fear of causing disputes. It is only in this sphere of suspected magical attack that they show such reticence. In other circumstances, such as that of trying to divine the whereabouts and identity of a thief, the *baiga* has no such qualms about describing the wrong-doer in detail. This reticence has been noted for contemporary Chhattisgarh by MacDonald (2004), who ascribes this change in role to "the police, media and administration seeking to locate responsibility for witch-killing" (ibid: 186). She sees it as a relatively recent development in rural plains Chhattisgarh, following a witch-killing case in 1995 that was seized upon by the media and campaigning organisations. The police, she reports, have publicly changed their stance and have been far more vigilant in tracking down those (including witch-identifying *baiga*) who can be held responsible for violence against witches (ibid: 140). She writes,

> "Witchcraft accusations have transformed from being merely cognizant cases identified through the Indian Penal Code to a political object for discourses that challenge ideas of development, progress and modernity" (ibid: 152).

In a climate such as this, it is understandable that *baiga* are wary of identifying witches and opening themselves to possible arrest by the police should the victim of magical attack seek a violent remedy. Unfortunately, their reluctance to name witches or instigators of sorcery makes them less satisfying for people who visit them in search of answers about causation. And this applies to the use of the *Angadev* too. Though police were refusing permission to invite the *Angadev*, the example of Gujarbarga demonstrates that a village, if united, will ask the deity to visit regardless. The problem appears to be that villagers cannot take satisfactory measures against any witches identified by the *Angadev*: they run the risk that the accused will file a complaint with the police.

Conclusion

An examination of the impediments that exist to controlling or combating witchcraft, sorcery and magic reveals several important attitudes and social processes. Not only does it demonstrate that the categories of witchcraft, political economy, the State and sexuality implicate each other in the lives of Markakasa villagers, but more specifically it offers a methodologically satisfying explanation of why membership of a religious sect which promises to protect one from mystical attack has grown so rapidly in the last fifteen years.

Running through the discussion in this chapter has been the wider opposition of 'wildness' and 'civilisation' that characterises various projects of Indian modernity, and the place that Markakasa people see themselves (and are seen by others) as occupying along that continuum. The articulation of the idea of the 'Adivasi' and of the 'Adivasi area', through the interpretative device of witchcraft, is highly relevant.

Recent historiography on witchcraft practices and their suppression in colonial India may provide further insights and points of comparison to the processes I have outlined in the chapter above. As mentioned above, Skaria (1997a) reports that the late nineteenth century in western India (the Dangs) witnessed a decline in 'traditional' forms of witch-detection such as 'swingings' and the use of *bhagat*s (diviners) due to pressure from colonial authorities. In addition, the colonial administration was particularly vigilant in its pursuit of those suspected of killing witches. As a result, victims of witchcraft had no remedy: they could neither detect witches nor retaliate (1997a: 140-41). One of the consequences, Skaria suggests, was the use of religious reform movements in the early twentieth century, such as the Devi movement (see Hardiman 1987), as substitutes to control witches and magic. He reports that, as the movement reached the village, the Devi would ask the women to assemble and they would be tested for witchery (ibid.). The control of witchcraft then was intimately linked to the popularity of these religious reform movements: since other forms of addressing the issue had become unavailable, people saw in the Devi movement a way in which to deal with this pressing problem.

In her study of witchcraft in Chhattisgarh, MacDonald (2004) argues that violence in cases of witch-accusations paradoxically produces rupture even though it aims to bring resolution and order. She describes the process thus:

> "By employing the solution of either physical or indirect violence, the perpetrator(s) seeks to transform the social environment in several ways: by immediately halting the magical strike of the witch; by seeking resolution and order to the disruption produced by the witch; by exacting retribution through murder/torture or forced relocation of the witch; and finally, by forestalling any future 'magical attack' by the witch" (2004: 28).

Witchcraft and sorcery in Markakasa are increasingly difficult to deal with using existing modes of defence. In the absence both of effective means of witch-identification and of violent retributive remedies such as beating, killing or expulsion, people subjected to mystical attack have sought out another solution. This solution – joining a religious sect – enacts exactly the same process MacDonald outlines. By seeking relief at the sect's temple town and then by joining the sect, Markakasa people attempt to stop the current magical attack, claim retribution against the witch through the actions of God, and ensure that any future magical attack against them will be ineffective. Sect members in search of protection transform both their social environment and themselves. In the next chapter, I trace the rise in popularity of this particular Hindu religious sect, the Mahanubhav Panth, which has been drawing adherents from Markakasa and the surrounding villages, and I examine the ways in which membership of this sect produces rupture by altering people's perception of society, sociality and self.

Plate 19: Markakasa people digging earth to build a road.

Plate 20: Taking a break from the road-building work.

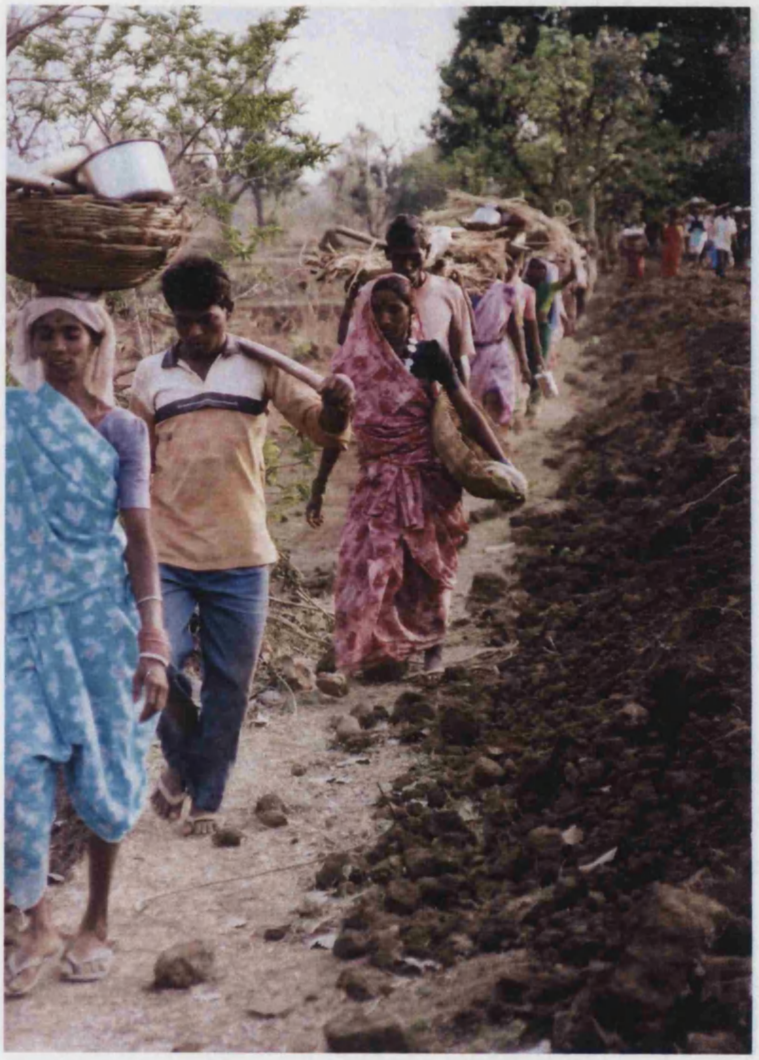

Plate 21: Returning home from working on the road.

Chapter Five

Sect, Self and Sociality

The previous chapter discussed the constraints that have developed in dealing with witchcraft and magic over the course of the past fifty years, at the level of the person, the household and the village in this area of central India. This chapter goes on to consider how people have responded to those constraints by seeking out an alternative means of resolving the problems of malignant mystical attack. This alternative consists of joining a Hindu religious sect, the Mahanubhav Panth, which protects adherents from these sorts of attacks. Membership of the sect fulfils the functional purpose of protection and is also transformative in several ways. As I discussed in Chapters Three and Four, witchcraft and magic are often associated with closeness between persons. There is a heightened fear of attack in situations of intense sociality such as at wedding feasts, or as a consequence of disputes which mar the fraternal bond. Becoming an adherent of this particular sect leads to the regulation of closeness and the restriction of sociality in certain spheres of life. Not only is sociality limited, but also the transition from suffering to happiness effected by the sect leads to the partial articulation of a different kind of person. This new type of person no longer depends on others to solve these particular problems of existence: the maintenance of his relationship with God is all that is necessary. In order to preserve this relationship of devotion, adherents are required to be unswerving devotees (*atal bhakt*) and refrain from offering worship to any other deity but God (*Parmeshwar* or *Bhagwan*). Moreover, they must abstain from eating meat and drinking alcohol.

There is a vast anthropological literature on the Hindu religious and devotional orders (e.g. Burghart 1996; Van der Veer 1988; McKean 1996), and a certain amount on the Mahanubhav sect in particular (Raeside 1976; Feldhaus, 1984, 2003; Feldhaus and Talpule 1992; Skultans 1987). Little of it, however, has focused on the context of those sects in local society, away from the temple towns and ashrams. Indeed, Raeside states quite categorically, "I have no information on how far professing to be a lay Mahanubhava affects one's life at all" (1976: 596). I therefore look at the ways in which membership of a religious sect (and of the Mahanubhav *panth* in particular) changes one's relationship with society and creates a new sense of self.

Understanding the experience[98] of joining a religious sect is important in contemporary India, since so many devotional movements offer perspectives and commentaries on society. Through gurus who give sermons (*pravachan*) and provide models of exemplary behaviour, religious sects serve to fashion 'good Hindu' society as much as they create 'good Hindu' selves. Devotional sects in India have also been linked more explicitly with the project of Hindu nationalism (McKean 1996), and the association is especially important when marginal communities such as Adivasis and other low status groups are involved, since the latter are targeted by organisations such as the Vidarbha Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VVKA) using much the same rhetoric. This Hindu nationalist organisation, while professing to be apolitical and only interested in 'social work', is intensely involved in confirming the Hindu nature of the Adivasi people among whom it works. It does this locally by encouraging Sanskritic daily worship, abstention from meat and alcohol and the promotion of local holy men (*sadhu-sant*), who themselves advocate such practices. VVKA activists also make periodic visits to villages to monitor possible Christian proselytisation. Through a policy of 'uplift' of Adivasi people, the VVKA and other nationalist organisations set up an opposition between those who are civilised and those who are wild.

This chapter is largely an examination of how sect membership changes people from the point of view of the person-in-society. In the chapter which follows this, I expand on how the functional requirement for protection is transformed in people's narratives into a more generalised discussion of the nature of the 'improved village', which feeds into a wider debate about wildness and civilisation. 'Good Hindu' selves in this analysis can create

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[98] By this I mean a phenomenology which takes sociality as its focus of analysis, as Kapferer (1997) has proposed in his discussion of Sinhalese healing rituals.

'good Hindu' society, an attitude which resonates with the nationalist projects of organisations such as the VVKA. What I want to emphasise is that people's values and attitudes as to what constitutes the 'good Hindu' and 'good Hindu society' are not 'introduced' by Hindu nationalists, but arise as a consequence of searching for a permanent solution to bodily attack, socially understood.

The Mahanubhav Sect

The Mahanubhav sect developed in the thirteenth century at around the same time as other religious movements in western and central India which emphasised *bhakti*, or devotion to God. In common with many of these others, its key doctrines are monotheism (or more accurately, monolatry), rejection of caste and the refusal to acknowledge the authority of Brahmins. Though the Mahanubhav scriptures emphasised key differences from other forms of contemporary worship and belief, and its adherents were often subject to local Brahminical persecution, it is now considered just one of many Hindu sects. In geographical and cultural terms, the Mahanubhav is primarily a Maharashtrian phenomenon with adherents concentrated in northern and eastern Maharashtra (Raeside 1976: 585). According to Enthoven (1920: 427-33), Mahanubhav devotees numbered 22,000 at the turn of the twentieth century; present-day figures are hard to come by because Mahanubhav sect members are no longer listed separately in the census, coming as they do under the category Hindu. Secrecy had been a hallmark of the sect right up until the 1920s, with Mahanubhav *mahants* (senior sect leaders) refusing to discuss doctrine with outsiders (Raeside 1976: 586). This attitude changed and sect texts became available to non-sect scholars, who discovered that these writings represented the earliest and most complete examples of Marathi prose before the seventeenth century (ibid). Nowadays, in those parts of Maharashtra where it has a presence, the sect and its temples are associated with the healing of illness caused by witchcraft (see Skultans 1987).

Of the 122 households in Markakasa, thirteen are adherents of the Mahanubhav sect[99], eight are Kabir and three are Ramanandi (see Chapter Two). The Mahanubhav devotees in the village and elsewhere in the area are an eclectic group comprising members of all castes, both clean and Untouchable, and people of all wealth levels. Not only is the Mahanubhav sect the largest in the village, but it also appears to be fastest growing: just ten years ago, there was not a single adherent in the village. The rate of growth in other similar-sized villages in the area has been comparable, and each can count five to ten (though in some cases more) Mahanubhav households. Interestingly, there are no Mahanubhav sect members in the all-Gond neighbouring village of Kedanar, a fact on which I will elaborate in the next chapter.

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[99] Number of households by caste: 5 Teli, 3 Gond, 2 Rawat, 2 Mochi and 1 Mahar.

I focus principally on the Mahanubhav for two reasons. Firstly, as mentioned above, it is not only the largest Hindu sect in the village but is also the sect that has shown the fastest rate of growth. That it should become so popular in a relatively short space of time demands a more detailed investigation, into how the rise in membership of this particular sect affects those who join, in their relations with other sect members and with non-sect kin and neighbours. Secondly, the diversity of its membership, in terms of caste and wealth, makes it an interesting sect in which to examine the processes through which existing sociality is restricted and new forms of association expanded. This would perhaps have been more difficult to observe in a sect such as the Kabir *panth*, which has an almost exclusively Teli membership in the area.[100]

Suffering and the Self

Closer analytical examination of the causes of suffering for those who join the sect suggests that the actions of other people – witches, sorcerers and ancestors - are to blame. Conversely, they become happy and protected from suffering by entering into a direct relationship with God through devotion. How can one analyse this change in terms of the place of human action in society? Graeber's discussion of magic marks out a potentially fruitful path. He begins with Marx's view of the human condition: he states that, for Marx,

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[100] The Kabir sect's membership, at least in this area, does not seem to have risen as dramatically (if at all) as that of the Mahanubhav sect. Though this is entirely speculative and would require more research, the Teli association with the Kabir *panth* may be connected to the issue of witchcraft too. Since members of the Teli caste have a particular reputation for being witches in many parts of Chhattisgarh, the act of joining the Kabir sect may in the past have been an attempt to distance themselves from possible accusations. See also my brief discussion in Chapter Two.

> "human beings are creatures. The social world we live in is something we have made and are continually remaking but we never see it fully that way and therefore can never take control of the process. [Religion] is the prototype for all forms of alienation since it involves projecting our creature capacities outward onto creatures of pure imagination and then falling down before them asking for favours" (Graeber 2001: 239).

For Graeber, magic is just the opposite of this: it is an un-fetishised view of the workings of society "in that it recognises that the power to transform the world ultimately goes back to human intentions" (ibid: 245).[101]

Following the logic of this analytical framework, what is it that Mahanubhav sect members are doing by joining the sect and living by its rules? By refusing to acknowledge that the actions of witches, sorcerers and others have any power over their lives they are in a sense rejecting an unfetishised view of society and instead placing faith in God and 'religion' - the 'prototype alienation' - to direct the course of their lives. Not only does membership of the sect appear to minimise the role (or at least impact) of other human action because of the fetish of God, it also enhances the role of the self. It is the individual self who becomes responsible for his well-being: as long as he keeps to the rules of the sect regarding diet and worship, his protection from the actions of others will be maintained. Safety and certainty in the course of one's life is entirely in the hands of the devotee and is no longer dependent on the actions of others[102]. This concentration of power in the hands of the self entails a restriction of sociality. Moreover, this restriction, as I show below, is promoted by the rules and practices of the sect.

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[101] In his discussion of Sinhalese sorcery and healing, Bruce Kapferer (1997: 298) makes a similar point: "The phenomenon of sorcery and witchcraft are mirrors to humanity. Above all, they address the problematics of human existence in worlds that human beings make and unmake."

[102] Though Mahanubhav sect members venerate their gurus, the latter are more like moral exemplars than intercessors with God on behalf of the disciple.

Dumont's (1980) discussion of religious sects in India is also instructive and indicates that the type of self that is constituted by adherence to the Mahanubhav Panth is not necessarily an 'individual' in the sense understood in Euro-America. For him, the existence and pervasiveness of caste belonging in Hindu India means that the notion of this individual, the 'individual-in-the-world', cannot emerge in society. Rather, it is constructed 'outside the world' in the figure of the world-renouncer who rejects society and caste (ibid: 273-75). According to Dumont, the 'man-in-the-world' who follows the teaching of the world renouncer, becomes a member of his sect and establishes a personal connection with God does not transform into an individual in the Western sense, because his new religious affiliation does not really attempt to compete with his caste identity and make him despise the values of the latter (ibid: 188). Nevertheless, Dumont states that to conceive of a personal Lord, as Mahanubhav adherents certainly do, there must also be a believer who sees himself as an individual (ibid: 282). Thus there appears to be a tension between the articulation of the self as independent of the actions of others, which is supported by the membership of the sect, and the ultimate denial of individuality as understood in the western sense because of the continuing relevance of caste as a source of personal identity.

People come into contact with the Mahanubhav sect as a result of an incurable illness, but the sect is seen as a last resort. Before people make the decision to go to the sect's temple town, they often seek out a wide range of other remedies.

Dealing with illness

When people fall ill, they have several options. Most people act immediately: very few people sit around waiting for the illness to get worse. In the first instance, whether the illness is a persistent headache, a fever or a stomach complaint, people generally seek the advice of a 'doctor'. A doctor is simply someone who can examine one and prescribe treatment, either in the form of tablets or an injection; he or she is not necessarily fully qualified (i.e. in possession of a M.B.B.S. degree). Markakasa was fortunate in having a 'doctor' who had studied under a 'proper' doctor for two years and knew how to deal with minor ailments and administer injections. If the sickness appears serious to this type of doctor, he suggests the patient visit another doctor, a 'proper doctor' in a hospital or clinic located some distance from the village. Unless it is very serious, people are reluctant to take this step largely because of the cost of visiting such a practitioner. At the same time, especially in cases where pain exists but there is no external manifestation on the body, the afflicted person visits one of the several healers in the village who are able to *phuk mārna* (Chh. 'blow'). The healer, who is in possession of a mantra that has proved efficacious, blows ash over the area of pain three times while reciting the mantra under his breath. People also consult a *baiga*, a ritual specialist and almost always a Gond man, who has the ability to divine causes of illness, remove inauspiciousness caused by Saturn (Chh. *shani*) or combat witchcraft (Chh. *jādu-tohna*). If the sick person is a Gond, the *baiga* might suggest that offerings be made to household gods (G. *lochtun*) or to the ancestors (G. *hānāl*). Payment is often made in alcohol (Chh. *mahua dāru*)[103], though in many cases, especially in those where witchcraft or magic is suspected and needs to be countered, chickens or even goats and pigs are needed for sacrifice. If, after trying all of these, the person's health still does not improve then often someone, usually a sect member, will suggest they go to the Mahanubhav sect temple town of Sukdi, about a hundred kilometres away to the north. What is important to note here is that a journey to Sukdi is seen as the very last resort, after all else has failed.

Here I pick up the story - which I briefly outlined at the very start of the thesis - of my landlord Brijlal, who lost two infant sons and nearly died himself. Through this partial life history, I hope to convey some of the experience of his search for a permanent solution to the problem of malicious mystical attack.

Brijlal is a Gond man in his mid-thirties. His family is one of the earliest to have settled in the village some ninety years ago and is rather closely related to the family of the hereditary headman (*thakur*). His FM was given from the Thakur's household, and his FZ was married to *her* MBS, the current Thakur's father. In other words, women have been exchanged between the families twice (see figure 5 below). Both patrilateral and matrilateral cross-cousin marriage is practiced among the Gonds, and is the preferred marriage. This sort of union, however, is not without its perils. If there is a frequent exchange of women between two households then a condition called *vellarhāri*[104] may arise, an affliction that only Gonds appear to suffer from. Each Gond lineage has household deities (G. *lochtun*), which protect that family and which require to be worshipped regularly and at important events throughout the year. *Vellarhari* occurs as a result of jealousy and neglect: the household gods of the family with whom one has exchanged women begin to demand attention too. One now has two sets of gods to appease. If attention is not given, the gods claim retribution by 'eating' (killing) male children "so that the family cannot grow" (M. *parivār vādu nai shakat*). The trouble with *vellarhari* is that one does not know one has a problem until children or young men start dying or one finds one cannot conceive.

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[103] This is alcohol home-brewed from the mahua flower, which is collected in April. *Mahua daru* is frequently used as an offering in rituals involving Gond families and their household gods, and in collective village rituals. It is a ritual substance, therefore, in a way that government-brewed alcohol (*desi daru*) and beer are not.

When he was twenty years old Brijlal married Champabai, my landlady, who was then eighteen. A couple of years later, their first child, a son, was born. The baby was healthy and crawling, and things were good for several months. Then, on a windless night, the large mango tree in front of the house keeled over; by the following morning their son was dead. They grieved awhile but picked up their lives and a second son was born a few years later. This time, ten days after giving birth, Champabai suddenly stopped producing breast milk. They tried feeding him other milk but the child weakened and, within a month, he too had died.

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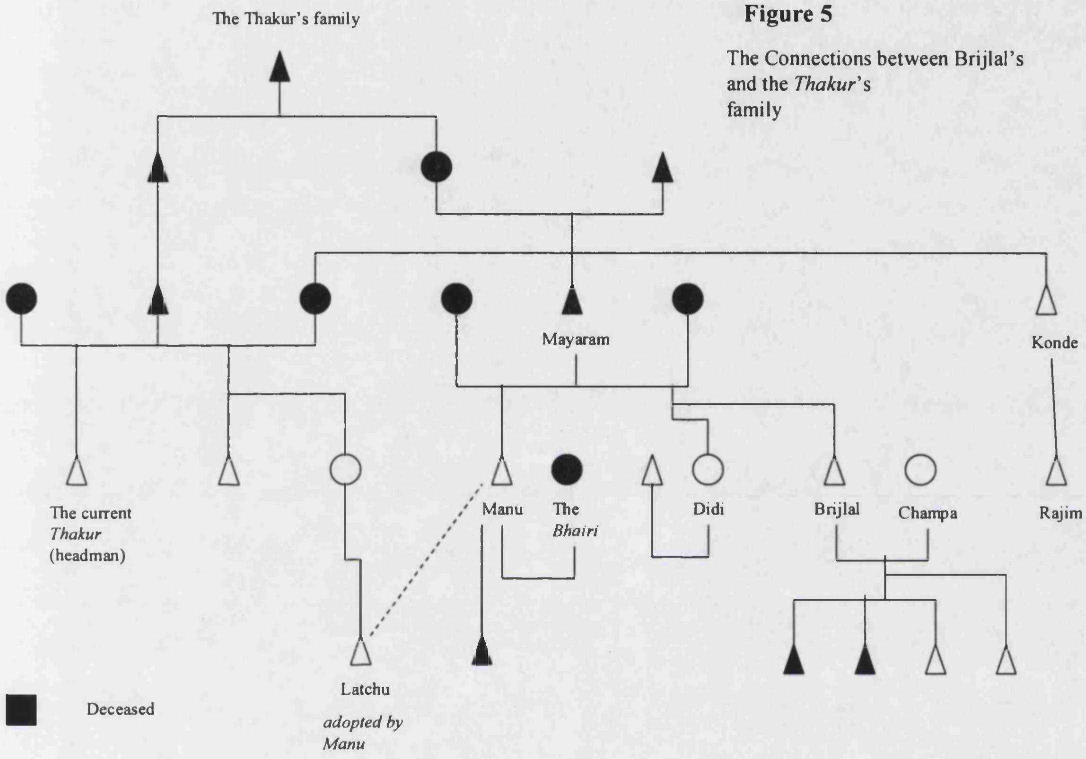
[104] I did not obtain a satisfactory etymology of the word *vellarhari* from my Gond informants, though I suspect it is the composite of the Gondi words 'vellah' which has the connotation of witch, sorcerer or demon, and 'arhari' which is the Gondi kin term for FZD (and thus a marriageable cross-cousin for male ego).

Figure 5: the relationships between the Thakur's family and Brijlal's


The Thakur's family
Figure 5
The Connections between Brijlal's and the *Thakur*'s family
Mayaram
Konde
The current *Thakur* (headman)
Manu
The *Bhairi*
Didi
Brijlal
Champa
Rajim
Latchu
adopted by Manu
■ Deceased

Now they were convinced something was wrong: surely mango trees do not just fall over and milk dry up? Unfortunately the death of male children was nothing new in Brijlal's family. His then estranged elder brother, Manu, had been married five times and those five unions had produced only one child, a son who suddenly fell ill at the age of twenty and died. Similarly, Brijlal's FyB, Konde, had lost two sons and only one now survives. Brijlal consulted a local *baiga* (diviner, sorcerer), who declared that the cause of his children's death had indeed been *vellarhari* and suggested how best to resolve the problem. It seemed that both Brijlal and the current Thakur had to perform a ritual together in order to appease the latter's household deities. But the Thakur was unwilling to allow someone else[105] to worship his gods, thinking that his own family would suffer as a result.

Though not magic or witchcraft in the strictest sense (though see footnote 104), *vellarhari*, and the suffering it caused for Brijlal and his family, was the result of human actions in the past (the marriage of a pair of cross-cousins) over which he had little control. In addition, the solution suggested to him required the ritual assistance of other people, and the Thakur's refusal to help left him without an effective remedy to the condition. Both the affliction and its solution required engagement with others; one could not deal with it alone. He eventually managed to deal with *vellarhari* by turning to another ritual specialist, a guru of the Ramanandi devotional sect who employed a different method to that of *baiga*: instead of placating the angry household gods by offering them meat and alcohol, the guru used powerful mantra to bind them and limit their power over Brijlal and his family. The nature of divinity as revealed through *vellarhari* and Brijlal's experience of it is also significant: household gods are jealous, but their jealousy comes into being as a result of human sociality, in the act of two cross-cousins marrying one another. Though Brijlal resolved the problem of *vellarhari*, his tale of suffering did not, unfortunately, end there.

In 1998, Brijlal became very ill. He began to lose weight and suffered from terrible headaches. He consulted doctors, who were at a loss to explain the cause and disagreed among themselves as to the diagnosis. At the same time he went to see *baiga*s, on one occasion travelling a hundred kilometres away to seek a remedy from a particularly famous one, and though he himself does not eat meat or drink alcohol, he had to offer chickens and goats and bottles of *mahua daru* (alcohol). All the *baigas* said the same thing: 'someone is doing something to you' (i.e. witchcraft [*jadu*]) but were unable or unwilling to tell him who. This is one of the main problems people talked about when discussing *baiga*: that they will not reveal the name of the tormentor because to do so would lead to disputes (see Chapter Four). All Brijlal's efforts appeared to be in vain: his health was still deteriorating. A member of the Mahanubhav sect, a rather wealthy old Mahar man from a neighbouring hamlet, suggested that Brijlal go to the sect's temple town, Sukdi, to worship God (*Parmeshwar* or *Bhagwan*) and seek relief. Brijlal was reluctant: he had heard strange stories of this particular sect, of its exclusivity and its strictness, and was not all that keen to get involved. But he was also rather desperate; the villagers seemed to be mourning his passing already, telling him his time was up, that though he walked he was dead. The Mahar man suggested a test: Brijlal should light an oil-lamp and pray in front of a picture of Lord Krishna and if he felt any better he ought to think seriously about going to Sukdi. Brijlal did feel stronger and told his wife to prepare for their trip.

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[105] There are two exogamous divisions among the Gonds in Markakasa: seven-god (*sath deo*) people and six-god (*che deo*) people. People of the same division are regarded as brothers (*bhauband*), people of the other as affines (*sorye*). Brijlal is a seven-god Gond and the Thakur a six-god one.

Salvation in Sukdi

Sukdi is a rather large village in the north of the district about one hundred kilometres from Markakasa. By bus it takes a good five hours, with several changes along the way. Nor is the fare cheap, costing seventy rupees, the equivalent of two days wages[106]. The temples of the Mahanubhav sect are located at places where the fourth (Govindprabhu) or fifth (Chakradharswami) incarnations (*avatar*) of the Lord, and the founders of the sect, stayed during their medieval wanderings in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These towns are ranked according to how long the avatar spent there: thus the more important temples are those where they stayed a month or more. Sukdi is a rather minor temple town in the large scheme of things: Chakradharswami spent only one night here. There are five places of worship in Sukdi, each corresponding to a place where Chakradhar stopped or gave a sermon. There are no idols here however; the objects of veneration, known as *ote* (M. sing. *ota*) are raised stone and marble structures representing the dais from which Chakradar preached, and there are five such *ote* at Sukdi. It is at the principal *ota* in Sukdi, in the main temple, that the act of worship (*puja*) is performed, with hymns sung and the Deity greeted with light (*aarti*). Worship takes place three times a day: once at 4am, then again at noon and finally at 6pm. It is during these acts of *aarti* that women receive *byān*. *Byān* (lit. statement) is the name given for the type of trance women enter when the *aarti* is performed.[107] It takes the form of a conversation between God and the *baiga* or witch who performed the spell that caused the illness or madness in the afflicted person. *Byān* is the means by which God reveals the name and actions of the tormentor, and thus represents a radical departure from the stance of *baiga* who refuse to name perpetrators of magic for fear of causing disputes. Receiving *byān* is exhausting but an essential part of the healing process. Through the body of the woman, God attempts to dispel the magic and, during *byan*, women are thrown around the temple grounds, crashing into walls or repeatedly smacking their heads on the marble dais which form the focus of worship; sometimes they attempt to scale the temple buildings and hurl themselves from the roof. What occurs during these intensely physical experiences is not remembered by the woman herself, who claims that she feels no pain resulting from *byan*, but is witnessed by those around her, including the man or woman who is the subject of the witch's attack. If the witch's magic is especially potent, the woman will be instructed by God to take herself to a lake at an appointed time where she will submerge herself until the witch is defeated. Since there is a risk of drowning, attendants from the temple accompany her and ensure that after the fifth submerging the *byan*-receiver surfaces. This is the final stage in the long process of healing the afflicted person, and is not only physically exhausting for the woman receiving the *byan* but also somewhat terrifying for the people watching. These intense experiences of healing involve the total body, and also become defining motifs in people's biographies as they explain the transformation from suffering to happiness they underwent at Sukdi.

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[106] Daily wages ranged from Rs. 25 to Rs. 47 depending on gender, work, and employer.

My Mahanubhav informants in Markakasa tended to have spent between one and two months at Sukdi on their first visit, though of course people do go there for longer.[108] Supplies of rice are taken from home, as are cooking vessels, and visitors find a spot within the temple precincts and cook and sleep there.[109] Going to Sukdi is seen as very expensive; if both husband and wife go (as is almost always the case if the afflicted person is married), the loss of income can be considerable. In addition, vegetables all need to be bought from market rather than picked from one's own garden. The decision

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[107] Skultans (1987) describes how in taking on the *byān*, women transform themselves into their patients, transferring in a sense the illness to themselves.

[108] When I visited Sukdi, I met one couple who had lived in the temple for six months.

[109] In early 2004 when I visited, a row of rooms that could house ten or so families had just been built.

Plate 22: The Mahanubhav temple at Sukdi

Plate 23: Midday worship at the Mahanubhav temple, Sukdi

to go to Sukdi is, as I emphasised above, not taken lightly; it really is seen as the last resort. Moreover, visitors are aware of the transformative nature of the sect: that, if they are cured and decide to join the sect formally in order to protect themselves from future attacks, their lives when they return to their villages will change.[110] Indeed, the initial motivation for going to Sukdi - to deal with a malicious mystical attack – is largely glossed over in initial discussions with devotees. What is emphasised instead as motivation in 'post-conversion' narratives is the desire to improve and cleanse one's life and one's soul and to move from a period of pain (*dukh*) to one of happiness (*sukh*). But let us pick up the thread of Brijlal's story.

Brijlal, his wife Champa, and their infant son stayed in Sukdi for five weeks. They slept and cooked on a verandah behind the main temple, taking all their supplies from home. The structure of their day was provided by the thrice-daily *aarti* and the rest of their time was spent in prayer reciting the names of the five avatars of the Lord. By following the example of other people there, and after receiving instruction from a guru of the sect, they began to learn how to pray and worship the Mahanubhav way. Yet several weeks passed and still Champa did not experience *byān*. Eventually, a friend of Brijlal's from a neighbouring village who was also at Sukdi at the time suggested that his daughter take the *byān* for Champabai, a potentially dangerous proposal since the magical attack could easily have switched to her. Brijlal and Champa thus came to know the name of their attacker: it was the Bhairi (Chh. 'the Deaf One'), Brijlal's estranged elder brother's wife[111].

The relationship between the two brothers, Brijlal and Manu, had not been good for well over twenty years. Though they are now reconciled, its most longstanding expression was in a dispute over inheritance and property that lasted ten years (discussed more fully in Chapter Three). In the midst of all the claims, counterclaims and accusations of betrayal,

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[110] No-one was aware of any person (and I certainly did not meet anyone) who had gone to Sukdi and not been cured. Nor did I ever hear of anyone being cured and then not joining the sect.

[111] Though everyone referred to this woman as his 'wife', in fact they had not performed any sort of marriage ceremony, not even a lesser marriage (Chh. *churri pahnānā*, lit. 'putting on bangles') used for widows or divorcees. She was still married to her first husband.

Manu's wife, according to the *byān*, went to see a *baiga* to ask that he cast a spell (*mantra*) to kill Brijlal. Bhagwan (God), however, punishes evil-doers, those who harm his devotees, and when the Bhairī died rather suddenly last year, there were whispers in Brijlal's household about the *byān* having sealed the old woman's fate.

Joining the sect and returning home

Membership of the Mahanubhav sect leads to a transformation in the lives of its members. Not only is there a transition from suffering to happiness, but notions of sociality change dramatically too, linked to a heightened fear of others to be sure, but also because the sect requires the devotee to take responsibility for his own misfortune. Having looked at the reasons for suffering and found in them the idea that the actions of other humans can be dangerous and problematic for people, I go on to show how the practices and requirements of the sect lead devotees to restrict sociality with others, in an effort to protect themselves better from renewed malignant spiritual attack. Through this process, I argue, the adherent also becomes a different kind of self in society.

During their five weeks at Sukdi, Brijlal felt his strength returning: his headaches ceased and he began to put on weight. He and his wife decided to join the sect and became disciples (*shishya*) of one of its gurus, a man who lived in Sukdi, and who was already guru to several of Brijlal's acquaintances back home. The process of becoming the disciple of a guru is known as *kān phukna* (lit. blowing on the ears); what is 'blown' is a *mantra* or spell that the adherent repeats at times of crisis and which he or she must not reveal to anyone outside the sect. Joining the sect means following its rules regarding diet, prayer and conduct within society, the observation of which protects one from further attacks of magic or witches. The types of behaviour these strictures demand, however, are radically different (and are seen as such) from the Hinduism practised by the rest of the village. Devotees must refrain from eating meat or drinking alcohol: this has proved problematic in that it has disrupted understandings of commensality, and is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. No images of gods or goddesses are permitted in the devotee's home, which is in sharp contrast to other houses, plastered as they are with printed images of deities. Like the God of Moses, this Bhagwan of the Mahanubhav is a jealous god and devotees must not offer worship to any other deity. Twice daily *puja* (worship) is required before the family take their meals. Though the object of worship is Bhagwan, who is in theory formless, devotees are also given a small black stone, called *vishesh,* which is said to represent God and, according to some, a piece of an *ota.* It is this *vishesh* that is placed on the altar and is the focus of devotion during *aarti.* The *vishesh* is powerful and has the ability to protect one from witchcraft, and is also treated with great tenderness (the act of devotion) by being kissed and stroked repeatedly before the *aarti* commences. This twice-daily puja is a practice no non-sect person performs and indeed many people say they are unaware of how to perform worship. The contrast was especially striking during the festival of Diwali on the night when the goddess of prosperity, Laxmi, is traditionally worshipped. While my landlord Brijlal's household spent nearly fifteen minutes on an elaborate form of worship[112], his sister's household, who do not belong to any sect, waved an incense stick in front of a newly purchased poster of Laxmi and that was that. Of course this too is a form of worship, but Brijlal's sister was acutely conscious that she did not know which phrases to utter or how to sing hymns.

The consequences for disobedience of the rules of the sect are dire: the *vishesh* disappears (*gaiap*), protection from magic is withdrawn and the erstwhile devotee will go mad. The disappearance of the *vishesh* is a sign to the devotee that the strictures of the sect are not being adhered to. I was told the story of one woman in a neighbouring village who started eating meat once more. Her *vishesh* disappeared immediately. She stopped and it was found.

The division between sect and non-sect villagers is made even more apparent when the former follow the injunction to worship Bhagwan alone. For members of the Gond community this means that household gods (*lonchtun*) are removed from the house, as are the spirits of the ancestors (*hānāl*) (see further below); for Mahars who join the sect and who were Ambedkarite Buddhists, the worship of Lord Buddha and Dr. Ambedkar ceases.

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[112] They were not, of course, praying to Laxmi but to Bhagwan; nevertheless, the purpose of the worship was identical.

Jadhuram, who lives in the neighbouring hamlet of Herpar, is the wealthy old Mahar man who suggested that Brijlal go to Sukdi to seek relief. His house, though non-descript from the outside, is rather impressive once inside, with large carved pillars and a stone (as opposed to mud) floor. Jadhuram also owns a small, rather decrepit rice-milling machine that does not seem to be making as much money as it used to. He has been a member of the sect for more than fifteen years, one of the first adherents in the area. He joined it along with his wife, who had suffered from a number of illnesses and sought relief at the temple. Her illness was the latest in a long line of misfortunes that befell the family: their cows got sick and died; a new rubber belt for the mill snapped after only four days of use, as did a second belt that was bought to replace it; and one of their sons fell seriously ill too. Convinced that they were targets of witchcraft, the family went to Sukdi for a couple of months and came back cured and members of the sect. As with all devotees, Jadhuram was required to give up the gods that he had worshipped before; in this case, he removed pictures of Ambedkar from his house and stopped the worship of Buddha. His caste-fellows were not at all pleased, and demanded he reinstate the images and stop the worship of his new God; they accused him of trying to give up his religion (*dharma*). Jadhuram refused, and the local Mahar caste-council slapped a fine on him and he split from the rest of the caste-community, though he was not formally excommunicated by them.

But Jadhuram also insisted that he had not given up his status as a Buddhist: he pointed to the fact that he still had a picture of Lord Buddha in the house, though he admitted he did not worship Him as he had before. This seemed contradictory to me since he, along with other adherents, used the phrase *dharma suikarla* ('accept the faith') to describe the act of accepting the Mahanubhav teaching and joining the sect. Could one be a Buddhist and a Mahanubhav at the same time? I realised however that Jaduram was explaining that his identity as a Mahar had not changed in becoming a member of the Mahanubhav sect. Since being a Mahar is so closely identified locally with being a Buddhist, keeping the un-worshipped picture of the Buddha in his house meant he wanted the world to recognise his continued identification with the Mahar caste. The sect changes many forms of sociality, and the caste of fellow adherents is said to be irrelevant in the community of the sect. Mahanubhav sect members will all sit in one unbroken line (*pangat*) to eat, Untouchable and clean caste alike. Thus commensality rules are relaxed, but only on public occasions of Mahanubhav devotion (e.g. at *satsang*, see below). Caste identity is still extremely important to sect members: a marriage between members of different castes (whether they are both Mahanubhav devotees or not) is still a transgressive union. As Dumont writes, "a sect cannot survive on Indian soil if it denies caste" (1980: 269). It demonstrates the limits on the transformation the self undergoes by joining the sect: completely denying caste is not an option. Like ritual friendship, the sect provides an alternative to the ideology of caste in certain spheres of life, but cannot eliminate its relevance.

When I asked non-sect villagers what they thought about the Hindu sects and their membership, the answers I received were broadly of two types that seemed to conflict with one another and were often offered on different occasions by the same people. One type of answer was a broadly critical one, that the sects (and in particular the Mahanubhav) were ruining the village; another common response was that people get sick and need to find cures, and going to Sukdi seemed to be very effective. One man, Ponwar Singh, a senior Gond who had been the village's *sarpanch* (elected headman) in the past, was intensely critical of the sects and their members because he saw them as destructive of the established fabric of village life, in that they refused to take part in village rituals or acted in ways that were different to their caste-fellows. "How is this village supposed to work, it's become full of little, little sects"[113], he remarked as a meeting convened to ponder its response to the theft of one of the village tutelary deities.[114] A more personal criticism this time, directed at my landlord: "Brijlal doesn't follow our Gondi customs (*rithi-rivaj*) anymore. It started when he joined that *panth* (sect). It was a scandal what he did with his father's funeral pyre: he just let it burn and didn't collect the ashes – that's what they're told to do by their gurus."[115] But the tone was markedly different on another occasion as we were cycling together to another village: "People go to places like Sukdi because they are very sick, because they're going to die. So they go and then they come back and they're cured. People need to go to places like that; how can I say that it is a bad thing? You didn't see Brijlal when he was sick, he was so thin. Now look at him, you would never know that he had been through something like that." What can we learn from these seemingly contradictory statements? Perhaps we can say that, when it comes to ways of thinking about the village or the caste-group, the sects are discussed disparagingly and regarded as dangerous. But at a more individual and perhaps more personal level, when one thinks in terms of sentiment and affection, people who in other situations are opposed to the Hindu sects for their perceived exclusiveness recognise that people who are sick need to be healed and need to search for solutions, and that a temple such as that at Sukdi has proved highly effective.

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[113] *Hamāra gaon mein nāne nāne panth bowth ho ge hein, gaon chalāna kaise?*

[114] This event is examined more fully in the next chapter.

While at Sukdi, the *byān*, as we have seen, is an individualised measure: it describes the circumstances of spiritual attack against one particular person, usually a relative of the woman who enters the trance. The nature and function of the *byān*, however, changes once the women and their afflicted kin return home to their villages. There, *byān* is received by one woman on behalf of all the members of the sect in any given space (a village for instance). Thus she acts as a warning device, alerting her fellow sect-members to the possibility of spiritual danger. Non-sect members are not privy, however, to the information revealed in the state of trance and so Mahanubhav devotees regard themselves as more able than non-sect members to fight attacks of magic or witchcraft. It is generally the case that one woman at any given time will be receiving *byān*; when her *byān* ends another woman inevitably takes it up and begins to trance during the *aarti* performed in her household. In Markakasa, the reception of the *byān* seemed to go back and forth between two particular women, a Teli woman and a Rawat woman. Needless to say, receiving the *byān* is regarded as a mixed blessing; through the *byān*, one becomes aware of danger, but the experience is intensely exhausting for the woman concerned and she is considerably weakened during it.

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[115] This statement was puzzling in the extreme, firstly because Brijlal's father had died several years before Brijlal joined the sect; secondly, because Brijlal's mother, who had died after Brijlal joined, was buried according to Gond ritual; and thirdly, Mahanubhav *panthis* do not cremate their dead but rather bury them.

From what I have sketched above, I hope to have given the impression that the reason people go to Sukdi and then subsequently join the sect (which is seen as a difficult thing to do) is to find a lasting and effective solution not only to the wider, more abstract problem of malicious mystical attack, but, more concretely, to the sickness they suffer from at that particular moment in their lives. But I ought to make clear that sect members do not always explain their reasons for joining the sect in these terms. I spoke to many Mahanubhav sect members over the course of my fieldwork: those that I knew well, especially those from Markakasa, told me rather plainly and straightforwardly that they had gone to the temple in order to cure intractable illness or madness caused by witchcraft. Others, most often those from other villages who were relative strangers, would be rather vaguer. A typical explanation was: "My life was full of pain (*dukh*) and sin (*paap*). I wanted to change my life and become 'improved' (*sudharlele*). Before I joined the sect I ate meat and drank alcohol and told lies. Now I am a better person and I'm happy. My soul is pure (*shuddh*); I'm pure on the inside." Later on, either by asking the person concerned directly or asking another more familiar sect member I would learn that in fact such-and-such-a-man, for instance, had been vomiting blood for several months and had therefore decided to go to Sukdi to get it sorted out. That the explanations differed so strikingly were not, I believe, simply the result of my informants feeling uncomfortable talking about what might be perceived as sensitive matters (though of course this played an important role). Rather, the types of narrative offered by sect members demonstrate a desire to emphasise the break with the past they have accomplished in going to Sukdi and joining the sect. The statement of the unnamed informant above may be interpreted as a search for a more prestigious way of life in line with theories such as Sanskritisation (see Chapter Six), but one must keep foremost in one's mind that the primary (maybe only) reason why people beat a path to the Sukdi temple door is to seek a cure from a life-threatening, painful and intensely experienced sickness.

It is here that we can bring in the discursive motif of the body. Concepts such as sin, misfortune and mystical attack are discussed and controlled in relation to the bodily processes of eating and drinking inappropriate and dangerous substances (meat and alcohol). And it is through the body that both the pain of suffering is experienced, and healing through *byan* is achieved.

We have seen that the return home to the village from the temple involves a shift in understanding: whereas people enter Sukdi as one type of person, they leave it as another, with an additional sense of belonging to the fellowship of their sect. Let us now go on to examine how that sense is more precisely articulated.

Satsang and the articulation of difference

The guru had been ailing for some time now. On his last visit[116] to the village he had not been able to engage in any conversation and had seemed very weak. He whispered the words of worship and let his wife do most of the talking, nodding or grunting to signal assent. Several months later, as they learnt of his death, Brijlal and twelve other *shishya* (disciples) from Markakasa and surrounding villages hired a car at considerable expense to take them the 100km to Sukdi in order to attend his funeral.

The death of the guru had a profound impact on his disciples in Markakasa and in other villages in the area. For the members of the *Panth*, their guru was a remarkable man, worthy of great veneration and imbued with the power to keep them on the path of righteousness. There was a fear that, with his passing away, his disciples would become lax in their practices and forget what he had taught them. An effort was made, therefore, to arrange religious meetings, *satsang*, as regularly as they could, something that had not been organised while the guru had been alive. Indeed, the inspiration behind the *satsang* appears to have been the guru himself. On the same day he died, he appeared in a dream to a man called Phul Singh, the son of Bhagat, one of the earliest disciples in the area, and instructed him to gather all the *shishya* together and perform a *satsang*.

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[116] This act of visiting was significant. Indeed, other commentators have remarked on the importance placed in the Mahanubhav sect on constant movement from place to place in emulation, one supposes, of its founder, the wandering Chakradar Swami (Raeside 1976; Skultans 1987).

The purpose of meeting in *satsang* is to discuss and debate matters of *dharma* (religion), and doing so is fairly common throughout North India especially among members of devotional sects. The *satsang* is typically composed of lay men and women, though exceptionally it will be directed by a religious figure such as a guru. In such a setting, questions are asked about the importance of practices and rituals along with more complicated issues about the nature of life and of death, and those members of the lay community that are regarded as being more learned than others in such matters are called upon to give their views. Essentially, however, it is a forum in which all the faithful, both men and women, are encouraged to talk and share their thoughts.

I attended two such *satsang*, one in October 2003 and the other two weeks later. The first was held in a village called Ganutola located four kilometres from Markakasa and the second in my landlord's house in Markakasa. What follows is a detailed exposition and analysis of what went on. I examine the second *satsang* first.

The second meeting I attended was the fifth to be held following the death of the guru. After dinner, at about eight o'clock, people began arriving at the house; men came first, from Markakasa and other villages, and the women followed some time later after having washed the dinner plates and tidied the kitchens in their homes. As the devotees entered they greeted everyone else present individually, both men and women, with their characteristic salutation, the *dhandavat* (see below for full description). The front door to the house was closed, sealing off those gathered inside from the rest of the village. Front doors to houses are very rarely closed in this way, especially if people are awake inside. However, doors are often closed when a *baiga* is visiting the house and performing a ritual to expiate misfortune, illness or witchcraft, which is done to prevent any force from outside the house interfering with the 'work' (*kām*) going on inside. In a sense, therefore, this small act was a way of keeping what went on inside secret and unpolluted and not subject to possible spiritual interference; it was a 'sealing off' of the community of the faithful.

The discussion moved on to a topic which appeared to have been bothering a number of the devotees for a long time, a question which was asked as 'should we contribute money (*barār*) to village festivals such as Ganesh?' and which one could paraphrase as: 'how are we to live in society with people who are not members of our sect?'

Phul Singh, the man who had had the dream, answered first, and it was a categorical "no". He said that it went against the principles of their dharma (religion) to worship any other God but Bhagwan, and that they were *atal bhakt* (unswerving devotees) who did not stray from devotion. "By making a contribution to the village's Ganesh festival you are in fact worshipping Ganesh (*ganeshtsa puja karat ahe*). You may think that you haven't participated in *puja* because you don't eat the *prasad* or do the *aarti*, but with the contribution you have made other people will, and so you will end up worshipping him," Phul Singh explained. For him, worshipping Ganesh was tantamount to betraying the promise to be an *atal bhakt*. He proceeded to ridicule the festival: "what do people do after they've finished worshipping him for ten days?" he asked rhetorically. "They throw him [his image] in the lake! Is this how God (*bhagwān*) should be treated? Is this really the Lord (*parmeshwar*)?" Another man quoted a saying by Tukrodi Maharaj, a *sant* (holy man) and an immensely popular religious and moral figure in Maharashtra (though not a Mahanubhav *panthi*): "If it is made of wood it can burn; if it is made of mud it can be dissolved; if it is made of gold it can be stolen; if it is made of stone it can be broken." By contributing this he was affirming the Mahanubhav injunction against the worship of images and agreeing that the worship of the idol of Ganesh was not something that a devotee of Bhagwan should participate in. Phul Singh then went on to elaborate what he saw as the problem with Hindu dharma, its multiplicity of gods:

> "Four men - a Hindu, a Sikh, a Christian and a Muslim - wanted to cross a river. They saw a boat hitched to the bank and got in and made their way across. Suddenly the water became rough and the boat began to

> sink. Each man started to pray. The Muslim prayed to Allah and was saved, the Christian prayed to Christ and was saved and the Sikh prayed to the "Sikh God" [sic] and was saved. The Hindu was sure of being saved too: after all he had far more gods than the other three and they had survived. 'Which one should I choose to save me?' he wondered. 'I'll choose Ganesh because he is the god that is prayed to first.' So he prayed, 'Save me O Ganesh!' 'Why should I save you?' the god answered. 'Every year you worship me for ten days and then you throw me in the lake and forget me. I will not save you.' The Hindu then prayed to other gods but each one refused because they were upset at not being asked first. The Hindu gave up hope and drowned. The other three men were saved because, unlike the Hindu[117], they were all *atal bhakt* [devotees of one God]."

But people had questions. Several adherents reiterated the need for all the Mahanubhav adherents in this area to act as one, especially regarding contributions. "If we act differently then the other villagers don't understand what it is we are. It matters what they [non-sect villagers] think about us. If one man in a particular village says that he will pay the *barār* and another man in the same village says that he will not, then other [non-sect] people will wonder to themselves as to the nature of our *panth*." There is a feeling among adherents that their *panth* in particular is demonised by other villagers as being strange and difficult, in a way other sects such as the Kabir or Ramanandi are not. "They [non-sect villagers] are always prodding us (*humāla towsthat*) to try and discover what our dharma [religion] is," one of the others said. They seemed to be extremely conscious about the inconsistencies in their behaviour and how these inconsistencies appear to other people. Unity was being sought, and the purpose of the *satsang* was to achieve it in relation to the rest of society by ensuring that all the adherents in the area were reading from the same page.

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[117] Despite this formal assertion of being distinct from Hindus, Mahanubhav adherents regularly described themselves as Hindu and as belonging to the wider Hindu tradition rather than outside it. Thus my landlord Brijlal would say "My dharma ['religion'] is Hindu, my *panth* [sect] is Mahanubhav and my *jat* [caste] is Gond. As a point of comparison, even Buddhist Mahars in some contexts described themselves as Hindus.

The example of a neighbouring hamlet, Gujarbarga, was given. Out of around forty households, six are members of the Mahanubhav sect. And of these six, five are fairly recent 'converts' and the remaining household has been a member of the sect for much longer. When they were asked to contribute *barār* to the Ganesh Festival, the latter paid up but the former refused. The confusion arose because of the different attitudes of the two groups: the senior sect member was accustomed to paying because up until recently the members of his household were the sole adherents of the sect in the village; the newer members on the other hand, confident in the solidarity of their group position, felt able to refuse to pay. This confusion was troubling to the gathered sect members because it left them open to charges of inconsistency to those 'other people' (*bākilog*) unwilling or unable to understand their *dharma.*

It is significant that the initial question about the payment of contributions was asked specifically in relation to the Ganesh festival (*ganesh utsav*). Ganesh (also called Ganapati and Vinayak) is the pot-bellied, elephant-headed god and an immensely popular deity in Maharashtra. His festival is held in the Hindu month of Bhadrapad which generally falls sometime in August-September. Originally a household festival observed almost exclusively by Brahmin families from the Marathi cultural heartlands in and around the cities of Pune and Mumbai, it was promoted and transformed by the nationalist leader Lokamanya Tilak towards the end of nineteenth century into a public celebration in order to circumvent colonial laws which outlawed the assembly of large numbers of people (Cashman 1975). Regarded as one of the early successes in mobilising the masses during the nascent movement for self-rule, the Ganesh festival remains to this day an intensely political festival. Though initially a uniquely Maharashtrian urban phenomenon it has since spread to rural areas in the state and to other parts of India (see e.g. Fuller 2001). The Ganesh festival is particularly well-suited as an expression either of village solidarity or of village conflict because there is no single permanent site in Markakasa, such as a temple, for his worship; as in many places in rural India, temporary shrines are constructed, which are then installed with the idol (*murthi*) and where the *puja* is performed for the duration of the festival. Thus, no single shrine can claim to be more important than any other. In other words, there is no main shrine from which the others legitimate their authority. The Ganesh festival has in recent years become a site of struggle between the clean castes and the Mahars. The latter have refused to pay *barār* for the celebration of the festival and have instead privately supported the construction of a rival shrine in the village. Aware of this history, for the Mahanubhav *panthi*s to suggest withholding contributions to the festival, though admittedly for different reasons, is to challenge the idea of the festival as somehow representative of the entire village, and acknowledge it as a legitimate site at which to demonstrate their lack of sociality in the common worship of 'false gods'.[118]

This exclusivity in relation to non-sect members, and the doings of other *dharma*, unfortunately extended to the anthropologist too. At one point in the evening, the discussion outlined above stopped, and people began talking about what they wanted to do next. It seemed they wanted to discuss the *mantra*, or formulae, given to them by their guru. My landlord looked over to me and asked me what the time was. I replied that it was midnight. "You must be very tired," he said, "don't you want to go to bed?" "No, I'm fine," I said, rather stupidly. A few minutes later, he asked me the same question. This time I got the hint and took my leave. My landlord's sister and her eldest son, who had also been listening up until that point and are not members of the sect either, also got up and went to bed. The *mantra* are of course secret and are not to be revealed to the non-initiated. The following morning, my landlord filled me in on what I had missed. After praying to themselves quietly for some time, where they repeated the names of the five avatars of the sect, they held what seemed to be a question-and-answer session on the practices, rituals and beliefs of the sect in order to establish that everyone present remembered and performed what their guru had taught them. Brijlal told me that some of the women, especially the older ones, had demonstrated a considerable lack of this important knowledge and that they had been set tasks to improve it by the next *satsang* when they would be tested. The *satsang* was thus not only a forum for discussion but the site at which, paradoxically, a 'closing of the canon' was taking place: the principles and practices that bound the devotees together were being emphasised and knowledge of them confirmed in order to mark them out from non-sect others.

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[118] It was striking too that they sought to follow the Markakasa Mahars' lead on this, especially as non-sect villagers disparagingly called the sect "the Mahar sect", principally, I was told, because the first few adherents in the area were Mahars, and also because the usual caste rules regarding commensal dining restrictions with Untouchables were relaxed with members of one's own sect.

Old kin, new kin?

Now, someone at this *satsang* at my landlord's house raised another issue: "what about relations with our mother and father, and our *sās-sāsur* (spouse's parents)?" The context of this question was clear to most of those present, especially those from Markakasa.

During the nine days of the festival of Navratri, which had just been celebrated, the adherents of the sects are required to abstain from eating food cooked in another household, refrain from eating with people not of their sect and avoid spending the night in a house other than their own. In the week gone by, the village had been abuzz about the dispute emanating from Gangaram's house. Gangaram is an elderly Teli man who lives with his wife and three sons. All the sons are married and the younger two, Dinu and Lomu, are members of the Mahanubhav sect, along with their wives. Though Lomu is often referred to as *hāf-dhimāk* (half-witted) and has a violent temper, Dinu is well-liked throughout the village, and is seen as a good-natured, hard-working and generous young man. The other villagers were surprised to learn, therefore, that both Dinu and Lomu and their respective wives were refusing to feed their parents. When asked why, they justified their action by saying that the rules of the sect forbade them from doing so for the duration of Navratri. This answer seemed to confirm in the minds of many non-sect villagers whom I spoke to that the Mahanubhav sect was radical and dangerous and that it overturned even basic notions such as the obligation to feed one's parents. This very example was raised in the *satsang* that night; interestingly neither brother had turned up, but now Dinu was brought from his house and asked to explain himself. He did so, and several others present agreed with him and said they had not fed anyone but their immediate household either; that was how they had understood the teaching. Again, the consciousness of what outsiders would make of this was immediately apparent: "People will ask, 'Is this what your *panth* is about? These *sukdi-wālleh*[119] aren't allowed to feed their parents!' That's what people will say." Again, the devotees were asked to be flexible and that, even if their parents were not members of the sect, they could not deny them food; by neglecting to serve (*seva*) their parents, they were neglecting to serve God. Yet men and women needed to be wary of their non-sect parents too. "My *sās-sāsur* (in-laws) complain that their daughter has changed since she joined the sect and try and convince her that what she is doing is wrong and that she should give it up", one man said to a general murmur of agreement and acknowledgement. Likewise, women were asked to stay on guard against attempts by *their* in-laws to change the mind of their husbands. Both husband and wife were exhorted to help each other and protect one another from such challenges to their *dharma* (faith). The emphasis here seemed to be on the importance of the marital bond and the 'sealing off' of husband and wife from the rest of society. This 'sealing' finds expression in the sect's ritual practice too. When adherents perform one of the most important acts of worship at a sect temple, known as *ota*, it is the husband and wife that perform it together with others standing well away. It is only the couple who hold the plate (*thāli*) containing the *aarti* (flame) used to worship at the *ota*. When I accompanied Brijlal, his family and several other villagers to Sukdi and witnessed them perform this worship, Brijlal gave specific instructions to the rest of us that at no point during the *puja* were he or his wife to be touched. This is in marked contrast to the way in which worship is offered during village rituals, such as at Ganesh festival where as many people as possible hold the plate or, even more strikingly, ritually touch someone who is holding the plate. One could argue that it is the marital unit through which the sect is in a sense experienced. Married people who visit Sukdi in search of relief are often accompanied by their spouse and, as we have seen, spend more than a month together surrounded by strangers and other sick people. Both men and women devotees whom I spoke to often dwelt upon this aspect: the time spent in one another's company and of cooking and eating together in such a small space. As Skultans (1987) has shown, the receiving of the *byān*, which is done exclusively by women and in most cases by wives, is seen by them as a sort of sacrifice on their part performed for the well-being of their families. Children do accompany their parents to Sukdi especially if they are young, but they do not become members of the sect until they are older (*jawān*), and then only if they choose to. The sect also seems to disapprove of marital infidelity; if a husband sleeps with another woman for instance, this too will be revealed in the *byān* that either the wife herself or the village trancer receives. Thus, as a member of the Mahanubhav sect, one could no longer conduct an affair in secret: Bhagwan would reveal all. In all this then, the marital bond is emphasised, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, perhaps to the detriment of other sorts of relationships. As the adherents of the sect seem to seal themselves off from the wider village community, so husband and wife seal themselves off in certain instances from 'outsiders'. This 'sealing', however, also goes one stage further, to the level of the person afflicted by the attack. In a rite conducted while people are at Sukdi, the guru instructs the sick person to perform special worship at the *ote* after having observed a rule: for three days the temple visitor must not let anyone touch his sleeping mat (*chatay*). The sleeping mat in Sukdi indicates one's presence and one's location in the temple complex. By sealing the mat in this way, even from one's own family, one is in a sense indicating one's separateness and one's mistrust of other people: the mat is sealed for much the same reason that the door is closed on the *satsang*, in order to stop interference with a ritual process.

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[119] '*sukdi-walleh*' mean those that are devotees of the sect associated with the town of Sukdi i.e. adherents of the Mahanubhav *panth*.

Though it is the family (and more importantly the husband and wife unit) that prays together morning and evening and in so doing asks for protection from God, in some senses the worship is highly individual. It is not the household (or the husband-wife unit) that receives the *vishesh* but sect members as they are themselves, as individuals. Thus, Brijlal has a *vishesh* of his own, as does his wife Champa. When a devotee is away from home for the night visiting relatives or friends in a distant village, for instance, he carries his *vishesh* with him and worships it there, and his spouse worships her *vishesh* separately at home. In striking contrast to other accounts of devotionalism (or indeed general Hindu religiosity), which has tended to view women as prime movers in household religiosity, among the Mahanubhav members (and other sects) in the village, men and women are charged equally with religious responsibility, with men on the whole taking a more active role (both within the household and publicly) than women. The woman of the household does not pray on behalf of her family; both husband and wife perform the act of worship together morning and evening.

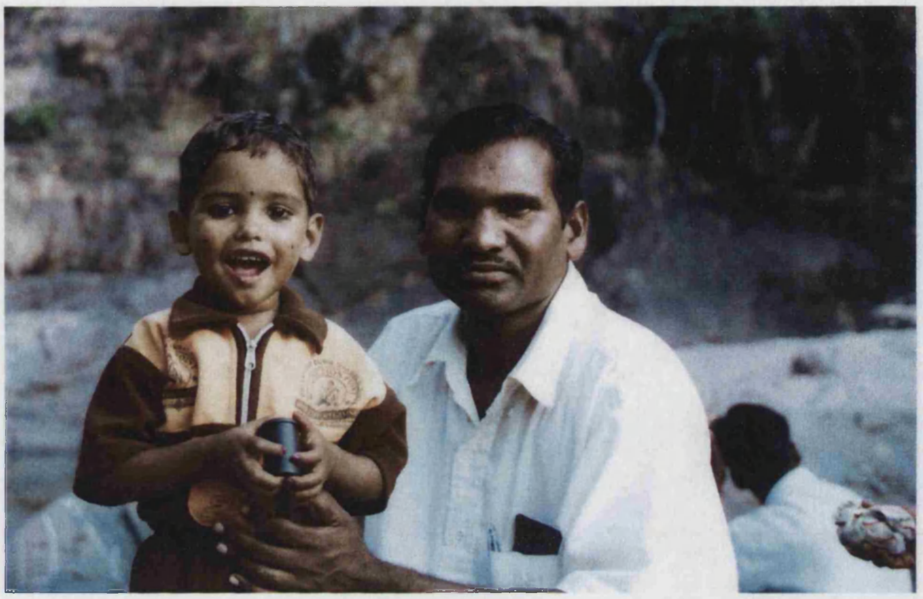

Plate 24: A Markakasa man and his son on a trip to a local beauty spot.

The practices of the sect, which devotees are required to adhere to if they are to maintain continued protection from witchcraft and magic, emphasise the individual self as a site of power. The binding of the sleeping mat and the exhortation to sleep in one's own bed suggests the importance of the individual self in society: on the one hand the isolated being is less likely to suffer, but on the other hand, the individual with his own *vishesh* is responsible for his own level of protection from future suffering. Dumont seems to agree: "in order to conceive of a personal Lord there must also be a believer who sees himself as an individual" (1980: 282).

Disputes as a consequence of sect membership could be more serious than the example of the two brothers given above. Although Dinu, Lomu, their elder brother and their father, Gangaram, eventually split from each other and established separate households, relations between them remain good and there is much coming and going between the various homes. One reason for this is that 'conversion' is not as dramatic as in other cases; here, Gangaram has been a long-time adherent of the Kabir Panth, also a devotional sect. Another family in the village, however, had a much more significant falling out, precisely over this issue of sect membership.

The Koreti are Gonds and there are three households in the village, all agnatic kin. The late Budda Koreti was the first member of his family to come to Markakasa from what is now the new state of Chhattisgarh, approximately sixty years ago when he was just a boy of about ten or eleven. His village was suffering from famine and drought so he came and worked as a house servant (*naukar*) in the village headman's (*thakur*) household. His brother and sisters followed him and, when they could, they built a house in the village and acquired some farm land. Budda developed into a charismatic man and a powerful *pujari* (or *baiga*: a sorcerer), and someone whom the gods had chosen to possess. The Koretis had done well in Markakasa: from nothing they had managed to become one of the wealthiest and powerful families in the village. This was not only the result of hard work and good fortune, they said, but also because they had not abandoned the *dev-dharmi* (gods and religion) of the Gonds[120]. As a consequence, worshipping the Gond deities and household gods (*lonchtun*)[121] seemed very important to them and, of all the Gond households in the villages, the Koreti employed *baiga* the most readily to intercede with the gods in order to solve problems.

Now, Budda's brother had two sons, both of whom are married and live in the village. About five years ago, the wife of Ramdas, the elder of Budda's nephews (*bhatija*), went mad. She would talk nonsense to herself and attack people without warning and only let people visit her if they brought gifts of food. Ramdas told me he had tried everything to find a cure: he consulted doctors in hospitals and asked *baiga*s to perform magic but nothing seemed to work. The longer the madness lasted, the more witchcraft was suspected. He went to see a *baiga* in a village about thirty kilometres away and sacrificed a Rs. 1000 goat, and for a time the madness ceased. Then it resumed and, as in the case of Brijlal discussed above, someone suggested they go to Sukdi, where if they prayed they would receive protection. Ramdas, his wife Tarabai and their daughter stayed there for five weeks where they prayed all the time, repeating the names of the five avatars and performing *puja* three times a day. The madness eventually left her and their guru instructed them on how to pray at home. They joined the sect by having their 'ears blown upon' (*kan phukna*) and returned to the village. Though Ramdas recognised the power of the place, he did not seem to regard it with much affection: "[Sukdi] is full of mad people wandering around. People who are happy (*sukhi*) don't go there, only those with pain (*dukh*)," he told me.

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[120] In most contexts this was not distinguished from that of Hindu *dharma* or Hindu *dev*; these were seen as the same as the Gond gods and *dharma*. The difference as people saw it was in the form and structures of worship. The only times the term 'Gond *dharma'* was referred to in an exclusive sense was when it was contrasted with the kind of dharma practiced by members of a religious sect, most importantly, the Mahanubhav sect.

[121] Each Gond family (extended) has two shrines, often located outside the house in a dwelling called *kuratandi*: one for the household gods (*lonchtun*) and another for the *hanal*, or the spirits of ancestors.

Unlike Brijlal's rather exceptional experience, Ramdas and Tarabai's 'acceptance' into the sect (*dharma suikarna*) led to immediate conflict with their kin. Like many new adherents, they began to cook separately, and of course refused to worship both the *lonchtun* (household gods) and the *hanal* (ancestors). By abandoning his gods, Ramdas was charged by his uncle, Budda, of giving up his Gond-ness and wanting to be separate from the rest of the Gond community. Ramdas has since built a separate house at the other end of the village and does not now visit his uncle's or younger brother's house, nor do they visit him, though his relationship with his wife's parents (also his FZ and FZH) who also live in the village does not seem as strained, partly because the refusal to worship household deities does not directly concern them. Yet Ramdas is emphatic that at no point did he quarrel with his *samaj*, the Gond community (his caste-fellows); the dispute in this instance is a matter of the 'household' (*ghar*). His assertion to me that he was a fully engaged member of the Gond community, a man who attended Gond caste meetings and helped at Gond weddings, demonstrated his desire that I acknowledge that his 'Gond-ness' had *not* altered despite the change in ritual practice. Like Jaduram, Ramdas had no desire to question his caste identity; despite changes in certain spheres of sociality and in the notion of the self, caste remains the hardcore. A different self which restricts sociality and is empowered by the ability to resolve existential problems of illness and pain has certainly emerged, but some ties continue to have meaning. Ramdas is no individual-in-the-world.

Disputes with non-sect members, be they kin or neighbours, are treated philosophically – as almost part of the process of devotion and of being an *atal bhakt*. "After all, a country cannot function with only one [political] party; it needs two to make it work", Brijlal said to me the following day as we were discussing the *satsang* of the evening before. Aside from demonstrating rather wonderfully the workings of parliamentary democracy, his statement expressed that conflict and opposition were to be expected and only made devotees firmer in their faith.

While for many people, the act of joining the sect may have led to many difficulties with kin, it also results in the adherent becoming aware of another association, that of their sect. Interestingly, the language used is that of kinship: all the disciples of one guru are called *guru-bhai* (guru-brothers) and this is a term that is extended to and used by women too. The guru is never in fact referred to as such and is instead called *babaji* or 'father'. In both of the *satsang* I attended, the devotees elaborated the common sense of belonging further as they talked about themselves as 'the children of one mother' (*ek mai ke pilla*)[122] and emphasised the need for unity among the corps of devotees even in the face of public, though more commonly private, hostility. Indeed this seemed to be the main purpose of the very first *satsang* held in the neighbouring village of Ganutola thirteen days after the death of the guru.

Though a hamlet of less than fifty households, Ganutola's location on a road between two larger villages, the presence of a government boarding school for *Adivasi*s and an Armed Police Outpost mean that it has attracted several traders to set up shop and is the site of the nearest weekly market to Markakasa. The village has a large number of Mahanubhav *panthi* devotees and is also the home of a Gond man, Bhagat, who was one of the first people in the area to go to Sukdi and join the sect about ten years ago. It was Bhagat's daughter who took the *byān* for Brijlal and Champa when they went to Sukdi in order to seek relief. This first meeting following the death of the guru was held in his house, chosen because of his position in the community and because his house was large enough to accommodate the forty people who attended. The meeting had several purposes: to perform the death rites of their guru held thirteen days after death when the soul of the deceased is dispatched; to perform a *satsang*, in accordance with the guru's wishes revealed in the dream; and to enable all the disciples of the guru and members of the sect to get to know one another (*parichay*). As I show below, one of the major concerns of the devotees gathered together that day was a fear of misrecognition.

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[122] Being the 'children of one mother' is regarded as the closest kin relationship one can have, closer than for example being the children of one father: a father can have many wives all of whom are mothers but only one of whom is regarded as the 'real' mother by her children.

Before we turn to an analysis of this first *satsang*, let us take a look at greeting and the process of recognition. Men in this region generally greet one another by saying "*Ram Ram*", though most of course dispense with this formality with people (such as fellow-villagers) whom they see often. Women, when greeting, do not usually say "*Ram Ram*" to one another or to men. Castes and religious sects alike have their different greetings; but one can only know which greeting to use if one knows who that greeted person is. The process of greeting is important since it is one way in which other people, spectators to the greeting, can observe the signs of community. Thus, generally, only a member of the Mahar caste would greet another Mahar (about whose caste identity the greeter was certain) with "*Jai Bhim*", though of course not all Mahars greet each other in this way all the time.[123] Likewise people of the Teli caste usually greet one another by taking the name "*Saheb*", associated with the Kabir devotional sect of which many Chhattisgarhi Telis are adherents. That people greeted one another in these multifarious ways was commented on extensively by villagers and was an important way in which to establish the caste or sect identities of people one had seen or had just met. Another mode of recognition is the application of *tika* (vermillion powder) to the forehead. In general the presence of the red powder in the space between the eyebrows indicates a member of a religious sect, whether it be Mahanubhav, Ramanandi, or Kabir. Indeed this is one of the ways in which non-sect people refer to sect adherents, by imitating the act of applying the *tika*.

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[123] Often, greetings such as "*Jai Bhim*" and "*Jai Sewa*" (the greeting used by the Gonds) would be used jokingly between non-Mahar or non-Gond people. Sometimes, the joking aspect was clear; at other times, especially when the greeted party was of that community, the use of the greeting was I felt more ambiguous – mocking or respectful depending on the context. Though I did not observe such a pattern in my fieldsite, Burra (1996) notes that Mahars in western Maharashtra tended to use the "*Jai Bhim*" greeting in public in front of mixed company but reverted to "*Ram Ram*" in private.

Though their *tika* look rather generic, adherents of the Mahanubhav sect do however have a particular greeting, "*dhandavat*", which has the effect of marking them as members of the sect to observers. All devotees, both men and women, greet one another by saying "*dhandavat*" accompanied by a folded hand gesture and a bow[124]. In form, it is significantly different to the action which accompanies the "*Ram Ram*" greeting in which the greeter touches the hand of the greeted and brings his own hands back to his chest, thus physically establishing a connection. In the *dhandavat* no physical connection is made or sought and the entire act looks far more ritualised than the simple "*Ram Ram*". The saying of it is not rushed; if two Mahanubhav *panthi*s (of either sex) pass one another in the street, for example, the parties will stop, face one another and perform the *dhandavat* even if no other conversation then ensues. When meeting a large group of fellow devotees, such as at a *satsang*, care is taken to greet each devotee in turn with a separate *dhandavat*, and again the space and time of the *dhandavat* becomes highly ritualised with conversation ceasing until the newcomer has finished greeting everyone. The *dhandavat* is an acknowledgment of belonging to the same moral community and acts as an important marker of its presence to those not members of the sect. But the *dhandavat* also signals something more: that it is said by each person individually to each other person individually, even if one is in a group, suggests that, for that ritualised moment in time, the group falls away and the individual members of the sect relate to one another as individual beings and not as members of a group. Conversely, the "*Ram Ram*" greeting in a group setting is usually uttered once by the newcomer and is meant to be a salutation to all. In the style of utterance of the *dhandavat*, the person seals himself off for a brief moment and through this practice expresses his sociality from a markedly individualistic perspective. But sect members also aim to establish the grounds by which a new sense of belonging can be recognised, one which involves being able to recognise others who are like them. So, let us now go to the first *satsang*, held shortly after the guru passed away.

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[124] The speech and the gestures are collectively known as dhandavat.

After the devotees had gathered at Bhagat's house, and after they had observed a few moments silence in memory of their guru, all those who were present were called upon to introduce themselves, to give their *parichay*. Each man (there were no women present at this initial *satsang*) gave his name, his village and the name of his guru (which, apart from a couple of exceptions, was the same for everyone). While the guru had lived, they had not needed to know who other members of their *panth* were, someone said: the guru had visited everyone and they had been connected through him. Now that he was dead, it was important to recognise just who one's *gurubhai* were. Just before the *satsang* had formally begun, for example, I noticed that my landlord Brijlal had expressed surprise on seeing an acquaintance from a neighbouring village; he had had no idea that this man was a member of the sect. That Mahanubhav *panthi*s would not recognise one another was seen as a problem: "Imagine you meet a *gurubhai* but you don't know that he is a member of your sect and you greet him with '*Ram Ram*' instead of '*Dhandavat*'. That would be a grave mistake (*ghalat*)." This misrecognition had the effect therefore of denying the presence of a community and again, in their opinion, led to the impression of an inconsistency in practice *from the outsider's point of view*. Likewise, it seemed to be desirable to create a map in space of where one's *gurubhai* lived, again to be able to imagine the extent of the community of sect members. It was important, one man declared at the *satsang*, to know where their sect-fellows lived so when talking about such-and-such village, one could say, "yes our *bhai* (brothers) live in that village". Membership of the sect is not spread by active proselytisation on the part of the gurus or by its lay membership; despite the fact that the former spend a considerable part of the year travelling from village to village, they meet only members of their own sect and do not hold public sermons (*pravachan*) as gurus of other Hindu sects do. Indeed, as we have seen, the sect is extremely conscious to keep non-initiated people at arm's length. Going to Sukdi and becoming a member of the sect is seen as an extremely difficult thing to do. Not only is it expensive, but once entered into it cannot be cast off easily without the risk of madness. Thus, as discussed above, it is seen as very much the last resort of people who have tried everything else. And the defining feature of the decision to go is the suggestion by a member of the sect that perhaps the time has come to give the temples at Sukdi a try. Information about the sect's power is spread by word of mouth. Knowing the social geography of the sect (who is an adherent, and where) is thus an essential part of increasing the membership of the sect, though this is not explicitly stated.

The restriction of sociality and the creation and recognition of a new sociality have considerable parallels with the discussion of ritual friendship in Chapter Three. There I argued that the ideology of ritual friendship asserts that love and affection are the source of the association and that this enables it to be contrasted with other types of relationships. Like *gurubhai,* it too is a relationship that does not distinguish on the basis of caste or class, and has force because it is a way of expanding sociality safely beyond troublesome (agnatic) kin. Though I do not suggest that members of the Mahanubhav sect create more ritual friendships than other types of people, the fact that a model already exists for recognising people as similar to one another in spite of caste and class may make the notion of *gurubhai* all the more meaningful.

I have argued that membership of the sect, and the kinds of practices and doctrines it requires of its adherents, enable the individual person take control of himself over matters of illness and well-being. Just as the sect member removes himself from certain forms of sociality, he engages in new forms with his fellow adherents, though it must be stressed that this latter is not really necessary for a devotee to maintain either his status as a Mahanubhav, or his level of protection from harm. In becoming associated with the Mahanubhav sect however, and especially through the act of pilgrimage, it is possible to discern another form of belonging, namely a more pronounced sense of Maharashtrian identification.

Pilgrimage and the idea of Maharashtra

For adherents of the sect, journeys to the temple towns where Chakradarswami preached and stayed are seen as desirable. Indeed, if an adherent suspects that he has been the victim of attack and successfully protected through devotion to God, he makes a promise to Bhagwan to visit a temple and give offerings (Chh. *naryal chudhāna*; lit. "to raise up a coconut"). Most Mahanubhav adherents in Markakasa visit Sukdi every year, though more men than women seem to accomplish this. In addition to these 'individual' journeys, there are also more 'organised' pilgrimages which occur in the Hindu month of Chaitra (March-April) and which take in several of the larger Mahanubhav temples at Mahur and Riddhpur in other parts of Maharashtra. A visit to a Mahanubhav temple is said to be particularly efficacious during the latter half of Chaitra since it is at this time of the year that the power to fight witches and ghosts is especially strong. During this time, I was told, Sukdi transforms from a sleepy backwater into a thronging town packed with pilgrims and the afflicted.

Markakasa people see themselves as living in a borderland[125], between the cultural worlds of Maharashtra ('Marathwada')[126] and Chhattisgarh. Neither entirely Maharashtrian nor entirely Chhattisgarhi, most feel out of place on their visits to other areas. This sense of belonging nowhere was often expressed in discussions of language. People would say that, though they might know several languages (Chhattisgarhi, Marathi, Gondi, Hindi), each was impure (*ashuddh*) and a 'mishture' (mixture). Travel west to Nagpur and beyond and one would hear 'pure Marathi'; go east to Raipur to hear 'pure Chhattisgarhi'; and go south, deeper into the forest areas (*jangalpatti*) for 'pure Gondi', I was told.

This border identity also finds expression in discussions over agricultural techniques: whereas in 'Marathwada' the dominant method is transplanting rice shoots (*rohona*), in

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[125] Interestingly, Chakradhar exhorts his followers to go to these very borderlands. The Mahanubhav texts remind adherents to emulate the founder and go and live at "the end of the land" (*deshacha shevat*). As Feldhaus writes, "according to them, 'the end of the land' is an area in which people speaking Marathi and another language intermingle. The periphery is understood linguistically, as a borderland between two language regions" (2003: 188). Not only should followers travel to borderlands, but the places they go to should be off the beaten track: "...followers are to keep to 'miserable little villages', they are to stay 'on hillsides and off the road' and they should sleep under a tree or in an abandoned temple outside a village...The most frequently repeated of Chakradhar's commands in this connection is the command to stay 'at the foot of a tree at the end of the land'" (Feldhaus 2003: 186).

[126] The use of 'Maharashtra' and 'Marathwada' in different contexts is significant. 'Maharashtra' was used to identify the political state entity and as such the villagers recognised that they were in Maharashtra. 'Marathwada' on the other hand was a description signifying cultural content such that 'Marathwada' meant places where people spoke Marathi, built their houses in a Marathi way, and followed Marathi customs. Thus, though Markakasa was in Maharashtra, it was not 'Marathwada'. Also, Marathwada as used by Markakasa people refers not to the specific region of Marathwada within the state of Maharashtra but to all of Maharashtra where Marathi is the dominant language.

Chhattisgarh the main mode is sowing seed by hand randomly over a ploughed field (*perni*). Needless to say, in Markakasa and the surrounding area they use both methods. What is important here is not whether in reality farmers in 'Marathwada' or Chhattisgarh use the methods ascribed to them by Markakasa people, but that their explanation of why there are two types of technique commonly used by them is this condition of living in a border zone.

One consequence of joining the Mahanubhav sect is a growing awareness of a sacred geography proper to the territory of Maharashtra. The imagination of sacred geography among non-sect villagers is limited to pan-Indian centres such as Kashi (Benares) and Puri (in Orissa) on the one hand, and local centres such as the temple of the Goddess Bombleshwari at Dongargarh in Chhattisgarh on the other. As discussed at the start of this chapter, the Mahanubhav sect is a distinctly Maharashtrian sect. Feldhaus writes,

> "...the Mahanubhavs are...extremely important for understanding the beginnings of regional consciousness in Maharashtra. For the Mahanubhavs were among the first to choose Marathi as a language of literary expression, and their religious literature was the first to ascribe religious meaning to a whole region that they called 'Maharashtra'" (2003: 185).

Indeed, Feldhaus's analysis of key Mahanubhav texts leads her to conclude that they regard Maharashtra as better than other lands: where the natures of the latter are *rajasik* (characterised by earthly passions and desires) or *tamasik* (characterised by ignorance and baseness), Maharashtra is *sattvik* (pure and good) and so more conducive to healing bodily afflictions (ibid: 193). She also highlights the importance the texts give to location and place and suggests that Mahanubhav pilgrimage is centrally concerned with remembering the deeds of the founders of the sect. The detailed listing in the Sthanpothi (The Book of Places) of villages and towns visited by Chakradhar and the other founders, and careful noting of the places where they stood, sat, stayed, ate, slept and defecated, suggest to Feldhaus "that rather than being a pilgrim's guide, the Sthanpothi permits the

Mahanubhav devotee the possibility of *thinking* about the places without actually going to them" (ibid: 196-8).

Several scholars have noted the importance of region as a way of mediating the relationship between the local and the nation in India (e.g. Benei 2001; Bayly 1998). The identification with Maharashtra and Marathi-ness through membership of the sect may enable this for Markakasa people. Certainly, many Mahanubhav sect members told me how their proficiency in the Marathi language improves after having stayed at Sukdi. Everyone there speaks Marathi and that is the language they use to talk with their guru. For those who are literate, the main texts of the sect such as the Lilacharitra and the Sthanpothi are in Marathi too. There is awareness in the village of the importance of Marathi. The medium of instruction in the Markakasa school is Marathi, a language which only a small proportion of children are familiar with. Teachers, parents and students alike complained that most people failed their Marathi exams and performed worse at school than people in other areas, largely because Marathi was not the language of the home for the majority of pupils[127]. Even the Mahars who speak Marathi as their first language complained that it was not pure and mixed with Chhattisgarhi.

Those sect members in Markakasa who had time and money visited the places of pilgrimage dotted around Maharashtra. The temples at Mahur and Riddhpur, west of Nagpur, were frequently mentioned both in conversation with me and amongst themselves, and these became more important than the pan-Indian or more localised pilgrimages. Membership of the sect draws people unfamiliar with Marathi ways into closer contact. What effect this has on other spheres of life, such as marriage patterns (do more people marry Marathi people as a result?), remains to be seen.

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[127] A study carried out by a local teacher examining primary and secondary education in a group of twenty-four villages including Markakasa concluded that the lower pass rates and lower level of formal schooling in those villages is closely linked to the language of instruction. Most students speak Marathi (if at all) as a language after Gondi and Chhattisgarhi, and he proposed that the schools in this borderlands area ought to devote more time to improving the level of Marathi in the early years of schooling (personal communication, I did not read the dissertation myself).

Up until now I have discussed these changes in relation only to the Mahanubhav sect, and located the transformation firmly within Hindu religiosity. There seems however to be a local logic for this sort of transformation, which leads to certain people becoming Christians for the same reasons as those who become 'better Hindus'. Interestingly then, viewed in light of political and cultural Hindu nationalism (which aims to make Christians the 'other'), both 'good Hindus' and 'othered' Christians are products locally of the same social processes, which have led to problems in dealing effectively, definitively and cheaply with attacks of witchcraft and magic.

A Christian Coda

On my return to Markakasa for a month-long visit in April 2005 (after an absence of one year), I discovered, entirely by chance a couple of weeks into my stay, that two households in the village had converted to Christianity. While waiting for his mother to turn up, I had been helping a boy revise for his up-coming sociology exam. He had been attempting to memorise key facts about the religions represented in India and then, when we got to Christianity, mentioned that a few months after I had left the village the year before, Christians had visited the area and some people had joined them. He seemed unsure about who exactly had converted but I learnt from further enquiries that day that the newly Christian families were those of Baburao and Soma, both of the Mahar caste.

Baburao is a Mahar man in his sixties, with two sons: one lives in Mumbai and works in a restaurant near Dadar station; the other, Durga, lives now in Markakasa and had spent ten years working as a cook in the State Transport bus station canteen in Nagpur, a job which helped him buy an acre of land. Though Baburao himself is poor with only a three-quarter acre of farmland, and a modest house in the new 'SC para' of the village, he is the MBS of one of the wealthiest men in the village. It was the first time I had visited his house since my return, and fortunately I found Soma there too.

Baburao narrated the circumstances which led to him and his family becoming Christians. Durga's seven year old son had been ill for some time with a chest disease and, though they had spent a lot of money on medicines, the boy remained sick. Baburao too suffered increasingly from shortness of breath and likewise could not be cured. So they began to suspect that the cause of both their illnesses was something that medicine alone could not cure. At around the same time, he said, a group of Christians visited the village and said that if they sought relief they should come to the '*mandir*' (church) at Korchi some thirty kilometres away to the south, where Durga's son would be healed. They made the trip to Korchi and were taught how to pray. There they also learnt prayers (*prarthana*) and hymns (*gana*), and were given bibles in Marathi and Hindi. Reading the words in the Bible protected them from harm; Durga's wife told me that whenever she felt frightened or had the sense of something was going to happen to her (M. "*mālā shankā āli, āttā kayatri mālā honār āhe*" i.e. that she was being attacked by witchcraft) she would recite the Lord's Prayer.

Soma went to the church in Korchi for much the same reason. His house had been plagued for a number of years by a *bhut* (ghost) sent by an enemy (*dushman*)[128]. No matter how good the harvest had been, they never had enough food: the *bhut* was eating their rice. Since he began praying to Jesus Christ the situation had reversed, and now they could feed ten people a day and not run out of grain. This *bhut* had also stopped the family sleeping: it would throw things around the house and enter their dreams. Though he had employed several *baiga* to fight it, the *bhut* had always returned. Now it had gone for good.

The short narratives presented above bear a striking resemblance to the way in which people who joined the Mahanubhav sect described their experience and how they explained the importance of their new religious attachment. For both sorts of religious change, incurable illness caused by witchcraft or magic motivated the decision to seek sources of healing other than doctors or *baiga*; and the desire for continuing protection produced an attitude of commitment on the part of the newly converted. Indeed, Soma drew the comparison during our conversation: "it is like what Brijlal and those others *Sukdi-walleh* did – they were near death and they went to the temple and felt better – it's exactly the same thing." In order to continue being protected from harm, Baburao slept with the Bible under his pillow. They recognised that the ritual was different too: instead of lighting incense or offering coconuts, Christians only needed to get down on their knees with a lighted candle in order to pray. Like the Mahanubhav, Soma's wife told me, there are no idols (*murthi*) in the 'temple'.

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[128] An enemy he declined to name.

And there is another similarity. Just as Jaduram and Ramdas, discussed above, were keen to emphasise their ongoing caste commitments of Mahar and Gond respectively, despite their adherence to the Mahanubhav sect and in the face of challenges from their non-sectarian caste fellows, so Soma and Baburao denied that they had given up their 'Boddha dharma' (Buddhism) despite having become 'Isai' (Christian). Though I could not investigate these new Christians' changing notions of self and sociality in any depth, I suspect that this conversion to *Christianity* accords rather well with Dumont's discussion of the continuing importance of caste for members of *Hindu* sects.

What is also interesting about these recent Christian conversions is that they raise questions about novelty and secrecy. A consideration of these concepts as seen by Markakasa Christians and Mahanubhav sect members might help illuminate, in terms other than those discussed so far, why religious change of this sort might be attractive.

Why did these two Mahar households not take the well-trodden path to the Sukdi temple door in search of relief from these attacks? When I asked them, they both said that the Christian temple was closer and less expensive. Unlike at Sukdi, which often required a stay of five or six weeks, they only needed to stay at the Church for a few days. While these are clearly important considerations, I wonder if there is not something else going on too. Perhaps the attractiveness of the Christian path to healing, to transform oneself from a suffering to a happy person, was located in the novelty of the experience. The novelty in itself helps restrict the bonds of sociality with one's kin and caste-fellows, because one now worships in a different way and has created a different set of attachments unassociated with the past. As I talked to both Soma and Baburao's families, I sensed their excitement in doing something new: their Bibles (both in Hindi and

Marathi) were immediately produced, and Baburao's SW began to recite the Lord's Prayer without being prompted before going on to explain in detail what the church looked like and what they did there. The importance of novelty has been noted by Kapferer (2003: 20), who suggests, following Douglas (1970, 1973), that for Sri Lanka and elsewhere in the world, much ritual practice (including sorcery practice) derives its force from the fact that it is regarded as originating from 'the outside': its power inheres in its newness and separateness from people's existing social worlds. Conversely, "sorcery that is well-tried loses its strength", he claims (ibid).

Connected to novelty is the issue of secrecy, which is a significant element both of going to Sukdi and visiting a *baiga*. Markakasa people were insistent that, if one wanted to consult a *baiga*, one should not tell anyone that one was going; and indeed this is how they behaved. On several occasions, I witnessed people who I later learned had visited a *baiga*, pointedly ignoring questions asking where they were off to. I once accompanied a villager on a trip to another village to procure seven chicks of certain colours, required by the *baiga* he had engaged to help cure him of his constant headaches and dizziness – brought on, he suspected, by witchcraft. As we were cycling back home, he asked me not to tell anyone what we had in our bags: the fact that a *baiga* would be visiting his house that evening was to be kept a secret. This not only echoes the discussion of the 'sealing off' of the house discussed earlier in the chapter, but also the way in which Mahanubhav sect members talked about their visits to the temple. As we prepared to leave on our trip to Sukdi, my landlady Champa began to complain rather loudly that too many people had got to know about our journey. Her comments were aimed at me: I had told too many people and had invited them along.[129] At first I thought it was because she was impatient to leave and fed up with having to wait for these other people to turn up, but in fact she had a far more serious concern. Her guru had told them that if they wanted to visit Sukdi they should do so without telling anyone and should leave as early in the morning as they could, before anyone could find out or ask questions. "If someone finds out you are going, they might try to do something to you", she explained semi-euphemistically. Secrecy characterised both the consultation of *baiga* and going to the temple at Sukdi.

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[129] I was coming to the end of my fieldwork and I had certain debts of kindness I wanted to repay. Since I was paying to hire the car to Sukdi, I invited three village friends along (the junior Thakur at whose house I often ate, a Teli man and my *Mahaprasad*). My landlady was also upset at the presence of Latchu and Mukta, the adopted son and daughter in law of her HeB, Manu, who were also sect members but whom Champa suspected of magic. In fact, I had not asked them to come; they had heard I was going to Sukdi and invited themselves along.

The similarities between the two raise a couple of points. Firstly, in analytical terms, one can see the Mahanubhav sect (and perhaps the Christian Church) as types of *sorcery* used to counter *other* forms of witchcraft and sorcery. That the Mahanubhav might be seen as such is also suggested by the fact that many non-Mahanubhav Markakasa people saw the sect's temple as a dangerous place for non-sect people to visit. Consider the example of our trip to Sukdi once more: Champabai complained that too many people were getting to know that we were going and that this would hamper the effectiveness of the visit. I had invited my *Mahaprasad*, Ganeshyam, along too, and though he had initially said yes, as the time approached to leave he came to the house and said he couldn't come: his brother had errands to run and could not watch the shop in his place. This was clearly an excuse (his brother never had anything urgent to do) and we asked Ganeshyam what the real reason was: did his family not want him to come? He admitted that his mother opposed him visiting the temples at Sukdi: "she says that if go to Sukdi I will fall ill or worse, and that the power (*shakti*) there is too strong and harms people who are not *panth-walleh* (sect members)."

The discussion raises a second point: the secrecy and novelty of the Mahanubhav type of sorcery was being compromised by its popularity. So perhaps the reasons why the Mahanubhav sect may not have been attractive to Soma and Baburao were that it was already coming to be seen as an old and non-exclusive form of sorcery, that there was no secrecy left in its practice and that a large number of people in the village had already been to Sukdi and already knew protective *mantra* associated with the sect. The Christian church and modes of worship on the other hand were new and uncommon in Markakasa and the surrounding area. As such it was a new form of 'sorcery', all the more powerful because its practices were strange and unknown. While *baiga* are repositories of secret knowledge that can only be learnt after long periods of training, the secrets (and thus power) of the Mahanubhav sect are available to all simply by joining the sect, becoming the follower of a guru and keeping to the sect's strictures regarding worship, devotion and practices. The very fact that membership of the sect (and also perhaps of the Christian church) means that the self has responsibility for how magical attacks are dealt with also has the corollary that, as a form of sorcery, it is in fact more widely and immediately accessible (provided one keeps the faith) than that which is exercised by *baiga*, who manage to keep their mantra secret from all classes of people. As the Mahanubhav sect becomes more popular, therefore, the power that it wields in terms of secrecy and novelty diminishes and opens the field for other forms of sorcery.

Conclusion

Adherence to the Mahanubhav sect has the effect of reconfiguring sociality, especially with kin and neighbours. The experience of troublesome and dangerous kin relationships makes a religious sect which emphasises exclusivity and the restriction of sociality particularly attractive.

Through this discussion of the changing notions of the self and sociality, one can discern several tensions. Firstly, though kin are regarded as problematic (which is why sociality is restricted with them in terms of dining, cooking and worship), the closest of kin - one's wife, daughter or mother - are essential elements of the process of healing because they take the *byan* which leads to one being cured. Secondly, though the self takes responsibility for his own level of protection as a consequence of membership of the sect, a state of affairs seen as highly desirable given the problems which exist in asking for assistance from others, the sect member is still a man-in-the-world and so cannot restrict his sociality completely: his caste has enduring importance in the constitution of society. Thirdly, though the Mahanubhav sect is appealing because it is effective against witchcraft and sorcery, the power it exerts through its ritual practices can be seen as a type of sorcery too. As such, the more popular it becomes the less powerful or effective it may appear.

The perspective in this chapter has largely been from the point of view of the sect member and the partial creation of a new self in society. In the chapter which follows, I show how a change in food and drink practices as a consequence of sect membership not only fulfils a functional requirement of protection from harm, but also transforms into a way of thinking about a person who is 'more improved' or developed than others. This then feeds into a more widespread local discussion influenced by Hindu nationalist activists and ascetics about the constitution of the virtuous society.

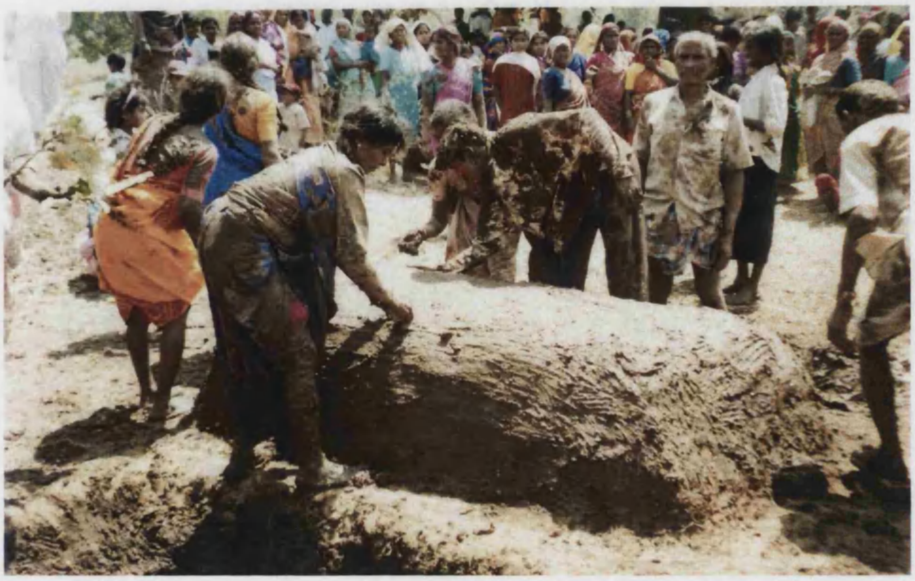

Plate 25: Building a tomb during the Gond death ritual of karsad

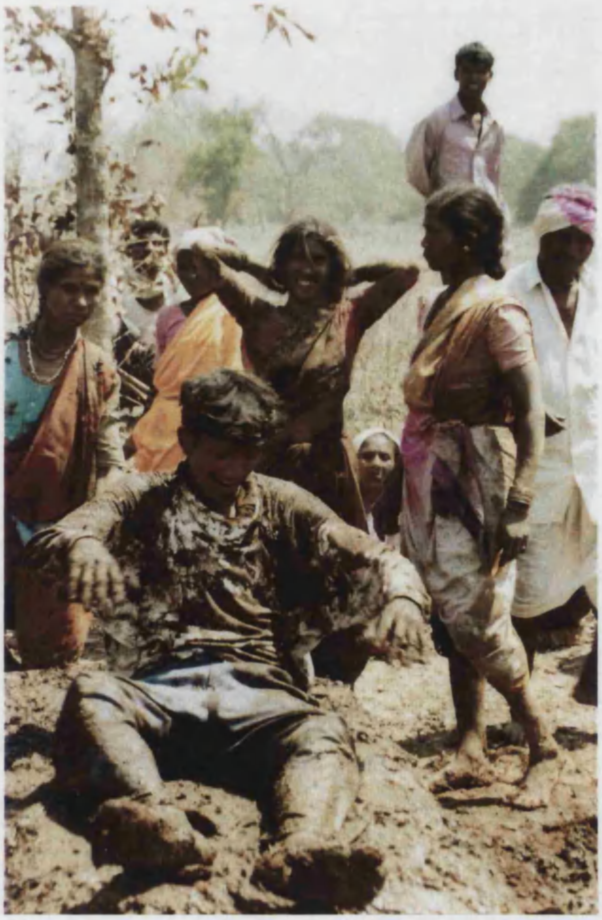

Plate 26: The sorye *(affines) of the dead playing* chikal *(mud) on a tomb during* karsad.

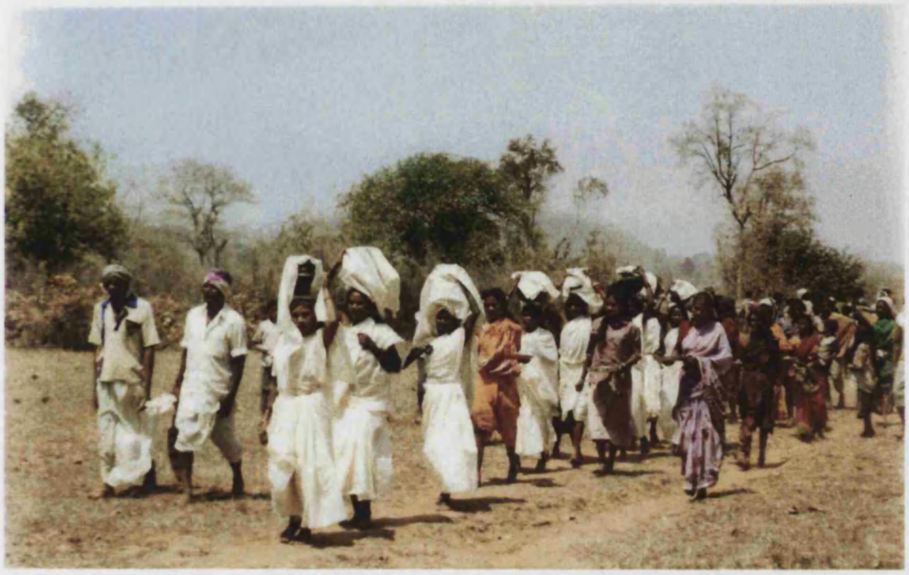

*Plate 27: Karsad. Women affinal kin of the dead carrying pots which will contain a frog in water, representing the jiv (*life*) of the dead.*

Plate 28: A group of young men and women dancing during karsad.

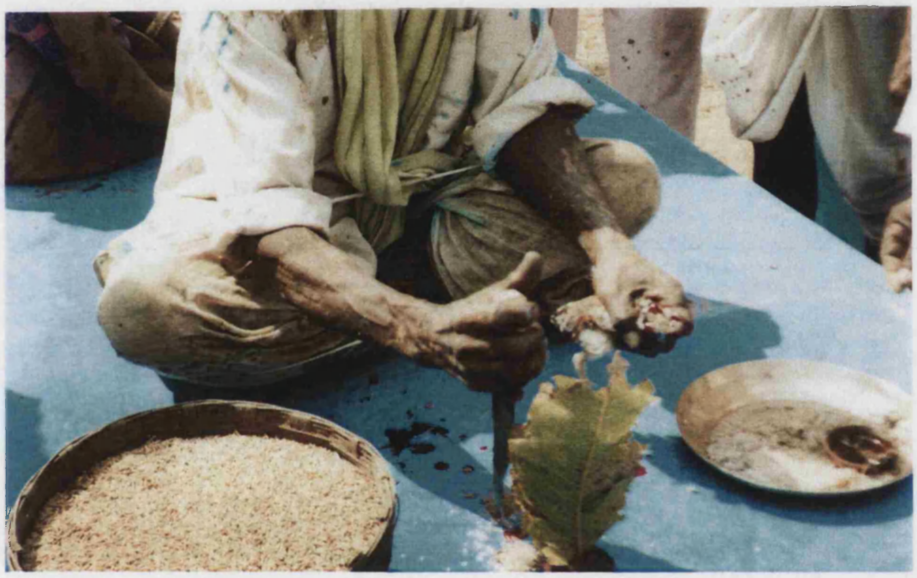

Plate 29: A baiga *sacrifices a chick on a Gond tomb during* karsad.

Chapter Six

From Protection to 'Improvement': The Commitment to Vegetarianism and Visions of the Future

Academic writing on the practice of vegetarianism in India has proceeded on the assumption that those on the lower rungs of society – Adivasi people and low castes - give up eating meat out of a desire to change their social position. In its baldest form, as stated by M. N. Srinivas, the suggestion is that, in emulating high caste Brahminical practices, those who are low attempt to improve their position in a purity/pollution-governed caste hierarchy in a process known as Sanskritisation (1966)[130]. Srinivas also highlighted the prestige associated with a vegetarian diet, and many scholars suggest that marginalised people (either as individuals, households or groups) adopt vegetarianism in order to increase prestige more generally, regardless of any clear sense of caste hierarchy (see e.g. Bailey 1960, 1961; Furer-Haimendorf 1982; Singh 1985; Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998; Deliege 1999). While these studies often assume that motivation for changing dietary practice lies in the increase in status and the accumulation of prestige, I aim to shift the perspective somewhat and examine what vegetarianism means for the person as a component of a wider transformation, part of which was discussed in Chapter Five. One of the consequences of becoming a member of the Mahanubhav sect, in Markakasa and in the area more generally, is the adoption of a vegetarian, teetotal diet. For Markakasa people, the adoption of a vegetarian diet as a consequence of membership of the sect solves 'being-in-the-world' problems: by joining it and living by its rules they attempt to protect themselves better from attacks of witchcraft and magic. In fact, this desire for protection is what gives vegetarian practice its power.

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[130] It was Srinivas' (1952) study of the Coorgs of south India that suggested the content of a theory of Sanskritisation. Srinivas found that the Coorgs were changing their dietary habits and aspects of their religious life. But he did not see this as necessarily a stab at increased status since the Coorgs were then the dominant caste locally. The way in which Sanskritisation was formulated in that ethnography was in fact more nuanced than the way it was subsequently developed and taken up both by others (see above) and Srinivas himself (e.g. 1966).

Insisting that the adoption of vegetarianism is evidence of a search for social prestige would be a misreading of the significance of vegetarianism, resulting from a disengagement from the view of people who adopt the practice. The social scientist often refuses to acknowledge how and why motivation for action (such as changing dietary habits) may have its roots in religious transformation because, according to the terms of a particular version of modernity, this motivation appears either pre-modern or objectively non-transformative.[131] Rather, explanations are sought which are more easily regarded as true engagements with modernity on the part of marginalised people, explanations such as the impact of anti-colonial nationalism, Hindu nationalist activity or, in the case of Sanskritisation, the desire to escape marginal status by acquiring social prestige. The experience of religion is un-coupled from both society and politics.

Religious movements among lower caste groups, which promoted not only changes to worship but also vegetarianism and teetotalism, have been analysed by elite nationalist Indian historiography as expressions of rebellion and resistance to colonial rule. David Hardiman's history of the Devi religious movement among Adivasi people in southern Gujarat in the early twentieth century seeks primarily to re-consider this movement from the bottom-up and not necessarily as expressive of anti-colonial sentiment. He also disputes the Sanskritisation model, and sees the adoption of vegetarianism and alcohol abstinence as an appropriation and democratisation of Brahminical notions of purity and a way in which Adivasi and other low status groups sought to deprive these notions of their power (1987: 6). My position is that vegetarian diet has a power that is embraced by people not necessarily because of the Brahminical status of that value but because of its appeal to experience. But let me be clear: I do not claim that the theory of Sanskritisation is without value – the evidence presented here cannot possibly do that – only that the method used to reach its conclusions be made more rigorous.

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[131] See e.g. Wakankar (2005) for a discussion of the implications of such an approach in examining the historical figure of the religious reformer Kabir. In that paper, Wakankar suggests that the causes and consequences of a low caste Hindu, Kabir, becoming a Muslim have been erased in official nationalist historiography in favour of an emphasis on the 'typically Indian' syncretism of the sect Kabir founded. Thus the transformative act for the actor (Kabir) is not examined and a religiosity founded in low caste experience left unexplored.

A focus on embodiment, on the way in which bodies, through experience, become socially and culturally creative, can reveal the power of a practice such as vegetarianism in this context. As we have seen, the experience of pain and suffering and of being healed at Sukdi has importance for Mahanubhav sect members in terms of the body. The body is the way in which suffering is experienced, whether it be madness, headaches, weight loss or sleeplessness. Healing at Sukdi also occurs through the body, seen in the violence of *byan* and the bodily disciplines imposed while one is in residence there. It is the remembrance of these experiences and the desire never to suffer again that make the practice of vegetarianism so powerful for sect adherents.

By suggesting that low status people act largely in reference to elite groups and elite modes of being, one not only denies the ability of those people to make sense of their lived worlds but one also pursues a methodology which leads to a fundamental misreading of a given social situation. Thus one would not be in a position to interrogate adequately why people give up meat, nor the power or consequences of that act. What I propose is, rather than assume that the adoption of vegetarianism is 'about' Sanskritisation or nationalist projects, one should be sensitive to the ways in which its practice may in fact be immediately irrelevant to the practitioner in terms of status or power.

The issue is, however, complicated, not least because notions of purity and sin and the link between these and a vegetarian life are important both for Hindu religious sects and in Indian society more generally. In this ethnographic context however, these important notions are merely elaborations rather than full explanations. Since the period of suffering, as they describe it, categorically does not result from being sinful or impure but from a sustained assault by magic or witchcraft, the purity and virtue of the vegetarian diet cannot but be encompassed by (and thus understood in relation to) the greater motivation for and power of membership of the sect and the resulting change in diet.

While the practice of vegetarianism and teetotalism is powerful for the individual sect member because of their experience of pain and suffering, these practices do have a wider social significance. Not only do they need to be examined against the background of changed notions of sociality of the kind discussed in the previous chapter, but what people eat and drink also becomes part of and contributes to the articulation of what constitutes *sudharna* ('improvement'), a local category which describes social change with the view to making 'a better village'. Villages in which sectarian Hindus (of any caste) live are seen as more 'improved' than those which contain none. This idea of improvement resonates strongly with local Hindu nationalist discourses on 'uplift' espoused by the Vidarbha Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VVKA) but also by holy men, ascetics who promote the notion that the 'good Hindu' who gives up eating meat and drinking alcohol can create 'good Hindu society'.

But vegetarian and teetotal practices are not uncontested and have led to division and tension in Markakasa, particularly among Gonds. What appears at first sight to be a divide between vegetarian and meat-eating villagers is less about the nature of the food being consumed than about a radical transformation in the nature of sociality itself brought about by membership of the religious sect. Ideas about what constitutes Adivasi culture and its relation to eating meat and drinking alcohol are used by some meat-eating Adivasis in order to demonstrate that a vegetarian, teetotal Adivasi is a contradiction in terms. But this, I argue, is just a way of talking through the issue; the real problem is not the dilemma of Adivasi-ness and its association with certain food practices, but a change in the way people relate to one another as a result of membership of the sect. Once again therefore, the methodological focus on the transformative act for persons in their particular local social setting reveals not only the power of vegetarianism as a way of being but also that its practice is indicative of other more general processes of change.

The conception of 'the Adivasi' is not, however, irrelevant. It serves to frame the discussion of *sudharna* and what makes a 'developed village'. Being located in a borderlands area, which is neither 'plains' or 'jungle'[132], means that Markakasa notions of *sudharna*, linked to vegetarianism and teetotalism, can also be seen as an expression of distancing from the idea of *jangli* (wild), and thus participate in a vision of Indian modernity through national identification.

Late in the nineteenth century, religious reformist groups such as the Arya Samaj became increasingly identified with the growing nationalist movement which sought to raise the consciousness of Indians as Indians in order to make demands on the colonial state. An Indian identity was being forged which drew on the 'rediscovery' of the ways of the ancient Hindus. Practices seen as superstitious and deviant from 'pure Hinduism', such as blood sacrifice, were targeted by nationalists, and consequently the view that good Hindus were vegetarian came to claim greater attention. Srinivas, for instance, reports that in Coorg district in south India in the 1940s, "the local leaders of the Indian National Congress have been everywhere more or less successfully opposing the propitiation of village deities with blood-offerings" (1965: 182, cited in Fuller 1992: 99). The link between what is eaten by the deity and what is eaten by man has been commented on, by Fuller among others: "There is a saying in the Ramayana that 'whatever food a man eats the same is the food to be offered to his deities' (Kane 1968–77, 2: 733). The reformist corollary must be that if all deities are vegetarian, so too are all Hindus" (Fuller 1992: 102). A specific view of what it meant to be a modern Indian and a modern Hindu was being promoted, one which saw meat-eating as a barbaric custom and a result of the degradation of the 'Indian spirit'. Alcohol, which led to drunkenness and idleness, came under attack by the Congress nationalists too. Verrier Elwin, for instance, writes at length of the Congresswallahs' attempts to wean the Adivasis of central India off *daru*, as part of their project of bringing the tribals into twentieth century independent India (see Guha 1999). Reforming eating and drinking practices was therefore seen by some in the nationalist movement, especially those on the neo-traditionalist right, as important to the task of building a modern society.

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[132] These are not necessarily accurate topographical descriptions. Markakasa was in a forested area regarded as *jangli* by many from the 'plains' (in Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra).

So let us first take a closer look at what Markakasa people eat, how it has changed and the social and symbolic significance given to different sorts of food.

Food and the dangers of commensality

Rice is the principal crop in this part of central India and people eat what they grow: most households operate subsistence agriculture. Though there are significant wealth disparities between villagers, there is little difference in the type of food ordinarily eaten. Meals are taken twice a day and consist of freshly cooked boiled rice and one vegetable dish or lentils. Sometimes this is accompanied by homemade lime or mango pickle. Food is cooked on mud stoves (*zula*) on the floor, which are fed by firewood. In the summer, when cooking indoors becomes unbearable, most households build stoves in the open air either in their courtyards or back gardens. Though women are the main cooks in the home, men do on occasion participate in the preparation of meals. They will often take on slicing, peeling or chopping tasks, while it is the wife who grinds the chillies to make the masala paste. Men are expected to know how to cook and will cook for their family, especially but not exclusively when their wives are menstruating and there are no girls to cook for the household. Diners (both men and women) sit on the floor and are served by a female member of the family, who eats after the others have eaten. If the rains are good then gardens can supply some of the villagers' vegetable needs: runner beans, pumpkins, bittergourd, tomatoes, aubergine; some of the wealthier households with larger plots of land or access to water can grow spinach, fenugreek, cauliflowers, cabbage, chillies, and various types of lentil. Otherwise, vegetables are available in weekly markets, held in several villages around Markakasa and attended by most every week or fortnight.

Apart from the increased incidence of vegetarianism, there appears to have been little change in people's eating habits, at least over the past twenty years.[133] Certainly the types of choices that now exist for city-dwellers are not available to Markakasa villagers: to this day most people have neither tasted ice cream nor drunk Coca-Cola. There are a couple of small shacks in a village four kilometres down the road which serve snacks such as fried *bhajia* (dumplings), but for a meal one has to travel forty kilometres to the *tahsil* (sub-district) headquarters.[134] It would be fair to say then that, for Markakasa people, food is essentially that which is eaten in one's own home, cooked by a member of one's family.

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[133] Given the prevalence of regular years of famine in the past (e.g. in the late 1950s as reported by Markakasa people), what *has* changed over a longer time span is the experience of serious hunger.

The majority of people in Markakasa, whether men or women, adults or children, eat meat, the most common being eggs and chicken; goat and pork (both wild and domestic) are also consumed. Though the consumption of carrion beef is not publicly admitted to, some Chamars (those involved in the flaying of dead cattle) as well as several Mahar households (involved in the transportation of cattle to slaughterhouses) certainly do eat this otherwise locally abhorred meat. On occasion more unusual meats such as owl, snake, tortoise, rabbit, or mouse will be eaten. From informal inquiries, meat (including eggs) is generally consumed once a week and it is not meat that makes the meal but rice.

Those who are vegetarian are for the most part members of one of the three Hindu religious sects (Mahanubhav, Kabir, Ramanandi) represented in the village. There are also a couple of individuals who do not belong to any Hindu sect and have given up meat in order to become disciples of a local *sadhu* (ascetic).

As Maurice Bloch (1999) has pointed out, food is often the best conductor both of sociality and of anti-sociality. The meal shared creates closeness but closeness carries with it vulnerability and the risk of the perversion of that closeness through poisoning or witchcraft (ibid: 145). Indeed, "the better a food is as a conductor that creates bodily closeness, the better it is as a medium of poison" (ibid). Just as with the Zafimaniry of Madagascar whom Bloch describes, a fear of witchcraft (*jadu-tohna*) and poisoning often enters into discussions about food and eating in Markakasa. It is generally thought that one is most vulnerable to such attacks when eating. Precautions are taken to avoid eating in such a way that one may be seen by people from outside the household: either a door is partially closed, a curtain hung, or diners move out of the line of sight of visitors. In my landlord's household for instance, where I took my meals, my landlady would whisper to me to move further into the kitchen when visitors to the house hovered outside in the courtyard. Likewise I was warned by my landlord's eight year old son not to drink my morning tea too far from the house in full view of passers-by for fear of being bewitched. In Markakasa, *paan* (betel nut leaf package containing betel nut, tobacco, and lime) was most often cited as the carrier of poison or other magical concoction, and for that reason I was often reminded not to accept *paan* from strangers but from people I knew or trusted. Buying one another *paan* is a highly symbolic act and a mark of closeness or intention to create closeness; the power of its potential as a conduit for dangerous substances lies, as Bloch suggests, in this strong symbolic value.

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[134] Even eating in a 'hotel' (restaurant) in this small town is thought of as incredibly expensive for the vast majority of Markakasa people. Such meals can cost Rs 20 per person, which is just under the daily wage for a farm labourer. Foods common in much of (urban) India such as *dosa* and *paneer* are unheard of by most Markakasa people.

Meat has a symbolic value in Markakasa[135]. It is food which is regarded as the most social and the clearest indication of sociality. Whenever guests from other places visit meat-eating households, at least one of the meals they are served during their stay contains meat. Even among Markakasa people, friends invite one another to eat on those days when their household has meat to cook. Sharing a vegetarian meal has social value too of course, but the value of meat seemed to rank higher. Meat-eating guests who came to Markakasa and stayed with vegetarian households were said not to enjoy themselves as much, and would stay fewer days on account of the lack of meat. They would spend their evenings at other people's houses, newly struck-up acquaintances, where meat would be served, or would disappear to a neighbouring village where a relative lived. Following the logic of Bloch's argument then, one could argue that, since meat in Markakasa has a strong association with the expression of sociality, it also carries with it the risk of danger.

Bloch also proposes that it is commensality with outsiders which is regarded as dangerous among the Zafimaniry: the closeness created by eating together forces people who are otherwise strangers (or even enemies) into one another's sociality. In Markakasa, similar sentiments were also expressed, as the example of *paan* above demonstrates. Weddings, too, were seen as prime sites for poisoning and witchcraft, since one would sit in a dining line (*pangat*) with people one might not necessarily know or trust. But as we saw in Chapter Three, and contrary to Bloch's ethnography, one also has reason to fear and mistrust those who are closest – brothers and other agnatic kin – since these are the types of people who are most involved in one's life and with whom one is most likely to enter into dispute.

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[135] Bloch (1999) also notes that meat in many societies performs an ultra-social function.

The power of vegetarian practice: protection not prestige

Whilst the actions of the body in the process of suffering and healing are striking for those who go to Sukdi (see Chapter Five), no less striking are the bodily disciplines imposed on them while they are in residence at the temple. Former meat-eaters and alcohol-drinkers have to change their diets and have to learn how to pray at the temple and participate in the worship there. Membership of the sect and observance of its values and practices protects people from the attention of witches and other malicious spiritual agents; thus the practices adopted while in residence at the temple are brought back to the village where they are believed by sect members to be part of the package that protects them from harm. In short, the practice of vegetarianism is seen as essential to living a life free from pain and hardship. Here then, we find ourselves far from the position where vegetarianism is seen as a marker of social prestige; rather it is a practice that is a fundamental component of the life lived safely, and one which has power because it is practiced by people who have experienced the worst of times. The intense bodily experiences involved in both suffering and healing create dominant motifs in the biographies of people who have become vegetarian; the power of the latter is found in the remembrance of that set of experiences, and the desire never to suffer in the same way again (see also Connerton 1989; Csordas 1990, 1994, 1999). As discussed in the previous chapter, the sign of their devotion is the *vishesh*, the stone said to be from an *ota* (dais), which each adherent possesses and to which they offer worship. The *vishesh* is also a mark of protection; its disappearance suggests that the devotee has somehow strayed from the path of the sect and protection from witchcraft and sorcery is withdrawn. To eat meat is to err and one risks returning to that time of pain and suffering before one joined the sect.

Since they are required to give up eating meat and alcohol on joining the sect, new Mahanubhav adherents come to see these two forbidden substances differently to before. Not only is abstention from meat and alcohol seen as contributing to a virtuous life characterised by the principle of non-violence (*ahimsa*), an idea that would have had little currency for them as meat-eaters before joining the sect, but these foods are seen as dangerous. My landlord, Brijlal commented that since joining the sect even to smell alcohol makes his head spin, a sensation he never used to feel before. This comment was made after he had told me that if Mahanubhav *panthi*s begin to eat meat and drink alcohol again then they will eventually go mad. Once again then, what is emphasised is the bodily sensation of contact with the forbidden substance and the effect that has on the status of one's vulnerability to attacks of magic and witchcraft. Not only is the body instrumental in one's experience of forbidden substance through the remembrance of the pain and process of healing, but it engages the entirety of one's senses and reminds us of the nature of the sensual power through which food is experienced (see Jackson 1989; Stoller 1989, 1997).

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, there is also a complementary notion of purity: membership of the sect and observance of its practices has effected a change from the impure and sinful to the pure and virtuous. One sect member from another village offered this typical explanation: "My life was full of pain (*dukh*) and sin (*paap*). I wanted to change my life and become a better person. Before I joined the sect I ate meat and drank alcohol and told lies. Now I am a better person and I'm happy. My soul is pure (*shuddh*); I'm pure on the inside." Does this desire to remain pure motivate the practice of vegetarianism? And in expressing this desire, do not vegetarian Mahanubhav devotees claim some sort of prestige that has a Brahminical referent? Does this undermine the proposition that it is the power of experience which motivates a vegetarian diet? The connection, after all, appears clear: purity is associated with a vegetarian diet throughout much of India and, as scholars have observed, this combination of purity and vegetarianism reaches its apogee in the figure of the Brahmin.[136]

But where does vegetarianism as a value come from for Mahanubhav sect members? Does it have a Brahminical referent? We can draw on Dumont's (1970) famous discussion of the relationship between the Renouncer and Brahminical thought in Indian religions to illuminate this question. Dumont suggested that innovations in Indian society and Hindu thought were due to the individual-outside-the-world or the World Renouncer. The Renouncer formulated new ideas, which were then canonised in the sect that he created. As the sect and the renouncer posed a challenge to Brahminical power and status, since they were often non-Brahminical in character, Brahminical thought then incorporated values and ideas propagated by the sect as Brahminical values which then became markers of prestige in society.

Let us take the example of vegetarianism. The Renouncer declares that to be virtuous and lead a good life one has to be vegetarian. This practice is then advocated by the sect he (or his disciples) establishes. Brahminical thought takes up vegetarianism and makes it a marker of prestige in society. Dumont sees this is a historical process, as a moment or series of moments that, were we so inclined, we could verify historically. Thus in joining the sect now, in contemporary time, what devotees are actually doing by practicing vegetarianism (regardless of what the sect says, regardless if the sect is explicitly anti-Brahminical, regardless of their motives in joining the sect) is reinforcing Brahminical values, since sometime in the past the idea of the renouncer has been incorporated into Brahminical ideology.

However, we could see Dumont's theory of the role of world renunciation as *dynamic* and applicable in the present-day, and not simply as a historical process completed sometime in the past. Surely, if Dumont's proposition is correct, Brahminical ideology is not fixed for all time but needs to be maintained by constantly adopting values and ideas from present-day World Renouncers. If present-day renouncers were to stop saying that vegetarianism is a virtuous practice, how would Brahminical ideology react? One could conclude that the act of joining a sect such as the Mahanubhav in the present day is to reinforce the values of the Renouncer and *not* of the Brahmin. Brahminical values cannot be completely hegemonic in the present: the relationship between the Renouncer and the Brahmin is dynamic, and the ideology of the latter has to be constantly maintained.

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[136] Parry (1991: 269) notes the considerable difficulties in attempting to study values such as pollution, purity, sin and misfortune in Hindu India: one should not assume that different words necessarily indicate different concepts. In this case however, the motivations of the people in seeking a remedy to illness do make it possible to distinguish between sin/virtue and purity/impurity.

One could take it so far as to say that by joining the sect of the World Renouncer, Mahanubhav devotees become (perhaps only for an instant) symbolic World-Renouncers themselves and give vegetarianism a value which is then transmitted to Brahminical thought anew. The source of the power that the Mahanubhav adherent gives to the value of a practice such as vegetarianism is the Renouncer, not the Brahmin. To argue otherwise would be to deny the power of the World-Renouncer in modern India; his power cannot be reduced to that of Brahminical ideology.

But what about purity? Here we can take up Hardiman's argument outlined at the start of the chapter, that religious reform movements such as the Devi were an attempt to democratise Brahminical notions of purity: by making everyone pure (not just Brahmins), purity lost its social power. This seems to bear some affinity to what we know about the history of the Mahanubhav sect. Like many other religious sects which began in medieval India, the Mahanubhav positioned itself against Brahmin ritual hegemony (Raeside 1976; Skultans 1987). Unusually, the Mahanubhav was the subject of intense Brahminical persecution up until the late nineteenth century when it was recognised as a Hindu sect and, perhaps as a result, the sect writings are vehemently anti-Brahmin (Raeside 1976). Similarly, the nuns and monks of the sect whom I met both on their visits to Markakasa and on my visit to Sukdi would often define one of the chief characteristics of their sect as being against both Brahminical authority and privilege and the figure of the Brahmin more generally. At this point in the discussion, Hardiman's contention of an attempt to deprive purity of its specific Brahminical power, by making it a value available to all, appears entirely applicable.

However, one can distinguish purity as a value for the sect and as a value for its adherents: the two are not necessarily the same. The practice of vegetarianism and teetotalism from the view of the sect may indeed be an expression of purity in relation to Brahminical power. But purity as a principle from the sect's point of view is not the same thing as purity from the lay devotee's perspective. There are two possible explanations why the desire to be pure might be attractive to people in Markakasa. There is, firstly, the explanation which derives from the well-established argument running throughout the anthropological literature, that purity as a value in India is important in terms of social prestige – whether in terms of caste hierarchy or status more generally: in being members of a Hindu (devotional) sect and thus being vegetarian, people attempt to emulate the purity of Brahmins, a caste and status position denied them by the fact of their birth. A second possible explanation, advanced here, is that people maintain purity in order to protect themselves better from attacks of witchcraft. The motivation explained in terms of prestige may indeed be valid but it cannot exist without the corresponding motivation to have continuous protection; if the latter is untrue then both the decision to go to Sukdi to be cured and the consequent bodily experiences lose meaning. This latter explanation *can* however exist without the former, while the former is incomprehensible without the latter. Thus the values of purity and holiness, which the sect doubtlessly promotes and is associated with, are encompassed by the requirements of protection.

That purity is a value defined by and encompassed by the needs of protection against malicious spiritual attack is demonstrated by an episode involving my landlord Brijlal. As well as being a Mahanubhav sect adherent, Brijlal is active in the local Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), one of two major national political parties of India. Though he does not hold any official post within the local party organisation, he is nevertheless regarded as the BJP's man in Markakasa. In this part of India, as in many other areas of the country, it is customary for the major political parties (most notably the Congress and the BJP) to distribute alcohol to voters during elections. The purpose in Markakasa at least was not to 'buy votes' as it is often represented in the media; the alcohol is distributed after the polls have closed. But a link is established and generally, though not necessarily, BJP supporters drank the BJP alcohol and Congress supporters drank Congress-supplied alcohol. As the main BJP worker (*karyakarta*) in the village, Brijlal took delivery of the alcohol when the party jeep visited Markakasa. He refused to receive it into his house, however, and instead used a room in the adjoining house of his brother-in-law (ZH), whose household are not members of the sect, to store the liquor. After the polls closed and the election officials had left, Brijlal organised the consumption of this alcohol in front of his house. Though people wanted to drink in his courtyard, regarded as 'inside the house', Brijlal made it clear to those assembled that no alcohol was to be consumed there; in addition none of his cups were used and his sister supplied some, rather unwillingly it has to be said, from her own kitchen. Nevertheless, it was definitely Brijlal as representative of the BJP who served the alcohol and organised its distribution. Clearly he was concerned with purity but I doubt whether it was a matter of prestige. Prestige, after all, is a value in relation to others in society and yet Brijlal was not concerned about appearing to lose prestige by publicly serving alcohol in front of his house. It was his purity and that of his household that he was anxious about, and feared that by receiving the alcohol, a forbidden substance, into his home he would be breaking a key Mahanubhav tenet. Would the *vishesh* have disappeared if he had stored and served it within the walls of his home? It would be reasonable to conclude that he had to maintain purity in order to maintain protection.

But is not purity intimately connected with protection from misfortune in other parts of India too, even Brahminical India? Parry (1991) shows that Benarasi Brahmins regularly attribute illness to an impure diet; pollution, he claims, is a potent source of ill-being in many parts of India (ibid: 271). The position looks similar to that of the Markakasa Mahanubhav adherents but there is a qualitative difference. Before they join the sect, Markakasa people do not link impurity of diet or sin to the cause of their affliction. The illness is caused by witchcraft or magic in a situation completely outside their control, and regardless of their own behaviour. It is only in 'post-conversion' narratives that the question of sin and impurity becomes relevant. But sect members, if pushed as to the causes of their illness, quickly abandon the stance of impurity as cause and explain it in terms of mystical magical attack by other human beings. Pollution does not cause illness in the same way that it does for Benarasi Brahmins: for the latter, a person in an impure state seems to attract misfortune without the intervention of another actor – impurity and illness are inextricably linked; for Markakasa Mahanubhav people, on the other hand, the impurity attached to meat or alcohol which they come into contact with is seen as breaking their promise to God to be good devotees, and it is this broken promise which withdraws protection.

And there is a difference in the importance placed on prestige too. For the Benarasi Brahmins that Parry describes, prestige is just as important as protection. Indeed, funeral priests who expose themselves to more impurity than others are not only regarded as more susceptible to illness or death but are also lower in status than other Brahmins in the city (Parry 1994). This does not apply to Markakasa Mahanubhav devotees, for whom the prestige associated with a vegetarian diet is entirely irrelevant in their search for a lasting cure to their illness.

The practice of a vegetarian diet in Markakasa is the consequence of powerful needs rooted in painful bodily experience. The concerns with purity, which might have suggested an ultimate link with high-caste ways of being, are shown to be subordinate to the superior demands of protection from malicious spiritual attack. And though vegetarianism is associated with Brahminical ideology, a dynamic reading of Dumont on world renunciation demonstrates that sect members reference the values of the Renouncer, not of the Brahmin.

What then are the consequences of this change in diet for relations between vegetarians and meat-eaters? Indeed, is this latter distinction between the consumers of different types of food one that Markakasa people see as ultimately meaningful in structuring relations among themselves? Bringing notions of embodiment back into the analysis, one may be able to observe how "the body is not only an outcome of social processes but [is] a transformer of social processes itself" (Lyon and Barbalet 1994: 49).

Vegetarians and meat-eaters: Gonds, sociality and commensality

Gond-ness was often unsurprisingly expressed in the idiom of difference: their language, their life-cycle rituals, their gods and their enjoyment of meat and alcohol. So, roasted fish curry was an essential part of a naming ceremony (*satti*), as were copious amounts of *daru* (alcohol) for both women and men. At the other end of life, during the Gond death ceremonies known as *karsad* often performed several years after the actual death, when tombs for the dead would be built and the spirits of the ancestors given a room in the house (*kuratandi*), huge expense is incurred with the slaughter of animals both for sacrificial purposes and for the needs of the guests. Indeed, this is the main reason not only that the *karsad* takes place several years after a death, but that the *karsad* is performed for several deceased agnatic kin at one time. Daughters of the family who have since married and become members of other households return at this time, and make offerings of juvenile chickens to their dead ancestors which are then sacrificed by the officiating *baigas* (ritual specialists) and cooked. Likewise, alcohol flows freely: an important role is played by the deceased's affines (*sorye*) in the preparation of the tombs, and in the transportation of a pot said to hold the deceased's life force or soul (*jiv*), and every now and again at various points during the ritual the *sorye* all sit down and refuse to take any further part until they are given alcohol to drink. Eating meat is so bound up with one's identity as a Gond that it was said that even Gonds who were vegetarian in their lifetimes would ask for meat on their death-beds. Talking one day with a Gond man, Dayal, he narrated an apocryphal story of Brijlal's father, a vegetarian, who, as he was dying, called Dayal over and asked him to get hold of a small chicken for him, cook it and feed it to him. "Why," I asked Dayal, "would a vegetarian do this?" "He was a Gond," he replied, "and Gonds need meat."

The Gondness of eating meat and drinking alcohol appears to be so intuitive that even children are aware of it. I take my meals with my vegetarian landlord's family. The adjoining household, separated only by a courtyard, is that of my landlord's sister and brother-in-law who are not members of the sect. While my landlord's two year old son, Anil, and I were eating lunch one afternoon, his uncle (the aforementioned brother-in-law), pottering around in the courtyard outside, asked us what we were eating. We answered and then Anil, prompted by his mother who was serving us, in turn asked his uncle what he had eaten that day. "Fish curry", came back the teasing reply. "You lot are Gonds" said Anil. His mother and I both laughed. "What are we then?" she asked her son rhetorically.

And despite this, the association of Gondness with meat and alcohol made by some people cannot really be sustained; in conceptual terms a vegetarian Gond would cease to exist as a Gond, something which clearly does not take place since vegetarian Gonds are regarded as full members of their caste group. What is at the root of these anxieties over Gond-ness, expressed by meat-eating Gonds, is not dietary difference but conflicting notions of sociality resulting from membership of the sect. Consider *karsad*, outlined above. Mahanubhav sect adherents would not require *karsad* for themselves but are quite willing to organise one for their non-sectarian parents. One man told me that the structure of the ritual stayed precisely the same: the affines (*sorye*) would periodically refuse to take part in the procession and instead of alcohol were given lemon sherbet to drink to persuade them to continue. Likewise the sacrifice of chickens and goats was replaced by lemons and coconuts and vegetarian food was served at the various feasts. Yet the *karsad* as a ritual was valid and successful: tombs were built and the ancestors (*hanal*) housed. That the *karsad*, a distinctive local marker of Gondness, could still be performed suggests that a vegetarian Gond is not really a contradiction in terms at all.

As we have seen, the practice of a vegetarian diet and abstention from alcohol in Markakasa are part of a package of measures which Mahanubhav devotees embrace in order to better protect themselves from spiritual attack now and in the future. This transformation distinguishes them from their kin and neighbours who are not members of the sect and do eat meat and drink alcohol. Vegetarianism needs to be seen in the context of a range of other changes in local notions of sociality. To neglect to do so would be to hold up the practice of vegetarianism in and of itself *contra* meat-eating as the key opposing tropes in society, and the contrasting dietary practices themselves as the distinguishing point of analytical departure. Approaches to embodiment which base themselves solely in experience and emotion (e.g. Obeyesekere 1981) are susceptible to the criticism that society and sociality (or how one relates to others) drop out of the analysis. I want to show instead how individual experience and practice (such as that of vegetarianism) can be *socially* as well as individually transformative.

There is a marked change in the practice and attitude to commensal dining. As discussed above, there is a general fear of magical attack while eating and one is most vulnerable at someone else's house, eating someone else's food. Sect members often expressed their reluctance to eat at the homes of others who were not Mahanubhav *panthi*s. A common pattern among new devotees is the culinary division of the household: sect members break away from brothers or parents and cook separately (though they may continue to cooperate in agricultural work). This exclusivity with regard to food and commensal dining has its ultimate expression in the 'sealing off' which takes place during Navratri (see Chapter Five).

Consider the following example. My landlady Champa, a Mahanubhav Gond, returned home from a baby's naming ceremony (*satti*) which she had attended in a neighbouring village along with several other Markakasa Gond women, and was not at all happy. "I tell you, Desai, it was awful", she complained, "our Gonds are really filthy; I couldn't eat a thing." "Didn't they have anything vegetarian?" I asked. "Yes, they'd made potato and aubergine curry", she replied, "but all I could taste was fish, they were probably using the same spoons and pans." Champa felt her purity had been compromised: even though vegetarian food was served, doubts entered her mind regarding contamination. She had felt very uncomfortable and left early. The following day I went to visit another Gond woman, Ganeshyam's mother, Saitrabai, who had also attended the naming ceremony. She was not at all pleased at Champa's behaviour the day before. What irked her was Champa's desire to be separate from the rest of the guests and her refusal to eat the vegetarian food she was served. "This is our *sanskruti* (culture)", she said, "and it's because of people like her [members of a sect] that we're losing it." Saitrabai's notion of sociality consisted of people eating together, happily without too much fuss. In her view, Champa had unproblematically been provided vegetarian food and so ought to have been satisfied. Instead Champa's reluctance to partake in commensality was proof to Saitrabai that membership of the sect had fundamentally changed her and that it was this, and not the practice of vegetarianism, that was of concern in terms of 'culture'.

What is troubling then for non-sect members is not the difference in dietary habits but that, in several spheres of social life, sociality and commensality seem to have been transformed. The real dilemma of Gond-ness for Gonds is not vegetarianism, which is capable of accommodation, but that Mahanubhav sect members no longer worship household gods or ancestors, nor do they share a common view of sociality.

That vegetarians refuse or are reluctant to eat with others is not in emulation of Brahminical practice but is part of a wider transformation in sociality as a result of membership of the sect. Their exclusivity, though it may be expressed in the language of purity and pollution, does not have a Brahminical referent; instead, in their interactions with others, sect members are keen to avoid coming into contact with forbidden substances because of the risk they pose to their level of protection against witchery and magic. Similarly, as a result of the remembrance of the painful embodied experience which led to them joining the sect in the first place, sect members have a heightened sense of danger and are cautious about commensality in general, fearful of a relapse into suffering. An interrogation of the causes for the adoption of vegetarianism and its continuing power, as discussed in the previous section, leads to a better interpretation of people's sociality and the place of dietary practice in that.

The dietary practices that Mahanubhav (and other sect) members observe emerge from the need for protection from future harm and represent an aspect of their performance of devotion to God. As noted at the beginning of the chapter, vegetarianism and teetotalism have been historically constructed as representing a true Indianness or Hindu-ness, and have been associated with civilisation in opposition to the barbarism of meat-eating. Thus these practices need to be seen as part of a wider set of concerns, which attempt not only to define who good Hindus are but also to distinguish those who are 'wild' (*jangli*) from those who are 'improved' (*sudharlele*). The commitment to vegetarianism produced by membership of the sect and rooted in the experience of illness also provides a link to this wider set of oppositions that come to be represented by different types of diet. The following example demonstrates how the vegetarianism of the sect members is transformed into a commentary on 'superstitious' and 'backward' practices conducted by non-sect villagers.

The case of the missing horse: animal sacrifice and 'superstition'

On joining the sect, new Mahanubhav adherents return to their villages from Sukdi as changed people, and it is in their practices that they appear changed to those on the outside. In order to affirm their status as *atal bhakt* (unswerving devotees) to God (Bhagwan) alone, they take down pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses which previously adorned their homes. For Gonds who join the sect, the household gods (*lonchtun*) and ancestors (*hanal*) must also be removed from their land; members of the Mahar caste who, in this area at least, are all Buddhists, remove pictures of the Buddha and cease to worship him; and sect members (of any caste) no longer worship village deities. Sociality with divinity is radically transformed. An event that took place during my stay in the village crystallised the divisions between sect members and non-sect members. It centred on the type of food one sacrificed to the village gods.

On the outskirts of the settlement, as the houses give way to the fields and forest, are the shrines of the Thakurdev, the principal tutelary deity of the village, and the gods and goddesses of the surrounding forests and hills that have been called to Markakasa and established there (*sthapan*) to protect it. These latter are represented in the form of clay horses and are called *dev*. Thakurdev dwells in the *saja* tree and is associated

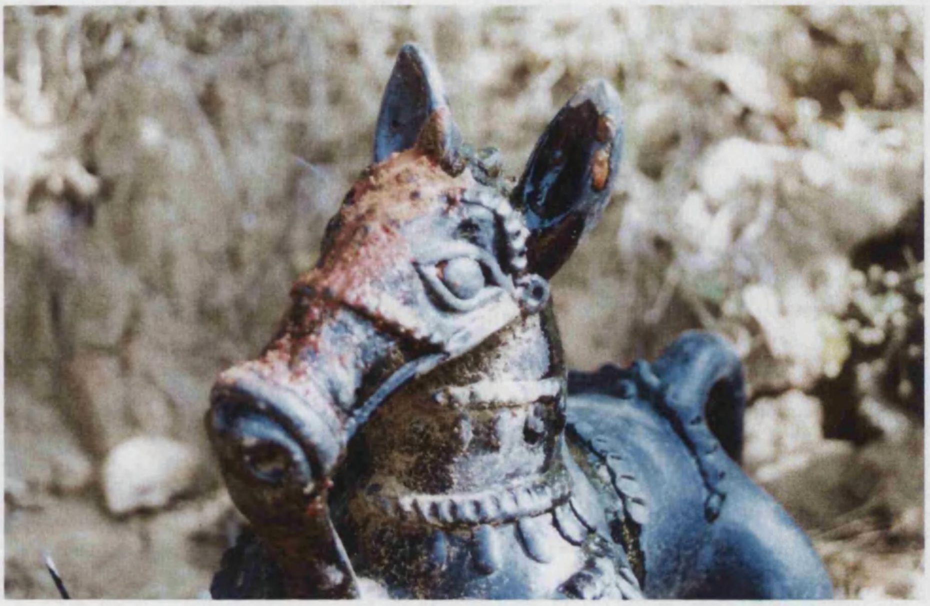

Plate 30: A tutelary deity of the village, around which collective village worship centres.

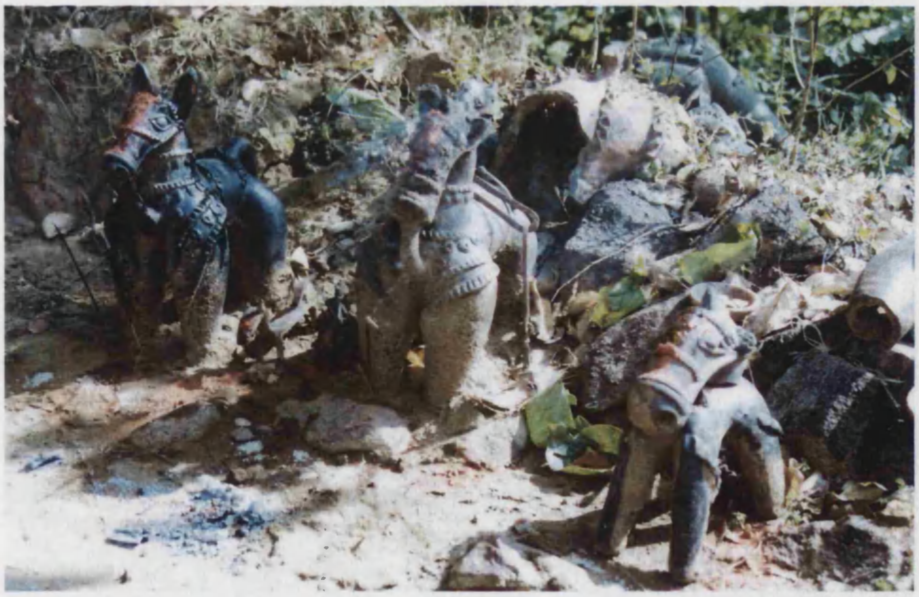

Plate 31: Deities.

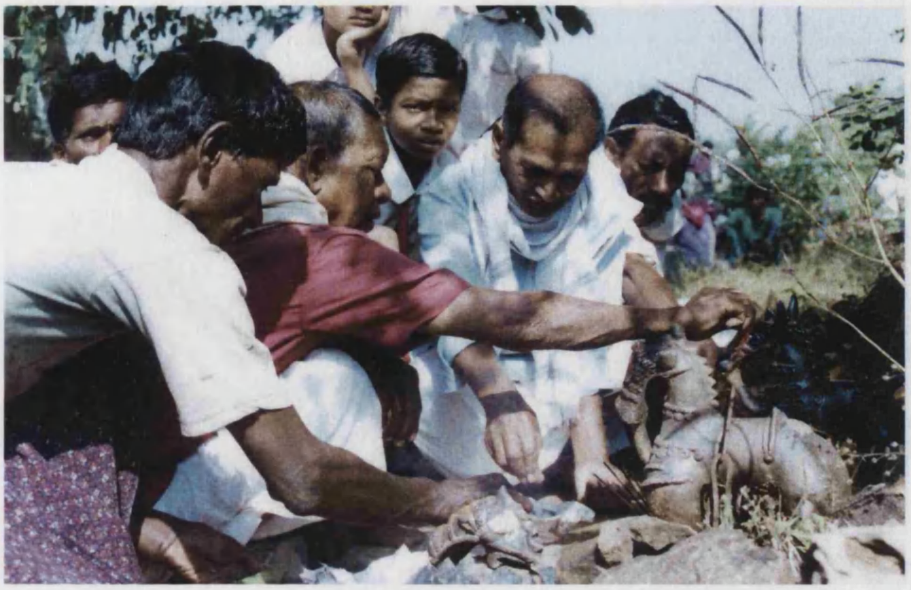

Plate 32: Offering worship to the tutelary deities of Markakasa during the agricultural ritual of Sanjori.

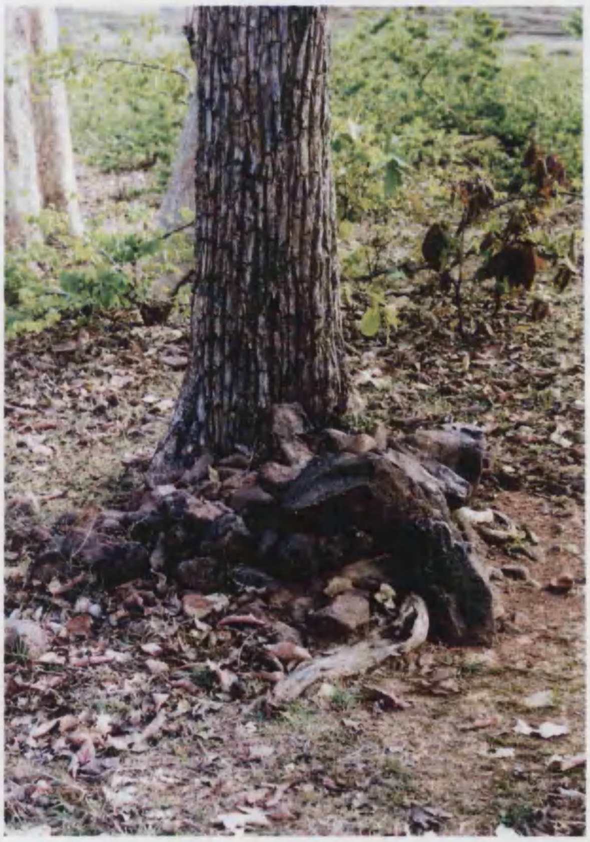

Plate 33: The Thakurdev, the principal tutelary deity of the village. It lives in the saja *tree.*

with the headman's family; the current headman's ancestor founded the village and the shrine. Also in this grove is Bhimalpen: he too lives in a tree and is the guardian of the village boundaries, being the deity that keeps thieves and ghosts away. It is here among this set of shrines that the village's communal religious life is centred.

Fifty years ago, animal sacrifice for these gods was common. One of the ways in which the village as a collective could respond to crop failure or illness determined to have been caused by angry gods was the sacrifice of a buffalo to the god Bhaisasur. Bhaisasur is located in an area slightly beyond the grove which houses Thakurdev and the others. There, the villagers would dig a pit and lower a live young buffalo into it. The pit would then be covered with a large slab of stone and the buffalo would be left to die. The Bhaisasur is still powerful today. The land where it resides belongs to Jagdish, a Mahar and one of the wealthiest men in the village. His wife told me that they do not farm that part of their land at all. Once a servant from another village had mistakenly ploughed the land there and had dug up a chain which he attached to one of the bulls. That night, Jagdish's wife saw a buffalo running through her dream and knew that something was wrong. When she woke in the morning, the bull with the chain around its neck had died.

But the god is no longer propitiated. Following a series of disputes with the incoming Telis about fifty years ago, some of whom were then beginning their involvement with the Kabir sect (see Chapter Two), blood sacrifice (including buffalo sacrifice) was abandoned.

There is a close association between the food that is eaten by men and the food offered to the gods during worship (*puja*). Babb (1975), for instance, notes that the principles of purity and hierarchy that are involved in food transactions, especially in relation to the notion of polluted leavings (*jutha*), are present in the offering of food to the deity. Just as to eat someone's *jutha* is to recognise one's inferiority to them, he argues, the receiving back of *prasad* which is shared among the congregants expresses man's inferiority to the deity (ibid: 53-60). And while blood sacrifice (*bali*) is different in form to ordinary worship (*puja*), scholars have recognised that they are related categories and that the eating of the meat after the sacrifice is akin to consuming *prasad* (Fuller 1992: 85-6). Just as the food that people were eating in Markakasa was changing, so the food eaten by their gods had to change too. But were the gods willing to accept that change?

A couple of months after my arrival in Markakasa, one of the horses went missing. Now, this unsettled many villagers; that a god could be stolen and the perpetrator not suffer any immediate punishment seemed to them a sign that something was terribly wrong, that perhaps the village gods were angry. A meeting was held and it was decided that a white goat would have to be given in sacrifice to the village gods; the villagers would ask that the gods bring back the stolen horse to the shrine and punish the thief by making him ill or killing him. Several sect members expressed their dissatisfaction with this return to animal sacrifice, but did not pursue the matter publicly. Goats are rather expensive so a collection was taken up to raise the seven hundred rupees needed: some sect members avoided paying; others told me they had reluctantly handed over the money. Many adherents of the sect regarded the slaughter of a goat in this situation as an example of superstition or 'blind faith' (*andha shraddha*) and would delight in telling me that the sacrifice had been in vain: though the horse was later found, no-one appeared to have been punished. That people should eat meat or drink alcohol was seen by sect members as undesirable in human beings, an indication that the individual or the community was not 'developed' or 'improved'; that people should offer blood sacrifice in order to feed the gods was superstitious nonsense, another indicator of people's lack of 'development' or 'improvement'. What is important here is that blood sacrifice was not decried using an idiom of purity and pollution; instead, the vegetarian sect members I spoke to felt that sacrifice such as this was decidedly unmodern: "Educated people from the cities don't do this sort of thing; they pray to God and have done with it", a Mahanubhav Teli man said.

This attitude did not sit well with those, especially non-sect Gonds, who had trusted in the efficacy of the ritual. That the horse could go missing in the first place was a sign, according to many people, that the vegetarians had had their way too long in denying the gods animal sacrifice all these years. That the sacrifice was only partially successful was another warning sign. Too many concessions had been made to both the Telis, who had initially introduced sect Hinduism to the village with their advocacy of the Kabir Panth, and more recently to the Mahanubhav sect and others, with their unwillingness to take part in any village ritual. While the rituals used to involve animal sacrifice and *daru*, now all that was offered was a coconut. The gods were not being satisfied and further problems could be expected. As one slightly drunk, non-sect Gond man put it to me:

> "If you invite someone to eat with you and put a pot of water in front of them to wash their hands and then tell them there is no dinner how will they feel? That's how our gods (*hamara devta*) feel when we give them coconuts; they're waiting for meat and alcohol."

Through the accusations of 'superstition' and 'backwardness' the sect members levelled at the rest of the village for pursuing the goat sacrifice, they were expressing their identification with a modern way of being, akin to that lived by people in the cities who were thought to have more effective ways of dealing with problems such as this. But alongside the calls of superstition is the fact that devotees, through membership of the sect, have in any case transformed an aspect of their sociality with these local village gods. They can call these practices superstitious and ineffective largely because they no longer need to rely on them for protection from harm.

Food, drink and the 'backward Adivasi': the neighbouring village of Kedanar

From my earliest days in the village, people would say to me that it was fortunate that I had come to live in Markakasa, and not in the neighbouring village of Kedanar. It was dirty, people said, and their inhabitants were not improved (*sudarlele*). The people there were always drunk and did not know how to welcome outsiders. At first I dismissed this as petty village chauvinism, but when it was repeated to me throughout my fieldwork and by 'outsiders' (forest guards, teachers) too, I began to look seriously at why they would think that Kedanar, and indeed several other villages in the area, were more backward (*magaslele*) than Markakasa. What were the criteria they were using?

Kedanar is a predominantly Gond village one km away along the road. The settlement is larger than Markakasa's and its forest is denser and more extensive, covering an area of over twenty square kilometres. Unlike in Markakasa, the Gonds here are by far the majority community and there is also a large population of Gond Rawat (a cattle herding service caste, that speaks a different dialect of Gondi). There are very few Chhattisgarhi castes in Kedanar, though there are several Maharashtrian Mahar households. As a result Chhattisgarhi is hardly heard and the village lingua franca is, unlike in Markakasa, Gondi.

People would often say that Kedanar was less 'improved' or developed than Markakasa, because the people there drank too much alcohol (*daru*). Markakasa is one of the few villages in the area to have banned the brewing and sale of alcohol, though not the consumption of it (see more below).[137] So, if people want a drink, they often go to Kedanar where homebrew is never in short supply; I was told repeatedly that Kedanar is a place where "you can obtain *daru* in any house" (*sab ghar me daru milenge*). Interestingly, the phrase "going to Kedanar", was used euphemistically in certain contexts to indicate that the speaker was going for alcohol. Indeed, expecting that these sorts of statements were just rhetorical, I was struck by their relative truthfulness. On my first visit to Kedanar, I was offered a drink by three different households, something that rarely happened to me in Markakasa except on festival days or during a wedding. In Markakasa and Kedanar alike, drinking *daru* was not necessarily seen as a bad in itself. In fact, the local brew, made from the *mahua* flower, was seen by many, including teetotallers, as an effective medicine against diverse ailments; "*daru me abud bitamin have*" (lit. there are many vitamins in daru). And 'alcohol' was not an undifferentiated category.

As I sat round the fire after dinner one evening, I casually mentioned to my host family that my uncle (*mama*) liked a glass or two of whiskey in the evenings, immediately apprehensive after the words left my mouth that my host family would think badly of a Brahmin who drank. Instead they seemed rather confused as to what whiskey was. My landlord asked me if it was 'inglish'. 'Inglish' [from 'English'], I learnt, referred to alcohol that was seen as more modern in that it was drunk by *paisewalleh log* (people with money) from the city, such as my uncle. 'Inglish' was a different type of alcohol, and indeed the word '*daru*' would not be used to refer to it. Inglish such as beer (Indian brand lager) and whiskey (or more commonly, 'whiksey') was something that was drunk with '*taist*' [taste], my informants said; it was a drink to be savoured, instead of knocked back, which is why city people (like me) always sipped *mahua daru* as if it were tea. Though sect members would not touch any alcohol, beer and whiskey, they did not seem to have the same opprobrium attached to them. Though surprising given his caste, the fact that my uncle drank whiskey was not necessarily contentious, perhaps because it had no local salience, perhaps because it was seen as 'modern' and therefore acceptable. The fact that my uncle ate meat *was* commented on however, and *that* my landlord did find curious. *Daru*, then, in most situations, referred to a limited category of alcohol which included the local brew made from the mahua flower, *mahua daru*, and also the more expensive government distilled alcohol known as *desi daru*. There was some confusion over the status of newer drinks such as Coca-Cola[138]: on several occasions I was asked whether it was *daru*[139]. That the villagers, especially young men, associated me with modernity, and that this modernity was linked to beer, is illustrated by a curious incident. A group of young men of all castes, who were on their way to a wedding in another village, tumbled into my room one afternoon as I was enjoying a nap and produced a 750ml bottle of beer. They had clubbed together to buy this bottle (about eighty rupees, or two days labour) and needed a place to drink it. They all knew how opposed my landlord was to alcohol (see above), so it seemed a strange choice deliberately to come to his house: if he found out he would not be pleased, and in any case there were several houses nearby which were eminently more suitable. They wanted to drink the beer with *me* and show me their sophistication. If it had been *mahua daru* I doubt they would have gone out of their way to come to such a risky drinking den.

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[137] The ban is not a *gram panchayat* resolution, but one made by the *sian panch.*

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[138] A six rupee (about eight pence) 150ml bottle of Coke was still regarded by many in the village as a strange luxury that only teachers and other government servants indulged in.

[139] *Daru*, used here to mean alcohol in the widest sense.

The problem with alcohol, I was told, was that some people, especially in Kedanar, drank to excess; they did not drink with '*taist*' as city people or foreigners did. One only had to look at Kedanar to see the effects of their drunkenness: "They have so much land in Kedanar, most people there are bigger landowners than in Markakasa, but they're just not interested in working hard; they're always drunk. That's why so many people from Markakasa rent farmland from Kedanar," said Ramu, a non-sect Gond who himself had a bit of a reputation as a keen drinker.

People in Markakasa seem to adopt an evolutionist frame of thinking when talking about Kedanar. Though only one kilometre away, it was, in their minds, further back down the road of improvement or change, a snapshot perhaps of what Markakasa used to be like. "What used to happen in Markakasa still goes on in Kedanar", was a common sentiment. My *Mahaprasad* (ritual friend) Ganeshyam visited Kedanar frequently, usually once every two or three days. His family has a home there, since his late father's second junior wife still lives there (Ganeshyam's mother is the first junior wife, and maintains her household in Markakasa), and they can count a number of kin in Kedanar: the *sarpanch* (elected head of the village council) there, for instance, is his FZD; and Kedanar is the natal village of his senior mother (*bade dai*). His mother is the Markakasa *sarpanch* who criticised my landlady in the incident referred to earlier in the chapter. Ganeshyam himself does not drink daru and, though he eats eggs, does not see himself as a meat-eater. And naturally, since his is a meat-eating household, he is not usually fussy about where he eats. I was asking him about labour employment in his small shop one evening as we were cycling back from a visit to Kedanar, and he said he preferred to get people in from Kedanar to work for him. They were *simpal log* [from English 'simple'], he said, who weren't interested in working for money: all they needed in payment was a few glasses of *daru* and a chicken or goat meal. Labourers from Markakasa on the other hand, he said, *were* money-minded and would bargain ferociously over their daily wages. There was of course no way of confirming this; what is interesting about these statements is not their veracity but the fact that they are made at all and expressed in terms such as these, with food and drink playing a part in the construction of the image of the 'simpal Adivasi'. In his eyes, the Gonds from Kedanar were to be admired for their simplicity.

But Ganeshyam could also be disgusted at times with people from Kedanar, and their lack of 'development' or 'improvement' was to be deplored. On another occasion, accompanied by him, I dropped in on a meeting of the Kedanar *sian panch*, who were discussing the arrangements that needed to be made for that year's village fair (*mandai*). Several of the men were noticeably drunk and *daru* was being served. As guests, we too were offered a drink: I accepted; Ganeshyam, who is teetotal, refused and was served tea instead. I drank up, and chatted a while and then left with Ganeshyam, who looked rather cross. "I feel sick; they served my tea in a glass which had had alcohol in it and now I can't get the taste out of my mouth", he complained as he chewed rather ferociously on a couple of 50 *paise* sweets. "Really, these Gonds just won't improve. A thing like that would never happen in Markakasa these days; people know better now."

Ganeshyam's concern over the *daru* was expressed in terms different to those used by Mahanubhav sect members. For the latter, having a drink served in an unclean glass would not only have been unpleasant, but also would have compromised their purity and thus their protection. For them, the sensation of drinking water from an alcohol-stained glass would have recalled both their experience of painful illness and their promise to God not to come into contact with such forbidden substances. Like Ganeshyam, however, they would have discussed such an act as evidence of a lack of improvement.

The lack of other castes in Kedanar, and the absence of members of devotional sects, were often given by Markakasa people as a reason for the former's 'backwardness'. The Gonds there dominated the village and had been left to themselves. Thus they could do as they pleased and did not have any time for the *haatiyas* (a derogatory term used for Chhattisgarhi people). Their excessive alcohol consumption was also used to explain the physical state of the village; Kedanar was seen as a dirty place where the lanes got muddy, the houses were poorly maintained and pigs ran amok with their litters. It was felt that the Gonds in Markakasa had improved precisely because of the presence of other castes and sects. But the lack of other castes and sects in Kedanar meant that the people there, and the village as a whole, were seen as more united than Markakasa. Decisions could be taken quickly about matters such as organising the village fair or, more importantly, dealing with attacks of witchcraft, magic or the displeasure of the gods. In local discourse, the mixture of castes, sects and people in Markakasa that made 'improvement' possible also made resolving disputes, and acting effectively as a community, more difficult.

The development of these categories of 'improvement' (*sudharna*), linked as they are to the practice of vegetarianism and teetotalism, find resonance with the activities of a group of local Hindu nationalist activists who belong to the Vidarbha Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VVKA) an organisation engaged in projects of 'uplift' and 'cultural protection'. In the sections which follow, I want to demonstrate how the reasons for being vegetarian discussed above (protection from harm) become tangled up with ideas promoted locally about what it means to live in a perfect society, a society which has a distinctly Hindu character.

Hindu nationalism and a coincidence of values

Brijlal and others like him have experienced the problems of dealing with witchcraft and magic and were healed at the Mahanubhav temple. As a consequence, sect members in Markakasa have come to regard certain practices as important to them in order to maintain their protection against further mystical attack. But as I describe above, their practices, especially their dietary practices, become part of a way of describing social change, 'improvement' (*sudharna*), which also enables Markakasa people to distinguish themselves from other people, typically other Adivasis, who are regarded as *jangli* (wild). As I mentioned in the vignette which began the thesis, Brijlal is also involved in several Hindu nationalist organisations which operate in the area. Here I want to discuss some of the activities of the latter, and also look at Brijlal's involvement in a little more detail.

Brijlal's father was a member of the BJP at a time when the Gond community was seen as the preserve of the Congress Party (as it largely still is). It is fair to say that Brijlal, like few others in Markakasa, grew up in an atmosphere where party politics was talked about: he developed an interest early on and when his father passed away in 1993, he took up the old man's responsibilities. His work for the Party is rather limited and he only really gets busy around election time. Though I questioned him often about this, his commitment to the BJP does not seem to be founded on a political ideological commitment to making India a Hindu nation. For him, this seemed an almost ridiculous proposition: as he saw it India is already Hindu. His association with the BJP was inherited from his father and was not something he really questioned, and he did not consider becoming affiliated to the Congress Party for the same reason. He was recruited to the RSS in 1997 and to the VVKA a couple of years later by Anjankar, the schoolteacher who introduced me to the village. He became a devotee of the Mahanubhav sect in 1998.

The RSS has had seemingly little presence in Markakasa; immediately after Brijlal joined, he and two other village *swayamsevaks* (volunteers) started weekly meetings (*shaka*) where nationalist songs were sung and the RSS flag was hoisted. But they stopped holding *shaka* three months later for lack of interest and it has never since restarted. RSS higher-ups do visit Markakasa sporadically but tend to visit Brijlal only; they do not have a wider audience. Nor has the RSS entered the village's collective consciousness for all I could gather: some people are aware of its existence but most are not, and the *shakas* seem to have made no impact at all. The VVKA is certainly more visible in the area and organises sport for youths, offers free medical supplies and runs a boys' hostel (*chatravasa*) in the nearby village of Chichgarh; though it is not a constant presence, most Markakasa people are aware of it. Importantly, it is not seen by most people as linked in any way to the BJP, and both members of the latter and of the Congress Party in the area have joined it. This is in part due to the success of the VVKA's strategy of persuading people that it is not a political organisation. One local leader on his visit to the village reiterated to me that "we don't do politics. Our only concern is with making *vanvasis* conscious. Our work is about Hindus and Hindutva."[140] The other side of this is that the BJP is not seen as particularly concerned with issues of Hindutva or Hinduness. It is regarded locally as a political party similar to the Congress, and a number of local leaders have switched allegiance back and forth between the two; one prominent local BJP organiser is in fact a Muslim. In short, at least in this part of Maharashtra, the notion that the BJP is an ideological party with a clear agenda like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a low-caste/Untouchable party, seems to have very little currency.

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[140] *Ami rajkaran nai karat. Amtsa kam phakta vanvasi jagruti badal ahe. Amtsa kam Hindu ani Hindutva badal ahe.*

One aspect which impressed Brijlal about these organisations was their ability to help a man without connections like him; in short, it provides *sifaras* (introductions)[141]. On several occasions, for instance, VVKA workers in Chichgarh have helped intercede with the police on behalf of people accused of collaborating with the Naxalites. One such case involved Brijlal's *salu* (WFBDH), Gota, who lives in the neighbouring village of Gujarbarga[142].

Gujarbarga is an all-Gond village and is regarded locally as 'open' to the Naxalites: the latter come and go very frequently, largely without fear of police interference. As the General Election of 2004 approached, the police seemed to become more vigilant: their patrols increased and their questioning of villagers became more intense. Gota was at home one morning, making lunch for his wife who had gone to collect *mahua* flowers. As it was summer he was cooking rice on a stove in the back garden. He heard his name called and went through to the front of the house. There he found several policemen, who asked if he would come with them to the police station in Chichgarh to answer some questions about the Naxalites. They told him that they had information that he had fed the insurgents on several occasions. Gota panicked. Claiming that he had to go out the back to see to the rice, he slipped away and ran barefoot the three kilometres through forest to his *salu* Brijlal's house in Markakasa. He hid out there for a couple of days and then Brijlal took him to Chichgarh to see Anjankar, who in turn accompanied Gota to the police station. Anjankar assured the police that Gota was a good and honest man. The police held him overnight but let him go the following morning. Whether Anjankar's intervention affected the outcome of this case is difficult to determine. Both Gota and

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[141] The correct Hindi word is *sifarish* but I write it here as my informants spoke it, probably in Chhattisgarhi.

[142] This is the village to which the *Angadev* was invited, described in Chapter Four.

Brijlal nevertheless attributed the leniency of the police to Anjankar's assistance. And Brijlal could call on Anjankar because they were both RSS/VVKA men. There was the sense, therefore, that being a member of these organisations brought one into contact with people of influence who could be useful in times of need.

The social benefit of associating with various Hindu nationalist organisations is clear: for people such as Brijlal, who has no connections to 'big men' (*bade admi*), they provide access to a wider world, the chance to meet and regard as friends people such as doctors and teachers. While this aspect of local Hindu nationalism is important, it has been my contention that we need to look at the connections between the particular practices and values it promotes and the religious experience of people such as Brijlal, in order to understand why the movement may have long-term attraction which endures despite the vagaries of electoral fortune.

What seemed to make the greatest impression on Brijlal was the discipline of the RSS and VVKA, something he frequently mentioned in our discussions about these organisations. He was struck by the manner in which meetings were conducted. Everyone would remove their *chappals* (sandals/flip-flops) before entering a meeting room and, instead of kicking them off roughly and leaving them untidily, members would place them neatly in a row. RSS/VVKA events always ran on time even if 'important people' had not yet arrived. An important part of this discipline, as seen by Brijlal, was the exhortation at many of these meetings that people, especially Adivasi people, ought to set aside time for daily *puja* (worship) and that they should give up meat and alcohol.

That Adivasi people ate meat and drank alcohol in immoderate quantities and neglected to perform daily worship, as he Brijlal, a Mahanubhav sect adherent, did, indicated for him a lack of discipline that prevented Adivasi people from getting on in the world: these practices kept them 'backward' (*magaslele*). This is where local notions of progress and development discussed earlier in the chapter converge with the practices and values advocated by these Hindu Right organisations. The VVKA is also involved in 'development' (or 'improvement') work of a sort: it attempts to make Adivasi people more recognisably Hindu in order to both reduce what they see as a gulf in practice between Hindus, and make Adivasi people more resistant to the attractions of Christian conversion by suggesting that Christianity makes people un-Indian. Making Adivasi people more Hindu is important because without it the long-term goal of Hindu nationalism of a united Hindu nation cannot be realised (see Hansen 1996; Froerer 2005). The project is profoundly patronising. And yet, as I have emphasised throughout, the commitment on the part of people like Brijlal to these practices has a different source, one which is rooted in the problems of everyday existence: relations with kin, friends, and neighbours; illness; suffering; healing.

Let me elaborate further with the example of a man called Edme, a Gond who lives in a village outside Chichgarh. Edme is a devotee of Ram and is a member of the Ramanandi religious sect, and his story in some way mirrors that of Brijlal. Several years ago Edme fell desperately ill and, as with so many others, could not find a satisfactory cure. Suspecting witchcraft, he went to a local *sadhu-sant* (holy man ascetic) who prescribed a series of measures: worship of God several times a day, and abstention from meat and alcohol. The *sadhu* explained that Edme's illness was ultimately the result of his sinful life (a position markedly different to those who join the Mahanubhav sect) and that in order to be safe in future he needed to follow the path of virtue. Edme's health improved and he became a disciple of the *sadhu.*

Edme has very little land, and he and his wife make their living by weaving baskets and mats from reeds they collect from the forest. He sells to people all over the area, and had got to know Anjankar and other VVKA activists in Chichgarh. He was asked if he would like to be the Superintendent of the VVKA boys' hostel (*chātravāsa*). They told him that they wanted someone who was aware of the importance of daily worship of Bhagwan in inculcating Hindutva. They also emphasised that they wanted a vegetarian (*shakahari*) person. Unlike at the Government Adivasi hostels, no meat would be served at mealtimes, since they regarded the eating the flesh of animals as *himsa* (violence) and against the idea of Hindu-ness (*Hindutva*). These were the reasons why they appointed him, as he presented them to me. The values that the VVKA promoted in the operation of the *chātravāsa* found resonance with the practices Edme had adopted for different reasons. Edme was receptive largely because of his personal history of suffering, sin, and illness.

The following section demonstrates how the projects of reform pursued by the VVKA intersect with local ideas of 'improvement' and what makes a 'good society', ideas influenced by the growing numbers of people joining religious sects in Markakasa.

The holy man's sermon and Hindu modernity

About a month into my stay in Markakasa, a *sadhu-sant* (holy man ascetic) called Balakdas came and gave a series of sermons (*pravarchan*) at the neighbouring village of Yedmagondi. Only twenty-four years old, Balakdas was from the Pateshwar Ashram in Jamdipat, in District Durg, Chhattisgarh. A devotee of the god Ram, he was also closely allied, as it became clear from his sermon, to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), a large organisation of holy men and devotional orders that sees itself as the custodian and arbiter of Hindu culture and religion in India and throughout the world. His visit had been organised by the Shri Ram Seva Satsang Samiti[143], established by the Yedmagondi *sarpanch*'s husband, Girdari, a devotee of the Ramanandi sect. Girdari was also a VVKA member, and his son attended the organisation's boys' hostel in Chichgarh. He ran the Samiti with the help of other VVKA members in a neighbouring hamlet and with financial support from the VVKA itself. The Samiti's main purpose was defined to me as 'Dharma Jagran' (Awakening of Faith) among Adivasi people, and organising visits of holy men-ascetics to the area achieved that end. In addition, the Samiti held religious meetings (*satsang*) in six villages in the area where it was explained to people that they ought to preserve their Hindu *sanskruti* (culture). This was essentially the message of Balakdas' sermon that day, which offers an interesting meditation on his vision of the ideal society. This is important because of the way in which it resonates with the discourse of 'improvement' and modernity articulated by certain Markakasa people.

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[143] The Committee for the Service of Lord Ram

About ten people from Markakasa made the six kilometre journey to Yedmagondi that day, several of them members of the Mahanubhav and other sects, but also a group of young men who were curious to see this *sant* and for whom it was an excuse to take a trip out of the village. Yedmagondi is also a 'mixed village' (*panchrangi gaon*), like Markakasa, and has a large number of people from all castes who are members of various devotional sects. Like Markakasa, the largest sectarian group is the Mahanubhav, and there are smaller but still substantial numbers of Kabir and Ramanandi. Also in attendance were the boys from the Chichgarh VVKA *chātravāsa* (hostel), their superintendent Edme and several other local VVKA activists. The connection with the VVKA is significant. A couple of weeks later, Balakdas was the star turn at a ten-day religious *mela* (fair) at the town of Chhuriya about forty kilometres to the east in Chhattisgarh, where he gave an afternoon sermon every day. The head of the VVKA came to Chichgarh and from there took a number of local activists, including my landlord Brijlal and the teacher Anjankar, to Churiya to meet Balakdas. They asked him if he could go to Melghat, another Adivasi area in western Vidarbha, and give a *pravarchan* there as he had done in Yedmagondi. Balakdas's involvement with VVKA projects and the coincidence of his ideology and theirs is clear. So what did Balakdas say to the villagers that day in Yedmagondi?

Balakdas arrived in a small white Maruti van preceded by a line of devotees ringing bells. He made his way to the dais that had been prepared for him and began to chant a prayer which he ended by shouting "Hindu dharma ki Jai! [Hail the Hindu Religion!]", "Bharat Mata ki Jai! [Hail Mother India!]", "Gau Mata ki Jai! [Hail Mother Cow!]", which were repeated by some of the 250 people assembled. These introductory shouts were an appropriate beginning, since his sermon was essentially a discussion of these three areas. He started to speak on the subject of cow protection. The latter was absolutely essential, he said, if Hindus were to create Ayodhya here; if we did not act to prevent cow slaughter we would instead live in Lanka. As the Kingdom of Ram, Ayodhya is a common metaphor for the ideal society just as Lanka, the kingdom of his foe, Ravana, is the ultimate land of sin and wickedness. He told the following story:

> "A tiger came upon a cow grazing in the forest. As the tiger got ready to pounce, the cowherd said to the tiger, 'Take me instead'. The tiger could not believe that a man would substitute his life for a cow and so left them both alone."

The sermon moved on to Hindu *sanskruti* (culture) and Hindu *dharma* (religion) and he asked those present to be wary of Christians visiting the area, who encouraged people to give up the Bhagavad Gita and Ram and take up the Bible and Christ instead. They would offer food, clothing and money, he said, to persuade people to give up their 'Hindu dharma'. Adivasis should not succumb: "If anyone like that comes to your village tell them they are not welcome. Kick them out!"

Balakdas now broached the difference as he saw it between the virtue of the village (*gaon*) and the evil of the city (*sahar*). In cities there was great violence, and bombs exploded, and people lived unrighteous lives. The people of the villages were beginning to behave in a similar fashion, Balakdas warned, and so they and their way of life required protection. Protection, he seemed to be suggesting, came in the form of hostility to Christians, no truck with cow slaughter and an opposition to the English language and its associated foreign culture.

> "Why do young people say 'Happy New Year' on 1st January? It is not our New Year yet people in the city say it to one another and hold parties. Why do they do that? That is the New Year according to the calendar that the English gave us. But our calendar is different and our New Year is different. The people of the cities already live by the English calendar; the people of the village should live by the Hindu calendar. I was looking around the houses in this village. How many of them had 'Sitaram Sitaram' written on them? None. How many had 'Welcome' written on them? Many. Why? What is this 'Welcome'? It is an English word. Why do people say 'Hi' and 'Hello' when they meet?

> They should not. These are not our Hindu *sanskruti*. We should say 'Jai Hind!' instead."

He then began a discussion of sin and declared that eating the flesh of animals was not part of Hindu sanskruti either. Combining the attack on 'Angrezi culture' and meat-eating practices, he rounded on the culture of people in the cities "who have begun to celebrate birthdays by cooking 'cake', a type of sweet from abroad (*videsh*) made with eggs. They light candles on the top and then blow them out. How wrong! How wrong of them to celebrate by cooking eggs! And, how wrong of them to create darkness by extinguishing the light on this joyous occasion![144] How is Ayodhya to be created if people behave like this?" He ended his sermon with a series of shouts from him: "Ramchandra ki Jai! [Hail Ram!]", "Bharat Mata ki Jai", which were taken up by the congregation.

Balakdas's sermon was important because of the way in which it highlighted the link between the daily practices of people (diet, greeting etc.) and the project of creating an ideal society in India, one governed according to the principles of Ram Rajya. It is also indicative of the connections made between the type of diet one has and the type of society one creates. For Balakdas, those who ate meat and drank alcohol were unable to participate in the (re-)establishment of Ram Rajya. Meat-eating was characterised as a foreign trait and not part of Hindu culture; as such it implied that those who continued to eat meat could not be regarded as proper Hindus. Sect members who have embraced the practices of vegetarianism and teetotalism for reasons of protection from harm see resonances in the discourses of such holy men with the experience of their own lives. I asked Om Prakash, who became a member of the Ramanandi sect when his wife was ill, why he was a member of the BJP and not the Congress: "the Congress people always serve a lot of meat at their functions and I don't like it: eating meat and drinking alcohol is all they do. The BJP don't do that – no meat and no alcohol, the atmosphere of their meetings is better." Thus the commitment to the BJP was not expressed abstractly, as support for a party which promoted a Hindu agenda. Rather, the idiom of meat-eating and alcohol was used to distinguish the two parties, and why one was supported over the other. Clearly such sentiments were not articulated by every sect member in Markakasa, and not every sect member necessarily supported the BJP come election time. Rather, what I want to emphasise here is that the appeal of Balakdas' message, of the articulation of what it means to be a 'good Hindu' and what constitutes 'good Hindu society', resonates with people who adopt certain practices not because they want to become good Hindus or create good Hindu society but because they are in search of a permanent solution to the problem of suffering and pain. Nevertheless, once they recognise that their practices *are* constitutive of good Hindu-ness, they may become receptive to the message of Hindu nationalist actors. Their identity as a particular type of Hindu may then be mobilised for political ends, even though they have become more identifiably Hindu (through sectarian membership) for reasons that are far from political.

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[144] The talk of birthday cakes totally mystified many Markakasa people. Apart from a few of the boys who had noticed them in films, they asked me later to explain what a cake was.

The implications of such sermons (and, by association, the activities of the VVKA) in terms of transformations in sociality is well-understood by many non-sect, meat-eating, (especially Gond) Markakasa people. Ramu Koreti, the estranged brother of Ramdas (see Chapter Five), criticised the *sadhu-sant* who give sermons, and the Adivasis who listened to them:

> "Why do these *sadhu-sant* people come here to Adivasi areas? Why do they tell us we should give up eating meat and drinking alcohol? This is our Adivasi culture [*sanskruti*]. We are Gonds. This is what we do, we eat meat and drink *daru*. We should not be listening to *sadhu-sant* – they are not for us. They're ok for Chhattisgarhi people but they are not for us Gonds."

As I argued earlier in the chapter, his concerns thus expressed have less to do with the practice of a particular diet than with what vegetarianism and teetotalism signify in a transformed sociality that membership of the sect has caused. He speaks from his own experience of being estranged by a brother who joined the sect and would no longer worship their household gods nor eat at his house.

Whereas the sects, and the Mahanubhav sect in particular, promotes an ideal of Hindu behaviour which resonates with the Hindu nationalist message, the practice of this ideal comes into conflict with the non-sect Hindu (and particularly Adivasi) population of the village. There is perhaps something of a paradox here: whereas the purpose of *Hindutva* is to unify the Hindu population nationally, in practice and belief (and Hinduise or exclude the non-Hindu population), membership of religious sects, which outwardly espouse many of the ideals of *Hindutva*, can lead to conflicts at the local level between different categories of Hindu.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to show the ways in which vegetarianism and teetotalism have meaning for the people who practice them. It argues that the prime consideration is that of protection rather than a search for prestige. Examining changes in dietary practice need to be seen in the larger context of religious transformation, which restructures and reconfigures relations between people. Nevertheless, vegetarianism and teetotalism do have a value beyond these immediate concerns, and are part of a dialogue about the constitution of the ideal society and the participation in the latter of people regarded to be outside the mainstream. Prestige may not have a role to play at the start of this process but, through a particular articulation of the relationship between 'wild' and 'improved', we can see that it comes to have importance. The message of Hindu nationalist organisations and holy men also resonates with sect members' own experience, and that too is involved in an interpretation of what constitutes the modern and what does not. At the root, however, is still the original motivation for being vegetarian, and focussing on this, methodologically and analytically, enables us to see the processes of translation that go on when certain practices are entangled in larger visions.

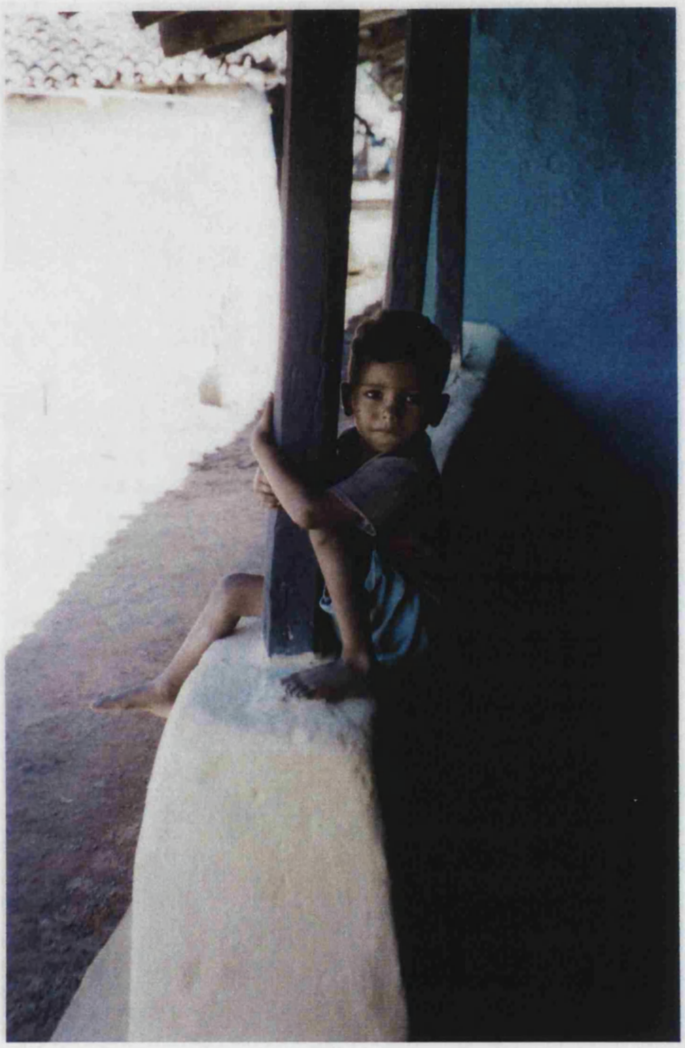

Plate 34: A village boy playing on the verandah of his house.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

Though Brijlal is healed and happy, rupture and division seem to characterise Markakasa society. The ever-present problem of mystical attack at the village-level remains unsolved and is indeed exacerbated, as protective gods now lie un-worshipped in their groves, and witches and those who employ sorcerers go undetected and unpunished. By seeking a personal solution to the problem of attack, Mahanubhav sect members effectively prevent others in the village from dealing successfully with witches and other malfeasants because of their opposition to witch-detecting devices such as the *Angadev*. Sectarian membership is thus never a matter which only affects the person who becomes an adherent. Just as the self is transformed, so is society, as a concept understood both subjectively as experienced and objectively as studied. This change in society cannot be thought of merely as a consequence of changing religiosity and modes of worship; for many sect members, the fact of changed sociality and of the restructuring of kinship and village relations actually makes the sect more appealing. The commitment produced towards practices such as daily prayer, vegetarianism and teetotalism also resonates strongly with wider currents in Indian society concerned with the fashioning and fixing of Hindu identity. The causes and consequences of religious transformation thus raise important issues, and only by taking religious experience seriously can one fully understand these concerns and the social transformations they generate.

Before I examine some of the questions raised by the ethnography, and suggest new questions too, I would like to look at how the analysis develops from one chapter to the next.

In Chapter Three, I examined the place of ritual friendship in Markakasa society and suggested that it fulfils a functional need. Not only does ritual friendship enable people to imagine and create a space where the otherwise overwhelming dominance of caste ideology does not really operate, but it also provides for a type of relationship that looks very much like brotherhood but is free from the dangers associated with close agnatic kinship. Rather than examine the important topics of caste and kinship on their own terms, the intention was to interpret them through the lens of another form of association - ritual friendship - that is important to Markakasa people. It also illustrated the fear people have of being bewitched or poisoned, both by those close to them (agnatic kin) and by those others such as neighbours and 'ordinary' friends with whom they are involved in exchange on a daily basis. Ritual friendship provides a way of expanding sociality out into the wider world without having to fear dispute or attack. The discussion also highlighted the play between structure (as represented by caste and kinship) and sentiment (as represented by the love [*prem*] between two ritual friends). This classic tension in anthropological thought – between structure and agency - is examined further in the rest of the thesis. Looking at ritual friendship as a functional form of social association lays the foundation for the discussions of witchcraft and sociality, in Chapters Four and Five respectively.

Chapter Four developed the theme of witchcraft introduced in Chapter Three. Instead of looking at witchcraft *qua* witchcraft, I explored some of the impediments to dealing with witches and malignant mystical attack that have developed over the last sixty years. Clearly the main social change that has occurred is the closer presence of the Indian state in a variety of forms: the effective implementation of land legislation which makes migration to the area more difficult; increased police presence due to the Naxalite insurgency; and the promotion of a particular type of modernity (both from inside and outside the village) which casts Adivasi people in the image of modernity's 'other'. The discussion of changed village composition and state activity is important because it provides sociological reasons for the kinds of religious transformation people undergo when they become devotees of a Hindu sect. Read in conjunction with the chapter which follows it, it demonstrates once again the tension between 'society' on the one hand, and the ways in which people attempt to control their lives and make meaning in changed conditions on the other.

Chapter Five looked in detail at this attempt and at the consequences of religious transformation. It took us back to the earlier exposition of the dangers inherent in kin relationships (especially agnatic kin relations), and showed how people use the rituals and practices of the sect to take control of certain spheres of life which in the past were problematically reliant on maintaining sociality with others. The analysis was grounded in the idea that the experience of social life, as well as the pain and suffering it can cause, is important to understand religious transformation that results from an attempt to solve problems of existence. This is significant because it explains why certain practices and ideas promoted by the sect have such power for those who join, and how they might be mobilised for political ends. But, while the ethnography for the most part details instances of rupture for those engaging in religious change, it also suggests some important continuities. Caste, for instance, is a constant, though the relations between members of different castes who are also all sect members is modified somewhat. A continuity of a different nature is the structure of the phenomenon of sorcery: one could interpret the Mahanubhav sect and the Christian Church as types of counter-sorcery employed in the absence or ineffectiveness of other measures. This too has political implications, especially in a context where Christians have been made into an 'Other'.

Finally, Chapter Six considered the practices of vegetarianism and teetotalism, which are adopted by sectarian villagers and promoted as ideals of Hinduness by local Hindu nationalist actors. It suggested that these practices have meaning for sect members as ways in which they can keep their promise to God and thus be protected from further harm. The chapter raised questions about conventional interpretations of the adoption of this dietary practice in India, interpretations which emphasise motives such as prestige or social advancement. Unable to deny the obvious connection between Brahminical ideology, vegetarianism and purity, the analysis nevertheless showed how vegetarianism could have a parallel existence in India outside Brahminical thought. This is important because it explains how the commitment to a practice comes out of the lived experience of intimate social life, and not because it is imposed or advocated by more powerful forces in society. It also discussed the ways in which dietary practices are talked about as markers of 'improvement', which does bring with it ideas of prestige and social distinction. Crucially, local Hindu nationalist actors (activists, holy men) see vegetarianism as a marker of Hinduness and it is articulated as a component of a virtuous and united Hindu society. This enables sect members in particular to see resonances between their personal experience and the political and cultural projects promoted by the Hindu Right. The end of the main part of the thesis thus suggests a beginning from where we can examine Hindu nationalist projects of 'uplift' and integration, and the role played by people such as Adivasis in them. Once again, what is emphasised is the creativity of people to develop meaning for practices which become entangled in larger structures of power.

Having looked at the chapters separately, I want now to pose new questions and suggest further avenues of enquiry.

Ritual friendship and the Sect

As it was presented in Chapter Three, ritual friendship may have appeared timeless and unchanging. But, seen in the light of what was discussed in the chapters that follow it, perhaps we can suggest connections between the religious transformations taking place and the function and ideology of ritual friendship. More precisely, is ritual friendship a palliative for the same sorts of tensions and fears that make membership of the sect so attractive?

We can observe the following. Just as membership of the sect results from and also promotes a view of certain forms of sociality as problematic and perhaps even dangerous, so the ideology of ritual friendship functions in opposition to the types of tensions that exist between close agnatic kin. Members of the sect have come to fear the actions of others and therefore take the step of finding a radical and extreme solution to the problem of mystical attack. Neighbours and kin are problematic, especially in a 'mixed village' formed in living memory by migration, where the identity and histories of the people one lives with are never entirely certain. Those who contract ritual friendships, though not articulating them as such, are actually forming associations which are relatively safe, outside the daily give and take of family and village life.

Also, as ritual friendship provides a different sort of sociality to that found with brothers or other agnatic kin, so sect devotees develop a new sense of belonging to the community of their sect, and their relations with kin and others are transformed. However, sect membership and ritual friendship operate differently in one important respect: whereas membership of the sect results in the re-structuring of relations with other villagers and a withdrawal from key areas of village life, the effect of ritual friendship is actually to make the imagination of the village all the more meaningful by linking people and families together based on ties of residence.[145]

All of this begs the question: do sectarian villagers form ritual friendships of a different sort to those formed by non-sect villagers? We saw in Chapter Three that the institution of ritual friendship in Markakasa was described as founded exclusively on sentiment. As such it offered an alternative to the experience of brotherhood. With the rise in popularity of the religious sects and, consequently, vegetarianism, differences in eating preferences are now also being taken account of when people make ritual friendships. This seems to fit in with the ideology of sameness that is talked about, but conflicts with the overarching principle of *prem* (love; affection) as the deciding factor in these sorts of relationships. It is love and affection, after all, which gives such ritual friendships their power.

I was invited to witness a friendship ceremony between Markakasa's junior headman's daughter and a girl from a neighbouring village. The respective girls were good friends, as were their fathers; both fathers, Om Prakash (the headman) and Sukhram, were also *gurubhai*, disciples of the same guru of the Ramanandi sect, and both families strictly vegetarian and teetotal. Usually friendship ceremonies are performed at a time of some other celebration such as a wedding or village fair: in this case Sukhram had invited a

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[145] This happens even if the ritual friends live in different villages. As I show in Chapter Three, it is often the case that one's ritual friend from another village is actually a relative of one's fellow villager.

sant (holy man) of the Ramanandi sect to come to his village and give a two-day *pravarchan* (sermon), and so it was decided that the friendship ceremony would be held at the end of the last day in front of the *sant* and those who had come to listen to him. Like Balakdas's sermon, discussed in Chapter Six, he too emphasised the need for people to give up meat and alcohol: they were sinful substances and made people sinful. As such they were obstacles for the establishment of righteousness (*dharma*). After the ceremony I was chatting to the girls and asked them why they had become *mahaprasad* to one another. In the course of our conversation they mentioned that there was supposed to have been a third girl with them that day and all three of them were to have become *mahaprasad*. The *sant*, however, had talked to them all beforehand about the importance of ritual friendship and had discovered that this third girl was not from a vegetarian household. He suggested that they rethink becoming *mahaprasad* with one another. He told them that dining with one another would become problematic and disputes between the three friends might arise because of the differences in lifestyle. The problem of diet is in fact one of sociality, which membership of the sect radically transforms. Ritual friendship, idealised as being founded on sentiment alone, is qualified in this instance because of the greater demands of a new type of sociality, one which can only be enjoyed by sectarian people. As non-sectarian Markakasa people recognise, fashioning 'good Hindus' who lead virtuous and safe lives involves a great deal of rupture.

Fashioning 'good Hindus' out of 'backward Adivasis' and others is a project of a particular Hindu modernity, one that is as old as the anti-colonial nationalist movement itself. The image of the 'Adivasi as Other Incorporated' is important not only to this Hindu vision of the future, but also to projects of the Indian State.

State and nation

The inability to deal with magical attack in the same ways as in the past is the result in large part of the policies of the Indian state. One could rather crudely argue, as the *Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti* has in fact done[146], that the failure of the

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[146] Frontline, August 2006

Indian state to provide accessible, effective and inexpensive healthcare in 'backward' areas such as eastern Vidarbha has meant that many people find medicine deeply unsatisfying as a solution to illness. The proposition is that if healthcare (and psychiatric care in particular) were better then the need to go to places such as Sukdi to be ('falsely') healed would be obviated. Such a proposition is undoubtedly simplistic, and the treatment of illness is generally characterised by a pluralism which exists even in societies which have well-funded public health systems. And Markakasa people, despite the lack of affordable medicine, do generally seek out doctors in the first instance and continue treatment alongside the consultation of *baiga* or other healers. The importance of the role of the Indian State rather lies in the particular projects of modernity it pursues through its actors. In the state of Maharashtra, at least, such a vision of modernity seems to offer no space for a belief in the efficacy of sorcery and the existence of witches.[147] State actors such as policemen and teachers, as well as forest guards and others, consider the region in which they work to be 'backward' (*magaslele*) and 'wild' (*jangli*). Though they may believe in witchcraft and magic themselves, public policy and their status, as outsiders concerned with maintaining the distinction between themselves and the 'Adivasi Other', effectively preclude their tolerance of superstition. The lack of State recognition of the validity of retribution against the witch, a position which has continued virtually unchanged from the colonial period, means that other forms of protection have been sought. The Adivasi is a figure of alterity who is seen as a threat to the progress of modernity. At the same time, the image of the 'Other' is necessary to provide a point of reference to demonstrate how far 'the rest of us' have come.

While the State in India (or at least Maharashtra) pursues projects of modernity, how can we develop the link between religion and nation? That the religious transformation is rooted in painful experience and inability to deal with malignant mystical attack is significant for a sense of nationalist identification. As we saw in Chapter Six, the practices sect members follow and have a commitment to find resonance with the projects of various Hindu nationalist actors in the local area. But might not the resonances go beyond what I describe? If followed to its logical conclusion, one can begin to see how the violence enacted on the (previously unknowable) witch by God through the devotion of the sect adherent can be compared to the violence inherent in Hindu nationalist ideology and practice, where the 'Other' is made unknowable and is therefore threatening. The growth of political Hindu nationalism has in part been signalled by spectacular and violent events. These include the destruction of the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya in 1992, the riots in Gujarat in 2002 and the general increase in violence against Christians and missionaries. Similarly, the numerous *rath yatras*[148] undertaken by senior members of the BJP were both political stunts and symbolic movements of 'warriors' ready to defend India from internal and external enemies. While the analysis of this violence is important in understanding how political Hindutva operates (see Brass 2003; Nandy et al. 1995; Tambiah 1996), my concern here is to suggest ways in which one can begin to relate it to the experience of religious transformation and in doing so find possible reasons for the role of violence in the cosmology of a putative Hindu State.

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[147] Cf. other parts of India such as Jharkhand where the Chief Minister publicly professed a belief in the efficacy of *ojha* or sorcerers. The case of Maharashtra (and India more generally) contrasts too with parts of Africa (e.g. Cameroon) where witches and sorcerers can be convicted of wrongdoing (Fisiy and Geschiere 1996; Geschiere 1997:169-97). In this vision of modernity there is certainly space for a consideration of wrongdoing of this sort. See also Siegel's discussion of witchcraft and the state in Africa (2006: 12-26).

How can one connect the personal experience of overcoming pain through ritual and the nationalist logic of violence against the 'other'? One way would be to examine the matter symbolically. As Kapferer (1997) suggests in his discussion of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, Bloch's (1992) theory of ritual and rebounding violence provides us with a powerful analytical framework to do this. His principal claim is that, rather than dissipating violence and disorder, ritual as a transformative act actually serves to intensify it: the transformation is one from being a victim of attack to being an unrestrained perpetrator of violence. This element of rebounding conquest has two dimensions: the first is reproductive in nature, where vitality previously lost is regained and increased through sacrifice, initiation or healing ritual; the second aspect is aggression, where violence expands outwards (ibid: 61). In state societies such as India, the two aspects are separated. The former is the outcome of local ritual by the ruled; the latter is harnessed by rulers from the ritual of state (ibid: 63-4). What is particularly interesting in relation to the discussion of Hindu nationalism is that the different types of ritual action set up a communicative link: "...the evocative power of the rituals of the rulers for the ruled largely depends on the connection these have with the symbolism by which ordinary citizens express their reproduction through rebounding conquest. What happens is that similar symbolic sequences are used by the two groups with different emphases which express different political idioms." (ibid: 61). The thesis has examined the first half of the process Bloch refers to: it has looked at the way in which ritual as healing through the sect can be transformative in the way one relates to society; the way in which the magic of the witch or sorcerer is conquered through membership of the sect; and the way in which the power of the new sect member is expanded in an attempt to refashion society itself. From being a victim of witchcraft, the sect adherent becomes a wielder of powerful sorcery himself, which is intensely socially disruptive. The violence of the ritual act, which provides retribution against the malfeasant through the actions of God, does not lead to resolution or to the restoration of the *status quo ante*, but creates more rupture. Though it falls outside the parameters of my study here, following the logic of Bloch's theory, connections can be made to the wider cosmological sphere of Hindu nationalism whereby it seeks to 'heal' the nation and thus amplifies violence.

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[148] These are journeys traditionally undertaken by Hindu kings or gods on chariots, which have the religio-political function of establishing his kingship over a given territory.

Violence, both symbolic and real, seems to characterise much Hindu nationalist thought and action. Similarly, the 'spectre of conversion' (Dube and Chatterjee Dube 2003) seems to haunt Hindu nationalism, and has become entangled in political and popular discourse with the notion of Indian nationality itself (Hardiman 2003: 279). Building on my discussion of anthropological theories of conversion in the Introduction, I look here more specifically at conversion in the context of Indian society.

A question of conversion

At the beginning of the thesis I noted the importance of looking at religious experience, as expressed as problems with society and sociality, in understanding the appeal of various projects of Indian nationalism (both Hindu and otherwise). Political Hindu nationalism both pre- and post-Independence has been concerned about the activities of Christian missionaries, and has seen the religious transformations people undergo as threatening both to the stability of local society and to the unity and integrity of the Indian nation, conceived of as singularly Hindu. But what kind of religious transformation is that of Hindu sectarian membership, and is it not just as radical a social act as that of conversion to Christianity or Islam? Should we not consider this new sectarian membership as one of conversion? Is this how we should frame Brijlal's religious transformation? Is it useful to think of it as a 'conversion', even though in broad terms he considered himself a Hindu before he joined the Mahanubhav sect and stills considers himself a Hindu now? By seeing Hindu sectarian membership as 'conversion', and understanding the reasons for it, one can better see the connections between it and the appearance of Christianity in the village. As I show in Chapter Five, there are considerable parallels between the two. Such an approach undermines the idea that 'foreign' religions are somehow more socially transformative and disruptive than 'indigenous' ones. Looking at Hindu sectarian membership as religious conversion also highlights the plurality of Hindu religious experience, an observation which implicitly criticises a project promoting a singular view of Hinduism.[149]

In order to examine this question of Hindu sectarian membership as religious conversion, I consider here David Hardiman's (2003) historical examination of a religious reform movement in early twentieth century western India. Looking at Hardiman's study will help illuminate the material I have presented, both in its areas of common concern and in the ways in which my approach departs from his[150].

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[149] See also Dube and Banerjee Dube (2003: 249).

[150] Hardiman's study also highlights what I lack: a properly historicised account of social and religious change. Such an account would enable us to examine whether the transformations discussed here are recapitulations of processes that have occurred in the past or truly innovative responses to changed social circumstances. That I have drawn on historical analyses by Hardiman (1987, 2003) and Skaria (1997a, 1997b) cannot remedy this shortcoming. Nevertheless, the use of their material provides some understanding of the historical context (of other places to be sure) of the ethnography presented here.

Hardiman traces the rise of a Hindu reform movement begun by an Adivasi Bhil man called Govind, and the ways in which it became interwoven into nationalist agitation against colonial rule. Govind exhorted the Bhils to adopt vegetarianism and teetotalism, to practice devotion to Sanskritic Hindu deities and to give up Bhil beliefs in witches and ghosts as causes of illness or misfortune (2003: 264). In his analysis, Hardiman claims that the movement was, for Govind, a way in which to assert Bhil power in collaboration with the colonial authorities against powerful Rajput princes and local Brahmins. Indian nationalists on the other hand attempted to portray the movement as anti-colonial. They regarded Bhils, and especially Govind's Bhils, as Hindus, and saw an opportunity to use Govind's movement to spread a 'civilised' Hinduism among the '*jangli*' (wild) Bhils (2003: 275). He also suggests that some of these nationalists were anti-Muslim and may have wanted to bolster local Hindu identity through this process (ibid.).

Hardiman asks us to what extent we can define Govind's movement as one of 'conversion.' He points out that, "It is clear...that systems of belief and practice that were carried on within India frequently competed with each other to attract followers" (2003: 277). In addition, "those who followed broadly Brahminical rites often tried to popularise such practices amongst groups that were considered to be ignorant of them, such as the Bhils" (ibid.). In the Indian context, this sort of social action ('assimilation', 'uplift'), including what later became known as Sanskritisation, represents an attempt to dispense with the concept of 'conversion'; the latter came to mean a change concerning proselytising world religions only (Robinson and Clarke 2003: 10). Hardiman is right to expand the category of conversion since it forces us to look at the local logic for religious change regardless of whether those who undergo transformation see it as a 'conversion'. This local logic manifests itself in the attractiveness of different 'sects' at different times.

Like the comparisons I draw between adherence to the Mahanubhav Panth and Christianity, Hardiman goes on to compare Govind's movement and the conversion to Christianity that was taking place at the same time. He writes,

> "[Govind's movement] required a rejection of existing Bhil cultural and religious practices, and this often caused great social tension within villages and families. Such tensions were also commonly found when Bhils became Christians, so that there were parallels here to what we may describe as a process of 'conversion'" (278).

This discussion raises several related concerns, which demonstrate the difference between Hardiman's approach and my own. Firstly, Hardiman imputes the same intentions to Govind's followers (who became known as *bhagat*s) as to Govind himself. When the movement is described as asserting Bhil power against the oppression of princes and Brahmins, why should we conclude that *bhagat*s buy into the movement for the same reasons?

Hardiman states that Govind exhorted Bhils to give up belief in witches, ghosts and demons. He argues that this was the result of the criminalisation by the British colonial regime of Bhil ways of dealing with witches, and so Govind sought to make the whole issue redundant (ibid: 264). But Hardiman then goes on to say that people came to see Govind to be healed from illness, illness which he somewhat contradictorily states was largely caused by witchcraft and evil spirits (ibid: 264-65). His interpretation is not entirely convincing and I wonder if he has it slightly wrong. Is it not more likely that Govind's movement offered a cure for this sort of attack? Rather than renounce *belief* in these entities, it might be the case that Govind convinced people that, if they joined him, these sorts of entities and attack would no longer affect them.[151] Giving up *fear* and giving up *belief* are two entirely different things. If my interpretation of Hardiman's account is correct, there are considerable parallels with the changes I have discussed in the thesis. Once again, at the root of people's adherence to a sect is the search for a permanent solution to bodily attack. It is more than likely that the *bhagat*s found this religious movement attractive because it promised solutions to the problems of dealing with witchcraft and magic, problems which had become difficult to tackle because of colonial government policy. This eliding of intentions also characterises other studies of religious movements in India (see e.g. Jones 1989). What I have shown in Chapters Four, Five and Six is that there is no easy assimilation of the institution of the sect on the one hand and the power of practices and membership for its adherents on the other. The motivations of adherents cannot be assumed, they must be explored.

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[151] The question of what is meant by 'belief' is a thorny one and Govind might simply have been using 'belief' in the Old Testament sense of 'don't put your trust in witches or sorcerers' rather than 'don't believe in witches and sorcerers'. See Pouillon (1982).

In light of this general point (which is really a methodological one), we can turn the quotation above from Hardiman on its head. Hardiman sees the rupture with one's kin and village as a *consequence* of their adherence to the movement.[152] But could it not also be true that the types of problems that exist between people and their kin and neighbours actually contribute to the attraction of the religious movement in the first place? Why could rupture not also be a *cause*? Social rupture causes one to join the sect and rupture results.

One of the major themes of my study is that a focus on religious experience in the context of local society leads to a better understanding of motivation; of how people are actively involved in restructuring their lives in conditions of social change brought about by the fact of living in a nation-state; and how the consequences of such actions play out, both in local society and as part of wider political projects of the State and the nation. By looking at religious experience in the context of sociality, we can begin to understand its true social power. The lives of people like Brijlal are important for what they can tell us about how people attempt to make meaning from a society in flux and how that attempt ends up changing society further.

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[152] Of course he is not alone. In the same collection on religious conversion in India, Dube and Chatterjee Dube describe the same sorts of kin and village tensions which follow membership of a religious sect in Orissa; they too see such tensions as a consequence of changed religiosity (2003: 237-38). In their Introduction to the volume, Robinson and Clarke write, "...conversion is perceived to be rarely a transformation in the realm of ideas and beliefs alone. Other areas of social life may change. New faiths and creeds throughout Indian history have negotiated and sometimes clashed with prevailing patterns of kinship, marriage and inheritance. Food conventions, sartorial codes and occupational arrangements have manifested mutation" (2003: 18). But what if these 'mutations' were the causes for changed religiosity as well as consequence?

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