

UNIVERSITY OF DELHI

CASTE, CLASS AND SECT

A STUDY OF THE BALAHIS IN MALWA
circa 1940-1994

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
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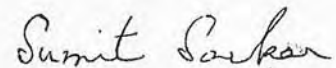
CERTIFICATE

I certify that Ms. Shahana Bhattacharya, an M.Phil student of the Department of History, has pursued her research work and prepared the dissertation entitled 'Caste, Class and Sect: A Study of the Balahis in Malwa, circa 1940-1994' under my supervision and guidance. This is the result of her own research and to the best of my knowledge, no part of it has earlier comprised any other monograph, dissertation, or book. This dissertation is her original work. This is being submitted to the University of Delhi for the degree of Master of Philosophy in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the said degree.



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This is definitely going to sound cliched but I have so many people to thank that I do not know where to start. Long and wordy acknowledgements tend to build up expectations of the dissertation that follows. So I will keep mine as brief as possible. I would like to thank all those I interviewed in Malwa and Chattisgarh, for generously sharing their lives, sorrows and ambitions with me. To all friends at Eklavya, Deras, particularly Arvind, Anu and Shobha and Subbu in Hoshangabad, thanks for both intellectual and moral support, and for actually starting me off on this work in '93. To Narayanji and Dinesh Sharma, thanks for your warmth and confidence. To Ilina, Binayak and the girls at Raipur, thanks for taking me in at a bad time, and for your immense generosity. In Delhi, the list of those I have to thank is long and without further ado, here goes: ^{first of all, thanks to Uma Chakravarti, who started me off} special thanks to Ramya Sreenivasan, friend and colleague for help with the translations of the bhajans which I had heard and recorded, and to all my P.U.D.R friends, a special prize for boosting my sagging confidence, when things got tough; to Harish, who (with his trusty computer!) actually made the writing of this dissertation possible; to Dr. Sumit Guha, for helping me with sources on Malwa from the Peshwa Daftar, and for helping me trace the origin of the caste; to my supervisor, Dr. Sumit Sarkar for helping me shape out a dissertation from an incredibly tangled and large mass of data; to Tanika

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Writing this has overwhelmed me somewhat, for it has made me realise the sheer *weight* of this burden of gratitude on this dissertation! Needless to say, all the errors in this are mine alone.

Shahana
SHAHANA BHATTACHARYA

PREFACE

The voice is rough and powerful. It is difficult to believe that it actually belongs to the fair slender girl clad in a white kurta pajama with a mop of crookedly cut short hair. It is a shock when you realise that she is completely blind. Her name is Sukhanbai and she appears to be completely lost in the Kabir bhajan that she is singing. She could not be more than 19 or 20 years old. It is rumoured that the Kabirpanthi mahant Keshavdas has got her under his 'spell', and she has left her home to join his ashram at Tonk Khurd in Dewas district.¹

Flickering shadows show up the faces somewhat eerily in the light of the two spirit lamps in the thatch roofed mud hut. There are about 15 people gathered here. Many of them had been part of an abortive attempt at forming an Ambedkar Vichar Manch at Dewas. They are mainly youths in their 20s. Their host and the owner of the house is Atmaram, who has a little 'photo-studio' on the Agra-Bombay road in neighbouring Siya village. Since this does not pay much he has recently started a part-time embroidery business. His father and wife supplement the earnings by casual agricultural labour. Atmaram has taken the lead in forming a trust of the youth in his village, Sindani. All the members of the group stay in the harijan *basti* outside the village. They aim to raise money to improve the condition of village dalits- but the membership of the group exclusively consists of balahis. They are trying to ensure that all balahis get employment of some kind. They are thinking mainly in terms of setting up small businesses. They are confident that they

¹. Kabir bhajan session at 'Eklavya', Dewas, 2.7.94.

will be able to achieve their target quite soon by pooling in small amounts of money. This year's soyabean has been very good. And all of them own some land on which they have been able to grow it. One of the members, a school teacher sums up the reason behind their optimism. The *Kalyug*, he feels is the age of the lower classes. Breaking up the components of the word in a novel manner, he says that it is the *Kala-yug*, i.e, the age of art, in which skill and ability, not high birth are essential for success.²

Many couples got married in the *balahi* mass marriage ceremony that was organised in *Jhonkar* last year. And all the high caste leaders of the village attended the ceremony, the middle aged man is saying to his audience, a group collected in the front room of his house. His name is *Siyaram Dangi*, and he lives and works in *Jhonkar* village. He is a good singer and has recently got influenced by the *Kabirpanth*. He is also a teacher in the local middle school, and a respectable man in the village. His dark glasses, the '*tilak*' on his forehead, his red *Rajdoot* motorcycle parked outside the house vouch for his status. Today, he no longer sacrifices goats to his community deity, *Bheru maharaj*, but spends his money wisely. Nor does he favour the frequent '*nuktas*' (feasts) that are given by members of his community. He continues to try to persuade them to stop this practice. He has formed an all India organisation of his caste. Of course, its only chapter is in his village. Some day he hopes there will be units wherever *balahis* live.³

2. Interviews at village *Sindani*, distt. *Dewas*, 24.11.94.

3. Interview with *Siyaramji Dangi*, village *Jhonkar*, distt. *Shajapur*, 27.11.94.

Lachmanji of Barandwa village used to perform in the 'mach' earlier, the bawdy local folk theatre form of Malwa. Then he became a 'kirtaniya', because he used to love singing, not due to any love of Ram and Krishna. His father had left him a small plot of land, not particularly fertile. His wife was a casual agricultural labourer. In the older days, bitten by the music bug, he had refused to take up any work and she had borne the entire burden of bringing up their two sons and one daughter. After that, he converted to the Radhaswami cult and followed all its rules and regulations. He had even visited the headquarters of the panth at Jalandhar. Under the influence of the sect, he started taking a greater interest in his household affairs. Soon afterward, feeling somewhat dissatisfied, he drifted towards the Kabirpanth. Today his land is partially worked by his son and partly by anyone who is willing to assist him, for a remuneration, of course. A poor 'thakur', who drives the tractor for the richest 'thakur' in the village, occasionally ploughs Lachmanji's land. His son does part time work at a tent house in a neighbouring village. Lachmanji's money situation is a little bad at present. He is working as a permanent farm servant (a *mahinadar*) in the fields of a 'thakur' for a very small fixed monthly salary. He is tied by contract to the 'thakur' until he pays off the loan he took to organise his son's marriage. The expenses were quite high, even though he deliberately negotiated the marriage with a young widowed girl, for whom he had not had to pay a very heavy bride-price.⁴

Each of the lead actors in these different accounts, incidentally, belongs to the same caste- the Balahi. It is a

⁴. Interview with Lachmanji Delamya, village Barandwa, distt. Ujjain, 10.12.94.

central Indian scheduled caste-group living only in Madhya Pradesh and parts of Rajasthan. This is a study of the balahis who live in Malwa, in western M.P. As the title indicates, it is a contemporary study, for convenience dated between 1940 and 1994 but actually starting much before the first date and extending, in places, well into 1996.

Bearing good intentions, a lot of enthusiasm and little else, I embarked upon my field work in Malwa. The most striking impression I had was of the familiarity of the lower castes, and the balahis particularly, with Kabir's teachings. Then I saw that most of the formal followers of Kabir, those belonging to the Kabirpanth in Malwa, were balahi too, though only about 15% of the balahis were Kabirpanthis. A third noticeable feature is the fact that balahis, both by their own standards, and those of most other castes in the area, are considered to rank the highest among all the 'untouchable' groups in the caste hierarchy in Malwa. The ritual distance that exists between, say, the balahis, and the bagris, chamars, and other scheduled castes in the area, seems to be enhanced by the distinctly higher economic status of the balahis today. All the three remarkable features noted seem to have been the result of processes that started about 40 years ago, but intensified by the early 1980s.

Well, these were only impressions. Hardly the stuff that History MPhil dissertations are made of, one would think.

However, here is an attempt, perhaps a bit foolhardy, to examine the specific ways in which caste, class and sect intersect, combine or interpenetrate each other in a small stretch of land in Malwa. Specific caste studies have earlier been done and so have studies of sects and class. The overlap between structures and their interconnections in this area, led me to adopt this different and somewhat multipronged approach. What follows is best described as microhistory, that does not try posit sweeping generalisations but tries to illuminate the nature of these social structures, and the ways in which they are providing, collectively, a sense of identity to a group of people.

I had initially thought that the 'smallness' of the region and limited nature of the phenomenon which I was trying to map, itself made this kind of writing 'micro'-history. In this work, few macro-level, national and regional 'events' are discussed except those directly relevant to or perceived from the villages in Malwa where the study is based. There are attempts, however, to establish connections between the micro and macro historical landscapes and developments. Microhistory of this kind, above all implies an insistence upon the context, rather than the analysis of an isolated fragment which has become

the hallmark of so-called postmodernist historiography. It combines the 'thick' description as a strategy of interpretive anthropologists like Clifford Geertz, with a contextualized social history.⁵

The methodology of microhistory was particularly developed by Italian historians in the 1970s.⁶ They attempted richly intensive kind of documentation of somewhat obscure or exceptional subjects, and tried to show that any social structure is the result of interaction and of numerous individual strategies, a fabric that can only be reconstituted from close observation. The relationship between the micro and the macro is a complex one, and in no sense are the conclusions arrived at in the micro study, automatically transferable to the macro sphere, and the vice versa. In one sense perhaps, this work is not sufficiently 'thickly' descriptive and its conclusions are tentative. It also might not fall very happily within the slot of micro history. But this methodological approach was definitely used extensively in the course of this work.

The geographical stretch that I surveyed, though only about 60 square kilometres in all, spanned the areas belonging to 4 present day districts and 4 erstwhile

⁵. This methodological point is borrowed from Levi, Giovanni, On Microhistory, pp.93-113, in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. by Peter Burke, Polity, UK, 1991.

⁶. Levi, op. cit., and Ginzburg, Carlo, *Microhistory: Two or three things that I know about it*, trans. J. and A.C Tedeschi, pp. 10-33, *Critical Inquiry*, 20, Autumn 1993- among others.

princely states. In order to document the process of social change, apart from the limited secondary material, I consulted modern day gazetteers. Which, of course, are fairly reluctant to record any change except that which is strictly quantifiable. This normally relates to the sphere of economics, and more often than not is recorded in statistical tables. So, descriptions of castes in recent gazetteers⁷ are almost identical to those presented in the Imperial gazetteer of 1908.⁸ After the enforcement of the Constitution caste categories are no longer used in official records and data. Thus caste data, at the village level at any rate, has to come from verbal or observed estimates. Gwalior, Holkar and Dewas state documents consulted at the M.P. State Archives at Bhopal and at Dewas Collectorate also helped in understanding class and caste configurations.⁹ Land Revenue and settlement records consulted in the Tarana tehsil office, Shajapur Collectorate and Dewas Collectorate,¹⁰ apart from providing valuable information on land holding patterns, gave an insight into the prevailing 'jajmani system' (at least till the 1920s), by recording the

7. Gazetteer of India, Madhya Pradesh, Shajapur, Dewas, Ujjain, Indore, Directorate of Gazetteers, Department of Culture, Govt. of M.P., Bhopal, 1994.

8. Central India Gazetteer Series: Gazetteers of Central India Agency, the Western States, the Gwalior State Gazetteer, compiled by C.E. Luard, Calcutta, 1908.

9. Administrative Reports of Dewas (Puar) states, Junior Branch and Senior Branch, Indore (Holkar), Gwalior (Sindhia); Holkar, Puar and Sindhia Sarkar Gazettes, 1900-1947.

10. Bandobast Records, Dewas- 1909-10, Gwalior (Ujjain)- 1911-12, and Holkar- 1905-06 and 1925-26.

minor village tenures (these land records are still used in contemporary land disputes by the courts normally attached to the offices where these are kept).

However, perceptions and aspirations are hardly recorded by officials on issues of this kind, and can never be captured by dry statistics that might provide information on, say how much money is spent on the welfare of scheduled castes by the state. More out of necessity than choice therefore, a considerable segment of the sources used are oral interviews with members of the balahi and other dalit castes in villages across the area, with some members of upper or dominant backward castes in each village, with balahi politicians and other prominent members, with those involved in engineering unity within the caste, with traditional genealogists of the caste, and so on. I also conducted interviews with both members and mahants of the Kabirpanth in Malwa, members of the Radhaswami sect in villages and at their annual '*satsang*' (gathering of followers) in Indore, as well as the chief *mahant* (leader) of the Kabirpanth and other members of the '*math*' (chief establishment) at the panth's headquarter near Raipur in Chattisgarh. A survey of old and new Kabirpanthi literature from Chhatisgarh helped to understand the aspirations of the leaders of the panth. The file containing the registrations of mahants authorised by the panth and details of the math's annual budget and income-expenditure records were useful.

British written records of Malwa and of this caste are limited, compared to the extensive details available for neighbouring British controlled territories of C.P and Berar. The reason is that this area was part of the peculiar province of Central India Agency, comprising a number of princely states of diverse vintage and origin, located in varied ecological zones. This province was divided into 8 administrative units, of which 2 were in the Malwa region. Official British records are more or less limited to reports of political agents to the Secretary of the Foreign Department of the British Indian Government. Besides these, there is of course John Malcolm's early 19th century account 'Memoirs of Central India including Malwa'.¹¹ In addition to the fact that the British ruled this territory only indirectly and therefore generated only a limited amount of 'administrative knowledge' about it, the confusion over boundaries different princely states and their periodic fluctuations, made the task of finding the records of the states a very difficult task. Such records of princely states as could be found, only contain some mention of state policies towards lower castes, their welfare and charity measures and so on. Congress activity and the State's Peoples Movement were not uniformly developed across the region and information from that source is also not

¹¹. Malcolm, Sir John, A Memoir of Central India including Malwa and adjoining provinces with the history and copious illustrations of the past and present conditions of that country, (originally published in 1824), Sagar Publications, New Delhi, 1970, (Indian reprint).

abundant. However the Indore Rajya Praja Mandal papers were useful to understand the war-time restrictions on the economy and the protests against these measures.

In order to knit up the partial story told by administrative records and Kabirpanthi literature, and in an attempt to make virtue out of necessity, I have interspersed passages of conventional history writing with my field notes. This accounts for a somewhat haphazard presentation, that might be objectionable to the purist. Yet this method best captures the nature of my interaction with balahis and other villagers. I will not launch into a statement of the ethical dilemmas of research of this kind. For, as Amita Baviskar points out the introduction to her book,¹² such dilemmas are stated but never resolved. And ultimately in a study like this, no matter how much I problematise my position, the voices of the balahis and others will be interpreted by me, the author, who will inevitably prevail. But as Baviskar continues, "the power of the researcher over the text is never absolute...to think that (a scholarly text) is fatally flawed by its shortcomings is to overrate its importance. One book (in this case, a dissertation) is far from being the only definitive, representation of the

¹². From Baviskar, Amita, *In the Belly of the River- Tribal conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley*, p. 11, OUP, Delhi, 1995.

people; they act as subjects of their own accord, and speak for themselves, and they will go on doing so".¹³

The residents of numerous harijan bastis across Malwa shared the stories of their lives with me with a generosity and warmth that I don't think I will be able to reciprocate. I have just tried to remember while writing, that behind these social structures and analyses, there are living persons, human stories, lives and collective and individual aspirations.

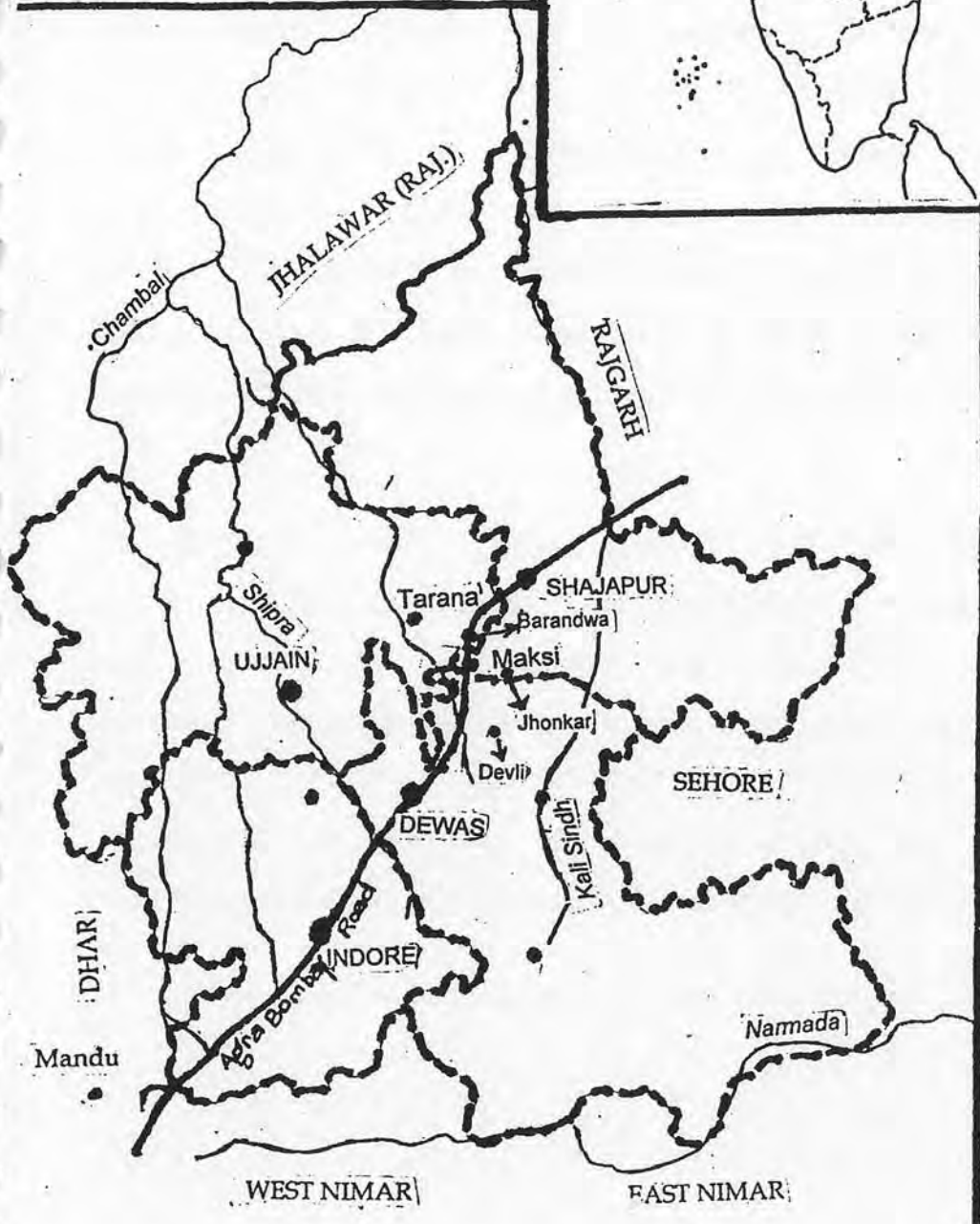
¹³. The chapter-plan of this dissertation is as follows: Chapter 1 contains details about the geographical region under discussion and describes the caste in its social, ecological and economic context; Chapter 2 is an outline of the socio economic history of the caste and the region, not particularly cogent, but highlighting those aspects that form part of the shared memory of the balahis and other scheduled castes in the area. In Chapter 3, I have tried to analyse the movement towards the institutionalisation of the sect of Kabirpanth and the adoption of the sect by members of the caste; efforts of the caste towards self-organisation are explored and the nature of the caste movement that is taking place in Malwa among balahis today is examined in the concluding section.

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Area under survey in
Malwa



Chapter One

'ORIGINAL INHABITANTS': MALWA AND THE BALAHIS

Malwa, to a lesser degree than Rajasthan, conjures up images of valour and bravery, the romance of Rupmati and Baz Bahadur, folk songs, Kumar Gandharva, and from school Geography text books, a plateau! If this last were to be explained somewhat, the Malwa plateau extends from "Chittore in Mewar North to the Taptee river South and from Bundelcund East to Guzerat West".¹ Members of one community claim to be the 'original' inhabitants of this land. This community is called Balahi, listed as a scheduled caste in modern India. It is an untouchable caste native to central and adjoining parts of western India. Stephen Fuchs was perhaps the first to write at length about this caste though his geographical focus was mainly the area south of the Narmada and of Malwa, Nimar.

Published in 1950, Fuchs's book, 'The Children of Hari', was based on fieldwork done in the 1930s and '40s. Independence followed, and zamindari abolition was implemented in 1952. Then the erstwhile Depressed Classes were given protection by the state in the form of preferential legislation, and the balahis as Scheduled Castes came under its purview. Moreover, Malwa has been more

¹. Malcolm, John: A Memoir of Central India including Malwa, vol. I, p.1,1824.

prosperous than Nimar and the overall conditions of this scheduled caste in that area have been better, socially, ritually and economically. I will try to substantiate this claim. I have used Fuchs's work as a kind of marking point from where I begin exploring the changes in the material and the mental world of balahis. The dates 1940-1994 are in the nature of loose brackets with the help of which I could examine the pre and post 1947 context and bring the study upto the time when I did most of my field work (end of 1994). What kind of economic mobility can be seen both within this and other communities in rural Malwa, and what factors have been responsible for either causing, or perhaps, not causing it? What are the changes in the social and ritual standing of the caste - have any changes occurred in this, and if they have, what historical processes and social choices lie behind them? For instance, one such choice being made is the acquisition of the membership of the Kabirpanth and the Radhaswami panth in increasing numbers in the last forty years. What is dictating this choice? What does membership in these panths mean to those who adopt it and to those outside them?

With many questions, almost no secondary work or written source on this scheduled caste, a caste which has only now started generating some literature about itself, working on contemporary history and consequently denied the objectivity lent by chronological distance, somewhat

burdened with an un-historian like empathy for the people who were to be the subjects of my research, I set out for Dewas to begin my field work.

I'm quite an oddity in the Maksi tempo and bus stand on the Agra-Bombay road, which is also known as National Highway No. 3. I'm waiting for a tempo to take me to village Jhonkar, which like Maksi itself is in Shajapur district, part of the Malwa plateau in Madhya Pradesh. I arrived hoping to do my fieldwork in these parts by the Intercity Express from Delhi two days ago. I have decided to base myself in Dewas where friends have been working in the field of school education, in Eklavya, an M.P based organisation.² I have already rented a house there at the foot of a hill made famous in Forster's "Hill of Devi".³ I have also met a retired professor of History who stays in the neighbourhood. He has given me some idea about the origins of the various castes in the area, but is of course frankly curious as to why I have been "allowed" to do work of this kind, under History. After all History kind of ended in 1947,

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- ². Eklavya has been working in this field in the state since 1982. The organisation has devised innovative science and social science teaching programmes and text books that have been included in the curriculum in all state government schools. In addition, in some schools across the state they also monitor special programmes and pedagogical methods and material. They also take up other work, such as hosting meetings and encouraging the Kabir Vichar Manch (also set up with their initiative) with the Kabirpanthis of the area, to discuss and debate the increasing ritualisation within the panth. The purpose was also to be involved with the lower/oppressed sections of society in Malwa. Under an ICHR project, Eklavya took up the work of compiling the extant bhajans of Kabir sung in Malwa (traditionally, by balahis, whether Kabirpanthi or not). They also started a discussion group amongst the area Kabirpanthis (this has been discussed in chapter 3).
 - ³. The Devi here is the huge figure of Tulja Bhawani, clan deity of the Maratha Pawars who ruled Dewas. Dewas itself probably gets its name from the devi, i.e, from Devi-vasini (Imperial Gazetteer of India, Calcutta, 1908, p.295). At the foothill also is a Bagri settlement. This caste continues to be at least part-time goatherders despite their urban location. My Marathi landlady warned me to keep my door securely locked because the house bordered the basti.

didn't it? I endeavour to collect my already shaky confidence and persist.

And now at Maksi...I have been waiting for about two hours. My friends at Dewas have given me a list of villages where they know some people - balahis, kabirpanthis, schoolteachers, any or all of these. Armed with this list which is to work as my entry-point into the villages I have started "work". At least, I intend to do so as soon as the tempo comes. Not surprisingly, I'm the only unaccompanied woman in the bus stand. I venture into what appears to be an all purpose shop there and hopefully ask for a glass of tea. I'm then served the first glass of the famous Malwi brew many gallons of which I'll be expected to consume during my stay. Tea seems a very weak description for it - in the villages it is made by boiling the tea leaves for at least half an hour, then putting in as much sugar as there is water, with just a spot of milk as a final touch. There is one danger- until you are a pucca Malwi tea-drinker, the syrup like consistency will make your lips stick to each other, temporarily making conversation difficult, if not impossible! The tea-stall owner asks me where I'm going and why. I answer. He immediately concludes that I must be of that caste myself. Why else would I be interested? He is unbelieving when I reply in the negative. Then do I know that this caste is very low in the hierarchy? That these people are very dirty? That balahis and chamars work in tandem...Fortunately a tempo has drawn up and I don't have to answer. People here are incredibly patient. I'm just beginning to figure out that if such delays are routine, the work I've come for will take much longer than I've calculated. This tempo driver is Muslim, one of the descendants of Pathans settled by Marathas to counter the power of the Mughal jagirdars, Rajputs or "Sondhia patels". Muslims

almost monopolise the transport business in Jhonkar.

Finally we're off. I have to meet Dangiji, teacher in the middle school at Jhonkar. It is going to be my first formal set of interviews, I wish myself luck.

To get on with a description of Malwa, it is a region criss-crossed by a number of rain-fed rivers - the Kali Sindh, the Shipra and the Chambal being the most important. Few of these flow southward into the Narmada. Most flow into the northern rivers, in some senses indicating the land's closer affinity to the north than to the south. The landscape, in the language of gazetteers, is picturesque, with undulating hills interspersed with stretches of flat cultivated land. Today, this idyllic picture is marred somewhat by ecological degradation, and population increase has forced people into cultivating the unproductive hilly and marginal land. Attempts have been made to develop industrial townships - and Dewas and Pritampur were developed as such in the late 1970s. Not very pretty but definitely leading to a more productive economy and greater employment! Black fertile "true Malwi" soil can be found in the more northern parts of the plateau⁴ while some of the area around Dewas has stonier, drier soil. Rainfall is fairly limited - the wet season lasts between July and

⁴. Adrian Mayer, *Caste and Kinship in Central India : A Village and its Region*, p.11, (originally Routledge, London, 1960), Universal Book Stall, Delhi, 1986.

September. The cold season is dry and quite warm and the overall climate can be described simply as "moderate".

Linguistically Malwa has strong linkages with Rajasthan, and Malwi the dominant dialect in the rural areas, is listed as a variety of Rajasthani.⁵ With its more southerly neighbours Malwa developed a political association in the 18th century, when the Marathas took over the territory from earlier Mughal conquerors and Malwa acquired a Marathi speaking largely town based ruling class.

Since Malwa provided a convenient transit route from the north to the south, it had a fairly chequered history of conquest and reconquest. Through it passed the ancient and very important trade route between the Ganga-Yamuna basin and Gujarat and the sea. Control over Malwa, therefore, was crucial for all north Indian empires. It is remembered by the people as the seat of the king, Vikramaditya (ChandraguptaII) who ruled from 376 to 414 A.D. and generated many fables and folk traditions. The Vikram Samvat era of the Hindu calendar that the genealogists of the Balahis use to keep a record of their visits to their patrons also originated here 57 years before the Christian era. Then followed the rule of the Paramara kings, a dynasty made famous by Raja Bhoja (1010-1055 A.D), whose reign also supposedly marked a cultural and scholarly high point.

⁵. Imperial Gazetteer of India, vol.XI (Coondapur to Edwardesabad), Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1908.

In the 14th century, a Khalji subahdar of Malwa attempted to secede from the northern empire centred at Delhi, an attempt that met with success at the time of his successor. The capital was set up in Mandu (Dhar) in 1406 A.D. The Khaljis ruled for over a century. The love of the last ruler Baz Bahadur for queen Rupmati of Sarangpur, and the tragic end when the Mughals conquered Malwa and Rupmati consumed poison to avoid dishonour, has captured the imagination of many.

Following the Mughal conquest of 1561, a stable land revenue system was introduced. Rajput chiefs who had settled here continued to rebel against the Mughals but it was the Marathas, who in 1703 seriously challenged Mughal authority, and through a series of raids managed to conquer this strategic territory. Malwa's revenues were extremely attractive to the Maratha generals in the post-Shivaji phase. It was conquered and then divided among three main warrior-chiefs - these were Malhar Rao Holkar, Mahadji Sindhia and the Puar chiefs. Holkar established his capital at Indore. Sindhia who had his capital at Gwalior, occupied the areas around Ujjain and the Puars, the areas of Dhar and Dewas.

The Marathas were a relatively spent force by the end of the 18th century and the unrest and chaos that ensued from incessant Maratha-Rajput warfare was put to an end by 1818-19 when the states entered into treaty relations with

the British and formed what came to be called the Central Indian Agency, as opposed to the British Central Provinces. The Malwa areas comprised the western parts of the Agency with the eastern part constituted of Bundelkhand and other princely states in eastern Madhya Pradesh. The state of Dewas under the minor Puar chieftains had got split between the senior and junior branches of the family in 1886 with separate administrations. In 1948, twenty five such princely states merged into Madhya Bharat and in 1956, along with parts of Rajasthan into Madhya Pradesh, the largest state in the country, with a very eclectic composition.

I am focussing on a narrower stretch within Malwa - roughly the area between the three cities of Ujjain, Indore and Dewas. Paucity of written material and the nature of the subject I had chosen to work on dictated the choice of a very limited geographical zone. I centred my study around Dewas and the villages around it. Though the Puars ruled Dewas, as John Malcolm notes, they, "have been the sport of every change. With territories situated in the most distracted part of Central India and unable to maintain any force, they have alternately been plundered and oppressed, not only by the governments of Sindhia and Holkar, but by ...every freebooter of the day..."⁶ Under such conditions perhaps, a village only managed to survive if it had as

⁶. Malcolm, 1824, vol.I, p.113.

headman a man strong enough to defend himself and his followers.

Not only did this result in fairly strong and independent villages but politically, the entire region around Dewas came to be controlled by one or the other Maratha competitor of the Puars, leaving only Dewas town and its immediate neighbourhood under their control.

This outline of the geographical and ecological conditions indicates that Malwa has been a distinct and separate entity. And among the people there is a strong awareness of belonging to this area. Here I would agree with Adrian Mayer, who in his work on the village "Ramkheri" (identified as Jamgot near Dewas) arrived at the same conclusion.⁷ Ujjain remains for the people of the villages the main ritual and cultural centre, a thriving city on the Shipra. Mandu, once capital, is today best known for its ruins, but at least for the balahis, is considered central to their sacred geography. One difference that is natural given the nature of Mayer's interaction with the village dalits, is that the sense of continuity assumed by his informants with the golden age of Vikramaditya and Raja Bhoja does not exist among the dalit communities. Other levels of identification with the region, a common feeling that Malwa's climate was the best, pride about the quality

⁷. Mayer, 1960, p.13.

of the wheat (*sharbati, pissi* etc.) are shared by the balahis. Subjected to social disabilities, with frequently limited interaction outside the village till recently, their memories of the past for them would not be constituted by the high cultural achievement in the court of a monarch, they would in all likelihood be preoccupied by the quest for a historical explanation of their own degraded social status.

Before describing the caste under discussion, a brief outline of the social structure in this stretch in Malwa is necessary. The Rajputs are the dominant upper castes, normally called 'thakur'. There are few brahmins in the area. Next in the social hierarchy are the patidars and the kulmis, followed by khatis, all considered to be cultivating castes with fairly large acreages of land. Service castes like sutars (traditional occupation-carpentry), kumhars (traditionally, potters), nai (traditionally, barbers) etc. rank next, and are not numerically too strong. The untouchable castes are that of balahi (traditionally weavers, village menials), chamars (leatherworkers), bagris (goatherders, hunters), and mehtars (sweepers). In addition, in places like Maksi, Jains are well represented in the population and Muslims in most large villages. Among Muslims, castes like naitas (local converts to Islam, who hold the cow as sacred) and pinjaras (originally 'cotton carders') are considered to be backward.

This is merely a rough sketch of the caste structure that exists today. Details of the processes of consolidation and fragmentation that are occurring both within and outside this structure are the subject of the following work.

BALAHIS - THE CASTE AND THE CONTEXT

"Only three gotras of the balahis - Mandvo Heervo, Gangu Devyo, and Gangu Kosla - were originally created by god. The rest of the *gotras* existing today were originally *kshatriyas*. At that time, Delhi was the big "*garh*", and Mandavgarh (Mandu) was the smaller "*garh*". When Parashuram, a brahman, got very angry with the *kshatriyas*, he vowed to destroy them all. They had to escape and they had to survive somehow or the other. They adopted different ways of making a living and according to the work they did, they got a rank or a caste. So our *jajmans* had to do *balapna* (the work done by a village servant) and they started eating and drinking (the most commonly used euphemism for eating non vegetarian food and consuming liquor) and became balahis. Then they left modern Mandu, then Mandavgarh, in carts and wherever they halted, some people stayed on, cleared the trees and started cultivating, becoming residents of that village, and developing it. They became its original inhabitants. From the time that our *jajmans* became balahi from *kshatriya*, we have their records. Our records go back to a period earlier than the Vikram era, more than two thousand years ago.

Our *jajmans'* eating habits got degraded the moment they left Mandavgarh, they got thrown out of the *kshatriya* caste because people were strict about such rules then. We don't keep a specific record of how our *jajmans* of different *gotras* fell from the caste hierarchy. We would never speak against

our *jajmans*, even if they do not call us for many years.⁸

So according to the *bhat* (balahi genealogist) who recounted the above account, the Malwi balahis were the original inhabitants of Malwa. It is a caste that can be found in Malwa, Gujarat and Rajasthan, and in Malwa, is mainly engaged in agricultural labour and cultivation. Traditionally an untouchable, weaving caste, it was considered to be on the same level as the chamars or the leatherworkers. This kind of unity between the leatherworking and weaving castes can be seen in northern India as well.⁹ In areas like Bikaner the chamars are actually called 'balais'. In Marwar, the bhambhis, who are village menials, look after travellers etc., are leather workers as well as weavers. They are also supposed to do *begar* work (unpaid labour services)¹⁰. In Malwa, the phrase, "balahi-chamar ki jodi", (the pair of balahi and chamar), is commonly used, and here the basis of the pairing can be seen in the traditional function of the balahi. The balahis were

⁸. Young college educated balahi *bhat* (genealogist), reciting the story of the origins of the balahis, on 19.12.94, village Rawer, near Sawer, Indore district. These bhats were extremely suspicious of me, openly calling me a 'spy'. It took me a long time to allay their fears. As usual they weren't sure as to what I was going to do with the information I got from them, and when I told them they refused to believe it. Finally, and fortunately, the young man who is educated returned from a trip to their patrons, and I was able to convince him as to my intentions. The old men who, till now, were fearing that I was somehow going to use this evidence against their patrons, also gradually got over their suspicion.

⁹. Fuchs, Stephen, *At the bottom of Indian Society*, 1981, p.171-72.

¹⁰. *The Castes of Marwar* (being Census Report of 1891), Munshi Hardyal Singh, Census Superintendent of Marwar, Books Treasure, Jodhpur, Second edn. 1991, p. 193-94, and 196.

required to remove all dead animals that are cloven footed such as cattle, buffaloes, goats etc. "When such an animal in the village dies it is the duty of the ... (balahi) to remove the animal and drag it either to a waste place near the village or to the vicinity of the Balahi quarters where he skins the animal. The skin he may keep, the bones he sells to Muslim collectors who sell them again to the soap factories. Where the balahis still eat the flesh of the dead cattle, members of his family and caste may cut off from the carcass as much flesh as they desire, take it home and cook it. The skin is sold to the tanner - or cut up and cured by the Chamar."¹¹

This piece was written in the 1940s and about the Nimari balahis, who are looked down upon by present day Malwi balahis with a great deal of suspicion. Russell and Hiralal¹² also state that Nimari balahis are considered lower than the others because they eat the meat of dead cattle. The Malwis, today primarily cultivators tilling their own or others' land, might, however have performed the same or similar functions about a century ago.¹³

¹¹ . Stephen Fuchs, 1981, p.181.

¹² . Russell and Hiralal, Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India (vol.1), (originally published 1916), p. 106, Ousterhout, NB: Anthropological Publications, 1960.

¹³ . Interviews with Salokibai, Bhera basahib, both in their late eighties, and a number of other elderly villagers. Today they speak of it in hushed tones or perhaps not at all. The older people are much more frank about it admit, as Salokibai did, that balahis in the past "used to eat calves as well". The younger generation, even those in their fifties, are understandably unwilling to even admit this memory.

Balahis, till recently, were not permitted to ride bicycles and their bridegrooms not allowed to ride horses in front of thakurs (Rajputs). Fuchs also mentions a newspaper report of 1979 citing an incident where a bridegroom who dared to ride a horse was "severely beaten up by the Rajputs of his village and the musical instruments of the band accompanying the wedding procession were badly damaged".¹⁴ In the course of my fieldwork I came across some incidents of this kind but the most recent of these had occurred in the 1970s.

I hear about an incident relating to Jhonkar village's history of protest, on the very first day of fieldwork. It is the story of Kalu and Bapu, local *pehelwans*, now in their fifties. They adopted the same tactics with the thakurs, khati and patidars in their village that were adopted against them outside. For instance, they made thakur grooms dismount as they entered the village. They also made harijan women take water from a common well as far back as the sixties (the term harijan is preferred all over Malwa to describe members of the scheduled caste, and in some villages refers exclusively to balahis. The reason could be the Gandhian influence, particularly strong in the 1940s in Dewas through the intervention of the ruler himself).

When asked about the incident, women of the village laugh uproariously. I am taken aback. Then it turns out Kalu and Bapu are strongmen in the village who "cast their eyes on women and walk around the village as though they own it".¹⁵ The

¹⁴. Fuchs, 1981, p.181.

¹⁵ .Interview with Nani bai and others in balahi mohalla, Jhonkar, 27.11.94.

women obviously downplay the note of heroism in the incident that the men consider pathbreaking, while agreeing that all in all, Kalu and Bapu had done the harijans some good.

As far as other disabilities connected to the balahis are concerned, one could cite the case of Barandwa village in Tarana tehsil, Ujjain, where balahis constitute the largest single caste by population.¹⁶ The barber (nai) there still does not cut their hair nor shave their beards within the boundary of the village. The effect of the passage of about fifty years after untouchability abolition has been that today, he serves them outside the village precincts, about 2 km away, at Kanasiya naka on the highway. Earlier, balahis would be forced to take off their slippers when they had to pass in front of upper caste people. Women would not be allowed to wear lugdis (long skirts) with borders, or bangles on the upper arm as per tradition in these parts, nor the heavy silver anklets that signify married status. Today these restrictions are just memories - why have things

¹⁶ .According to the 1971 census (Ujjain District Census Handbook, Series X A and B, p.132, Govt. of M.P, 1974) Out of a total population of 1066, the scheduled caste population (596) amounted to about 54%. The only scheduled castes in this village are balahis and bagris, and the latter number somewhat less than the former. The 1981 Census of Ujjain (where most of the villages surveyed are located), indicates that out of the total balahi population of 1,01,637, 36.37% are involved in agricultural work (19.91% are listed as agricultural labourers and 16.46% as cultivators) and only 2.13% are involved in manufacturing and 'industrial' activity. Though the chamars are the single most numerous SC group in MP and the balahis rank second, in Ujjain district the chamars are less populous (population- 85756). Out of these only about 28% are agricultural workers (20% of the population is engaged in agricultural labour and only 8% are listed as cultivators) while about 7% of the population is engaged in 'industrial' work. (Calculations based on SC-ST tables, Census of India, 1981, Series II, Madhya Pradesh, Part IX i).

changed? Some changes have taken place because of the law, it is now illegal to discriminate. As many balahis say, changes have occurred since 'Mahatma Gandhi's rule' began, but more importantly since they started living 'cleanly'.

Balahis in only a few of these villages had memories of weaving. In most areas even in the 1930s agricultural labour had replaced weaving as the main occupation and in comparatively few places weavers were displaced by the coming up of cotton mills like the Hira Mill in Ujjain. And particularly in Ujjain district quite a number of their caste fellows had got jobs in the mills as they came up in the late '30s. The occupational profile was quite similar to that of the Nimar balahis. The 1931 Census of C.P and Berar gives the best idea of this. Only 2.6% of all balahi earners were cotton weavers, and as many as 73% are listed as field labourers. 12.2% are listed as cultivators of any kind, 2% are involved in livestock rearing, and 10.2% have 'other occupations'.¹⁷

The caste occupation of the balahi as noted by Malcolm is that of the "Potail's spy". Russell and Hiralal¹⁸. refer to them as "a low, functional caste of weavers and village watchmen". The 1931 Census describes them as "an impure

17. Census of India, 1931, vol. XII, part I, p.265; The Census of India 1931, vol.XX, Central India Agency, does not appear to contain such detailed information. On p.216, the absolute strength of Balahi population is given (191,194), and one may be confident that this population was concentrated in at least the western states of the Agency, i.e, westwards from Bhopal in the present map of M.P.

18. Russell and Hiralal, 1916, p.105.

caste of village watchmen found only in Malwa". It goes on to add that "they have no tradition of migration and in all probability are the subjugated aborigines of Malwa and form the earliest strata of the population". Moreover, "in the old village constitution he was a very important village officer and an authority on village boundaries and everything pertaining to the village". As an officer he was granted a "watan" or a piece of land for doing this work.¹⁹ In return he was supposed to serve the patel (hereditary village headman, normally thakur or brahmin) and also escort officials, women of the patel's family etc., carrying their luggage to their destinations.

What was not clear to me before I went there was that while all balahis could be called by the thakurs and forced to do a variety of agricultural work, and the women had to collect cowdung, prepare fuel etc. for them, only one or at the most two balahis were chosen by the patel²⁰ to be the "gram balahi", and given the grant of a "watan". The "gram balahi" was at times looked upon as an extremely important person because of the nature of his work. However, at least in the villages that I surveyed, the work of the "gram balahi" does not appear to have been looked upon with any great pride, or seen as conferring any extra prestige upon the person thus chosen. The work of the gram balahi may or

¹⁹ .Census of India, 1931, vol.XX, part I, p.228.

²⁰ .The patel was the traditional village headman, a member of a higher caste. It was a hereditary post.

may not have been hereditary and was entirely dependent on the whim of the patel. The post was abolished at the time of Independence.

In his survey of a village near Dewas, Adrian Mayer, calling the balahi a "weaver" writes in 1960 that, "weavers can hardly be classified as *untouchables*". He found that the "drummer" and the "sweeper", i.e, the "doli" and the "bhangi" respectively, were the lowest in the caste hierarchy, and those with whom the balahis do not maintain commensal ties.²¹ My findings coincide with his in this respect, except that in this area the word "mehtar" was more commonly used instead of "bhangi". In the villages I surveyed in detail, I did not come across the caste of drummers that he found. Balahis also do not have commensal ties with chamars in most villages and hotly deny persistent upper caste attempts to link the two castes.

Balahis, followed by bagris (traditionally, goat herders) are the largest scheduled caste groups in the area. Fuchs finds many points in common between the balahis and the mahars, another caste of weavers, with similar village level functions.²² Some interesting evidence in Mughal India seems to point to the existence of a 'caste' of this kind in the late 17th century. Equating 'balahars' in function with castes like dhanuk and thori who "laboured at cutting and

²¹ .Mayer, 1960, pp.33-60.

²² . Fuchs, 1950, p.16.

carrying the crops of the cultivators", Irfan Habib writes that the balahar's traditional work was to act as guides and carry baggage. The balahar here clearly appears to be a caste (or at any rate, a strong corporate grouping).²³ Barni had described the category of balahar at the time of Allaudin Khalji as the lowest category of agricultural taxpayers, at the opposite end of the spectrum from the highest, the khuts²⁴. The reference here is clearly to a class and not a caste. It is not particularly implausible that the category of balahar over time got transformed into a caste-like grouping which with usage in central India and Rajasthan, came to be called balahi. The similarity of the functions of the two categories (balahis and balahars) strengthens this speculation. However this still remains at the level of speculation, given the lack of more conclusive evidence. Russell speculates that the word balahi itself originates from the Hindi word "bulahi", i.e, one who calls, referring obviously to the village servant/watchman duties of the balahi which would require him to call villagers to the assemblies, bring them to the patwari, of the patel when required, and so on.²⁵ Finding this to be an implausible

²³. Habib, Irfan, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, pp120-121, Asia Publishing House, 1963. In fn.10, p.121, he notes that the identification of the caste of thoris, agricultural labourers in Ajmer province, with balahars (and details of their traditional occupation) was done in a news report of 1679 in *Waqai-i'-Ajmir*, 131.

²⁴. Barni, Ziauddin, *Tarikh i Firuzshahi*, p.100, in *The History of India as told by its own Historians: The Muhammadan Period*, Sir H.M Elliot and J. Dowson, vol.3, first edn. 1871, present edn. 1958, Susil Gupta (India) Ltd., Calcutta.

²⁵. Russell and Hiralal, p.105.

argument, Fuchs feels that the word probably originates from some sort of a Dravidian word signifying "man", referring to the "original inhabitant" claim of the balahis. While on the topic of what is "original" and authentic, for Fuchs, the Nimar balahis he wrote about had preserved (in the 1940s) most of the original balahi character. However that may be, the Malwa balahis definitely appear to have been quite different even at the time that Fuchs was writing, and for them Nimar balahis were not even fit to be let into their houses, as my interviewees reiterated.

The various subcastes that Fuchs finds among the Nimar balahis -- Ganoria, Katia, and so on were unfamiliar to the balahis of Malwa. Here the exogamous subcastes among the balahis are Malwi, Maru, Mewara, Gujarati, Saurashtri (Sotia) and Nimari. Each subcaste considers itself superior to the other. "Roti Vyavhaar" (commensal ties) has only recently started between the subcastes and seems far more common among the Maru and the Malwi. As the names indicate, the subcastes obviously refer to the diverse points of origin of the groups -- from Marwar, Mewar, Gujarat, Saurashtra, and of course, Malwa itself.

This feature is actually true of the subcastes of a number of castes in Malwa. The strong sense of belonging that particularly the Malwis have is linked to the perception that others have continuously migrated into Malwa from different areas because of its superior climate, the

fertility of its soil etc.²⁶ Groups like the Maru have their own myths of origin unconnected with Mandu or Delhi but connected to the local geography.²⁷

Other differences can also be found between Fuchs' findings and mine. These could be attributed to the fact that completely different regions are being written about. For instance, Nimari balahis seem to have some kind of *jat panchayats* and *jat patels*, which hand down balahi laws and customs. Such a structure is completely absent in Malwa. I did not find any direct reference to the great balahi leader Ganga who lived 800 years ago (one could speculate about possible connections between this leader and two of the original balahi *gotras*, Gangu Kosla, and Gangu Devya). This leader is supposed to have "made the balahis a powerful caste by including in the community members of other and higher castes and to have been the leader of the emigrant balahis on their way southwards to the Nerbudda plains".²⁸

²⁶ . Mayer, 1960, p.13.

²⁷ . Interview with family members of bhat of Maru balahis at Lakhwara village, Bagli tehsil, Dewas dt. (The bhat was away on his 'rounds') It is believed that about 700 years ago Marus, then Kshatriyas, set forth from Marwar, due to conditions of scarcity- and came to Malwa. Being kshatriyas, they were fond of hunting and as one group was resting near the lake at Balon (near Jhonkar) they shot an arrow into the bushes when they heard the sounds of an animal there. They later saw that they had killed a *sambhar* deer, held as sacred as the cow by them. Seeing their grave error, the group accepted an outcaste status and became balahis themselves. This story was first recounted to me by Siyaram Dangi (27.11.94) as an origin myth of their particular clan of balahis of Jhonkar.

²⁸ . Fuchs, 1950, op. cit. p.29. Fuchs also writes that (pp. 234-238) the oldest known historical ancestor of balahis, according to a caste genealogist in Nimar, is said to be Haribans, who married the daughter of a weaver. His children lived near Delhi, the capital of the 'Moguls' who had put many balahis into jail. Ganga, a son of Haribans wove a beautiful cloth portrait of the ruler and his

This obviously implies a more northerly origin of the balahis than Nimar but is again a myth peculiar to the Nimar balahis.

The balahi bhats (of Maru and Malwi balahis) of whom there are just 70 families in all of Malwa are only allowed to eat with their patrons but they are strictly endogamous.²⁹ The Gujarati and Saurashtri balahis have their own bhats who come all the way from there.³⁰

Another associated caste that considers itself higher than balahis is that of the bairagis or balahi 'babajis' as they are called. They are the traditional priests of the balahis who perform the numerous rituals characteristic of balahi life. Sacrifices made to Bheru maharaj (a ferocious aspect of Shiva), marriages, funerals, etc. are performed by 'babajis' whose number is fairly small, judging from Mayer's findings and my observations. Mayer found that the Khati, Sutar, Mali, etc. ate food with the Bairagi. Bairagis are

palace. The king was pleased and granted him his wish of freeing all balahis. Ganga identified the balahis by offering a piece of cooked cow's meat to all prisoners. All who ate it were freed. Thus some members of higher castes also ate the meat to get free and thus fell in caste status and became balahis.

²⁹. Interview with bhat in Rawer-Sawer, 19.12.94.

³⁰. Interview with Sitalal Jain in Maksi. He is a Gujarati balahi who has converted to Jainism. Their family bhats come all the way from Mahadevpura village near Ahmedabad. They perform the *bhui* play - Sitalal says that as children they used to call them *bhuiwalas*. The plays refer to the origins of the caste. They perform the play in Maksi in each different mohalla in which the Gujarati balahis of different gotras stay - first in the Makwana mohalla, since the Makwanas were the earliest migrants, then among the Yadavs then the Parmars and finally the Phutgara. As to the origin of the Gujarati balahis he is unable to tell me much beyond the theory that they were originally Rajputs who fell in the caste hierarchy because of their eating habits.

also frequently priests at shrines of local village deities and *sants*.

In common with other villagers balahis worship a large number of deities and the Kabirpanth is one of the many cults they follow. It is a *panth* whose following is expanding rapidly in the area, along with the Radhaswami cult (these linkages are explored in chapter 3).

Today the balahis are perhaps the most prosperous and educated rural scheduled caste in Malwa. In the next section I will try to explore the reasons and factors that could account for this.

Chapter Two

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT

There was no food, bai. The poor *mazdoors* died in large numbers that terrible year. I was born the same year. A fever raged causing many to die also - in the village they called it *singti* or *kali bukhar*. My mother later told me that they didn't name me for three months after I was born for they were sure that I wouldn't survive.¹

The "56 period" - writing it like this in English sounds even more odd than the *Chappan ka samay* that has come up in every one of my interviews with the older people in the villages. It was universally the starting point of all personal histories of men and women in the *bagri* and *balahi mohallas*. The narrative of their community's history often started from this point in time, that seems to be marked by acute deprivation and sorrow. Many lost everything they possessed, lost loved ones, or were forced to migrate to unfamiliar and distant places. I hear accounts of people forced to eat grass, wild plants and roots, and dying when some of these turned out to be poisonous.² Obviously it is not the year 1956 that they are talking about - 1956 of the Vikram era, i.e., *Samvat* on the other hand fits better. *Chappan* therefore appears to be the year 1899 AD, when a disastrous famine struck large parts of the

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1. Interview with Ratan bai, an old woman, looking at least 99 if not 100 years old! *Bagri mohalla*, Barandwa, 11.12.94.
 2. Interview with old man, (unnamed), age, about 90, *Devli village*, Tonk Khurd block, Dewas district, 4.12.94.

The Central India Agency Gazetteer records " ... a curious paralysis of the lower limbs became common (during the famine). It was popularly attributed to the consumption of *teora* a wild pulse which

country. In neighbouring Rajasthan, that shares the same ecological niche, the famine was likewise called *Chappaniya kal*. This too was popularly known to be more severe than any other famine in the region.³

Until the time of the famine Malwa had been considered a 'healthy' place by contemporary British commentators.⁴ Their bewilderment as to how this zone of food surplus and pleasant climate could fall prey to such an acute 'natural' disaster appears quite genuine, in the accounts they present. Unfortunately such accounts are few and not particularly detailed. What these observers do record is the fact that this was the first famine to hit Malwa. Even if the veracity of the statement may be doubted it is true that this famine is today the one that survives in living memory, and was probably the worst famine the observers had seen a century ago.⁵ An important basic source, is the Central India Agency Gazetteer (compiled by Captain C.E Luard, in 1908). Both the Famine Commission Report and the Gazetteer record that virulent fever of several kinds plagued the weakened populace of Malwa in the famine year. Moreover an attack of infectious cholera as well as smallpox struck the

is one of the few plants that will grow in a famine. Deaths among those attacked were common, especially among men". (p.39)

- ³. Maloo, Kamala, *The History of Famines in Rajputana 1858-1900*, p.174, Himanshu Publications, Udaipur, 1987.
- ⁴. The most well known commentators were C.E. Luard, compiler of the Central India Gazetteer, D.W.K. Barr, agent to the Governor General in Central India, and Capt Cubitt, political agent at Ratlam. All of them wrote during and immediately after the famine.
- ⁵. Govt. Report, 'Famine Relief Operations in India during 1899-1900, vol.II, *The Native States*' (henceforth "Famine Report").

Dewas region in 1899 and 1900.⁶ Any of these could be the *kali bukhar* (or *singti*) that village folk speak of. Despite their bewilderment, the British political agent to the Governor General in Central India, Lt. Col. D.W.K Barr, and his subordinates did attempt explanations for the occurrence of the famine in a land which had previously enjoyed "immunity" from it.⁷ The main cause put forward was deficient rainfall. In 1899 instead of the normal average of 35 inches annually, actual rainfall in Malwa varied from 18 inches in Ujjain and Ratlam to 8 inches in Neemuch, Mandsaur and Sitamau.⁸ There was some rain in June and July, but the crucial rain on which the land is dependent for the kharif crop and the sowing of the rabi, occurring in September-October, (in the month locally called *kuaar*), failed almost entirely. By November 1899, Barr's report reflected the real state of things. In his general report on the famine in the Malwa Agency he wrote that the kharif had failed and the rabi sown in only 1/10th of the usual area. Grass and fodder were everywhere insufficient and the water supply low.⁹

Rajputana was worse affected. In November 1899, the solution suggested by the Agent to the Governor General in

6. Gwalior State Gazetteer, vol.I, p. 87, 1908, (Superintendent of Govt. Press, Calcutta). The total number killed in the famine through starvation and disease was about 12 per cent of the population in Ujjain pargana and 32 per cent in Shajapur.

7. Letter from Barr to Secretary to Government of India, Foreign Department, No.2 G dated Indore, 2.1.1900, p.98, Famine Report.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., pp.93-98.

Rajputana to ameliorate the acute scarcity conditions prevalent was that the rulers remove the cattle (that were dying in large numbers) to more favourable tracts.¹⁰ This dispersal by official intervention of both cattle and their keepers to states like Punjab, Bombay and the North Western Provinces was in addition to the simple migration across the borders into neighbouring areas that was simultaneously (and continuously) taking place. The total number of people who migrated in the latter fashion into Jaora, Ratlam, Khachrode, Indore, Ujjain etc. is given as 24,317- a populace that suffered "acute distress".¹¹ It was these Marwaris (strange to read of poor tribal migrants referred to as Marwari, a term normally used for well to do trading groups hailing from Marwar)- who, as the Malwa agent later noted, benefitted more from the relief work- mainly road making and digging wells, that had been started. They were probably in a better position to do so than the local population, for they came through the roads leading into the area, camped close to them, and thus could reach the site of relief work, particularly when it was road-making, much sooner. These immigrants have been regarded as a major 'problem' by the British agent in Malwa. He claimed that the little wheat that was produced was not enough because the "whole of Malwa (was) overrun by emigrants from the adjacent

¹⁰ . Cited in Maloo, 1987, p.185, fn. 26 (a) Report on the famine in the native states of Rajputana, 1899-1900, pp.64-65 and 101.

¹¹ . Ibid.

state of Marwar and Meywar of Rajputana Agency" with their cattle.¹²

The Rajasthan emigrants who were officially dispersed were later brought back by rail.¹³ Those who came into Malwa 'unofficially', presumably went back when scarcity conditions lifted. Yet large numbers had died both among the Rajasthan migrants and the local population of Malwa. The Gazetteer notes, about the latter, "...the people, unused to migrating could with difficulty be induced to leave their village until it was too late, and they had become so feeble as to make recovery difficult".¹⁴ Scarcity conditions in Rajputana were alleviated owing to a better harvest as also the steady flow of grain from Gujarat and Malwa into that territory.¹⁵ This flow was encouraged and promoted by the British Agency. Thus, in a desperate but futile bid to manage the food crisis, the British moved people and resources from one part of the country to another at random. The Rajputana Agent thought that the best way to deal with the 'problem' (comprised of a vast 'distressed' populace) was to export it. The Malwa Agent blamed the immigrants for aggravating his 'problem' and for taking advantage of his

¹². Letter no. 399G from DWK Barr dated from Indore 11.1.1900, p.124, Famine Report.

¹³. Report on the famine in the native states of Rajputana, cited in Maloo, 1987, p.185, (op.cit).

¹⁴. Gwalior State Gazetteer, 1908, p. 87.

¹⁵. Report on the famine in the native states of Rajputana, cited in Maloo, 1987 (op.cit).

efforts to ameliorate the distress of the people of Malwa, his responsibility. At the same time this 'distress' need not be thought to be directly correlated to the amount of crop produced or the deficiency of rainfall, as contemporary observers believed. Similar shortage of rainfall had occurred in previous years without causing such a severe food crisis, according to a recent (unpublished) study.¹⁶ Other factors seem to have combined with this natural one (i.e., shortage of rainfall) to produce this particularly disastrous consequence. One significant factor seems to have been that the Holkar government was hoarding grain even in September 1899, when the famine had already begun to grip the region. Relief measures set in motion by the state included mainly the establishment of poorhouses, while this stored surplus was 'exported' to British Indian territories that were suffering in the famine. This was achieved by not very subtle arm-twisting tactics resorted to by the Paramount power, made possible by the subordinate nature of the alliance between the Maratha Holkars and the British. A clear hierarchy of priorities was made by the British authorities between directly and indirectly administered territories here. For few efforts were made to regulate the flow of grain to the Malwi countryside. The British Agent until this point merely followed a laissez faire policy

¹⁶. Article (unpublished) 'Is rainfall the culprit', part of a recent study done for the Planning Commission, by Samaji Pragati Sahyog, a voluntary organisation, Bagli, Dewas, 1994.

allowing private trade to make up the continuing shortfall in grain in June 1900.¹⁷ Official efforts at controlling hoarding in private hands are noticeable by their absence. In sharp contrast are their efforts at extracting the hoarded surplus of the Holkars for their 'own' areas.

Caught between the 'free trade' policy pursued by the British, and the Holkar practice of stockpiling grain and perforce, 'exporting' it, poorer and lower caste inhabitants of Malwa continued to suffer, occasionally attacking houses of the wealthier rural folk in desperation. Not only grain but also some money was looted and used presumably to buy grain to feed starving families.¹⁸ For the laissez faire policy considered by the British to be an admirable solution to Malwa's problems (working on the principle that people could buy grain since they had not been able to produce it), failed to take into account the simple fact that most villagers simply did not have the purchasing power to buy food.

What was the impact of this famine upon the chief caste of agricultural labourers, the balahis? The labourers "were diverted from ordinary agricultural occupations by the dryness of the season". Attempts were made to employ them in relief work initiated by the different states. Apart from

17. Letter from Barr, no.399G, p. 124, Famine Report.

18. Grain Riots (*during famine of 1899-1900*), Foreign, Internal; Feb. 1900, 460-463 and April, 1900, 151-168; Part B, NAI.

making roads and cleaning and deepening of wells, they were employed throughout the agency in collecting such grass and fodder as could be found.¹⁹ These measures were obviously inadequate, and large number of agricultural labourers died in the course of the famine, due to starvation and disease. The depletion of labouring populace, presumably drove up the wages, and could have proved profitable to the balahi. However prices also rose after the famine. The Central India Gazetteer records that wages were high after the famine, because it carried away a large number of labourers. It goes on to say, "...since the famine, the condition of the cultivator has changed for the worse. Before this calamity he could boast of possession of some cattle but is now compelled to obtain the assistance from the Darbar or a banker in purchasing (or hiring) bullocks or even seed....The state has had to assist the cultivators largely to save them from becoming mere landless labourers". From evidence presented later in the text, it will become clear that some balahis too could be counted among the independent cultivators at this time though most were primarily landless labourers or poor peasants who owned small plots of land that were insufficient to support them forcing them to support themselves by casual labour. About the labourer the gazetteer notes, "Though the day labourer is never well off, his position has been improved by the rise in wages caused

¹⁹. Famine Report, pp. 93 to 98.

by the famine and the plague. If he had learnt not to squander his surplus earnings his position would be materially improved".²⁰

An interesting parallel could be drawn between the circumstances prevailing after the famine and this kind of official comment upon the labourer's failure to take advantage of the situation- and the aftermath of the plague in 14th century England²¹ Following a similar rise in wages the labourer who fails to utilise the 'opportunity' is chastised as 'lazy', preferring to be hired by the day, and so on. This kind of criticism occurs in all 'high sources'. This is followed up with the information that legislation was passed to curb not only the "excessive rewards enjoyed by the common people but also the manner in which they spent their ill gotten gains". This inability of the Indians in general and the peasant and the labourer (the balahi is included in this category) to save, his thriftlessness, propensity to spend recklessly on marriages and other social functions is often denounced and cited by British colonial commentators as an important cause for their poverty.²² About the balahis, even generally

²⁰. Imperial Gazetteer of India, (Central India), Western States, Volume V, Part A, p. 25, Calcutta, 1908.

²¹. Hatcher, John, *England in the Aftermath of the Black Death*, Past and Present, No. 144, August 1994, pp. 3-35.

²². Writing about this Bipan Chandra quotes the Resolution on the Economic Enquiry of 1888, according to which "The absence of thrift is a very prominent characteristic of the people...the prevailing custom of extravagant expenditure on marriages and other ceremonies

sympathetic commentators like Fuchs write, after documenting their extremely poor social and economic condition, that, "...not even their social degradation and economic misery are apt to rouse much sympathy and pity for their unclean habits and improvident and violent ways make one doubt whether they deserve anything better".²³ In an interesting but not unexpected move, the main aspiration of the caste organisation being forged among the balahis today is to mould the image of the caste into one of thrifty, hardworking members, to discourage members from spending lavishly from their hard earned wages on weddings, feasts etc.

So the balahi did not avail of the "advantages" immediately after the famine. Even if wages were high the prices of all commodities also increased, and since wages were at least partly paid in cash²⁴ any increase in wages would have most likely been neutralised. As noted earlier, state support was extended to cultivators. Those who were landless labourers, many balahis among them, were left with the cold hope of a higher wage since many among their ranks, friends and relatives possibly, had died, reducing the competition.

appears in every report". Cited on p.45 in Bipan Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India*, PPH, New Delhi, 1966.

²³. Fuchs, Stephen, 1950, p. 435.

²⁴. Gwalior State Gazetteer, 1908, p. 68.

"I lost my parents in the chappan". It is the old man in Devli again, sitting under a neem in his yard, his cataract blinded eyes turned toward the noonday sun. His voice is barely audible. He must be at least 90 years old. Suddenly his eyes turn inward and he looks very sad. I realise, that for many the famine meant very real losses, an uprooting and a dislocation that would have fallen most heavily on those on the lowest rungs of society. The losses they suffered can't in their entirety be captured in dry statistics and third person accounts compiled by administrators. The latter can at best give an indication of the same. However for the sake of veracity, to uncover a past without the inevitable refraction of memory, and finding out what in fact causes an event to be remembered in a particular fashion, contemporary records of this kind have to be consulted, of course cautiously, keeping their prejudices in mind. Past sorrows, people's personal beliefs and faith, their low status in society - sometimes I feel very guilty trying to analyse them dispassionately, digging beneath the surface of issues and matters close to people's hearts. It seems to me however, that there's no getting around this often unpleasant detective work.

The famine was everywhere, followed by a land revenue settlement that attempted to improve the position of the cultivators. State assistance to the region after the famine also flowed to the cultivator. In areas belonging to the Gwalior state, villages like Jhonkar and Devli, the Qanoon Mal, a land revenue Code, was brought into force from 1904 itself. It enhanced rights of occupancy tenant. Their occupancy right was made heritable. When this code was revised in 1927, full proprietary rights were conferred on

them²⁵ The backward cultivating castes in Malwa, khatis, kulmis, patidars who formed the main body of occupancy tenants benefitted vastly from this legislation and its implementation in the subsequent settlement. For the balahis, no spectacular gains or losses resulted. The Settlement procedures had already been set in motion in the years immediately before the famine. They were taken up again and completed in the Gwalior state areas by 1911-12, Dewas states areas by 1909-10. Holkar state areas by 1905-1906.²⁶ Even though some balahis (in each of the three villages whose land records I could survey in detail)²⁷ did possess land in the early years of the century, the concern for the 'cultivating classes', reflected in the official reports of the time, did not extend to too many balahis. 'Bandobast' records also for the first time clearly chalked out the different kinds of village services and the castes and individuals who were to perform them.²⁸ These services are mentioned only incidentally in pre-colonial records, in the context of the minor tenures given to village servants.²⁹ British settlements prior to this one were only

²⁵ . Madhya Pradesh State Gazetteer Series, 1993, Shajapur district, pp. 180-181.

²⁶ . Madhya Pradesh district gazetteers Shajapur (1993, p.173) and Dewas (1993, p.203) and Indore (1971, p.40).

²⁷ . These three villages were Jhonkar (Shajapur district), Devli (Dewas district), and Barandwa (Ujjain district).

²⁸ . "Bandobast" record - Land Revenue Records, Jhonkar (1911-12), Devli (1909-10), Barandwa (1905-06 and 1925-26).

²⁹ . Moreland, W.H., The Agrarian System of Moslem India, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1968 (2nd edition), p. 176.

partial and quite haphazard and failed to give these details. The list of village servants included in this report, (and reiterated in subsequent ones) included the priest(s), both the Hindu and the Muslim 'holy' men (fakirs and gusains), the barber, the potter, the blacksmith, the tailor, the sweeper (only in villages which had a mehtar population), the chamar, the balahi, and the village chaukidar.³⁰ These services and the work for which these village servants are compensated are called 'chaakri'. The service that the balahi is meant to do is "to assist in collecting the revenue and going from village to village"³¹ Elsewhere his functions are described as "assisting in collecting revenue and going from village to village with the womenfolk of the village (literally 'sisters' and 'daughters') and doing all kinds of work associated with 'balapna'".³² In these settlement records the *muafi* or *watan* lands given to one or two balahis chosen by the patel to perform the above functions as 'gram balahis' in each village got confirmed.

The example of Barandwa village (Tarana tehsil, Mahidpur pargana, Holkar state) is typical of the land

³⁰. Bandobast Records, op.cit.

³¹. Bandobast record, Daulatpur (Devli), pargana Sonkatch, jila Ujjain, compiled under the supervision of the Settlement Commissioner, Prant Malwa, Gwalior State, Samvat 1968, 1911-12 AD, section entitled 'Chakrandeh'.

³². Bandobast record, village Jhonkar, pargana Sonkatch, Zamindari village, jila Ujjain, Samvat 1968, 1911-12 AD.

ownership patterns in the area. The percentage of balahi population in Barandwa is quite high and currently they form more than one third of the strength of the village. In the Settlement of 1925-26 (the second round of settlement in the 20th century), out of the 165 plots of land belonging to the village, 37 belonged to balahis. In addition 4 plots were given as *inam* to the gram balahi, at this time Onkar, son of Bhera. The right was conferred on alternate years to Kheema, son of Lachman. Onkar already owned a considerable amount of land (53 bighas). (In an interesting aside one could note here that Onkar's son Narayan is the present sarpanch of the village). The balahi landowners were classified as '*raiyat pattedaran*' like other plot holders in the list. They possessed '*pattas*' or legitimate rights to cultivate. Besides the balahis, 8 plots were held by bagris, 32 by rajputs, 29 by khatis, 11 by sutars, 3 by kulmis, 2 each by 2 brahmins and 2 gusains, 1 by a gari (a caste of herdsmen), and 1 by a kumhar. In addition, 1 plot was held by a member of the naita caste, 1 by a sunar, 2 by mahajans, and 2 *inam* plots were granted, 1 to a gusain and 1 to a brahmin. All castes present in the village seem to have been well represented among the landholders.³³ No other scheduled castes stayed in the village at that time, according to an old resident. What is extremely significant is that all except 3 balahis owned only '*kardi*' land (called '*bardi*'

³³. Bandobast Records, Barandwa village (mauza), tehsil Tarana, District Mahidpur, Samvat 1992-96, 1925-26 A.D.

poor quality soil, located on tops of hillocks that dot the landscape. The 3 exceptions also owned only small plots of 'adaan' land (fertile land with a thick top-soil layer). The 'kardi' land without irrigation was barely good enough for one crop or grazing. And of all the 14 wells in the village, only 1 belonged to a balahi, once again Onkar. The rajputs and khatis together controlled the fertile black soil and 'adaan' soil. Seven of the wells were on rajput land. Sutars in Barandwa seem to have owned considerable tracts that were also well watered- with 2 of the wells being located on their land. The rest of the wells were constructed by the state and owned by it, which, given village caste dynamics and the fact that the patel at the time was Bhawanisingh, a rajput, would almost invariably have been located on the lands of his caste-fellows. This is borne out by the oral testimonies of a large number of balahis at Barandwa. Thus the necessity of irrigation in the area vastly reduces the scope for the large number of dry-land owning balahis to prosper. A very large number of balahis therefore had to engage in casual labour for their subsistence.³⁴ Compared to other scheduled castes balahis were better off in many ways and owners of some amount of land. The process of economic mobility might have started among members of this caste even in the 1920s, but there is little conclusive evidence to prove this. What is more likely is that individual balahis

³⁴. Interviews conducted in Barandwa, November-December, 1994.

had started becoming more powerful in villages like Kanthdi or Barandwa in the Holkar state and Jhonkar in the Gwalior state. This could also explain how in the five grain riots reported in Malwa in the course of the famine, when so-called 'badmashes' looted houses of well to do villagers for grain and money (mentioned earlier), one of the houses attacked belonged to Herchand Balai, of Bhutkhera village, Neemuch pargana. A small amount of wheat and opium, clothes and ornaments amounting to Rs. 108.³⁵ But besides some stray examples of relative economic strength, the first forty years of the century did not see any active mobilisation or overt economic and social mobility of the caste as a whole. However it should be noted that even these stray instances of rural affluence all pertain to this caste alone. Such inequalities within the caste are still present but possibly less pronounced today. Some landless balahis have been beneficiaries of a scheme by the state government to distribute land as recently as 1985-86. But the problem remains the same- state land is distributed, and this is most often *bardi* land, infertile and rocky.³⁶

I've been told to go to the *kuan* to meet the head of the house. I am at village Kanthdi, Tarana tehsil, Ujjain, at the large, though '*kachcha*' house of Ambalal Patwari. The *kuan* as far as my city vocabulary stretches, is quite simply a well. But here it normally refers to the site of the

³⁵. "Disturbances owing to famine in Central India, 1899", Foreign, Internal, November, 219-225, Part B, NAI.

³⁶. Interview with ba saheb, Renail Kalan, 4.12.94.

bore-well, in the fields, which are called 'jungle' in Malwi. This last had initially confused me completely, for when people would say that they were going to the jungle, I would look at the few straggly trees among acres of cultivated fields - and despair of ever understanding this bizarre dialect. Now that I know better I go in search of Ambalalji, and find him at the low lying and well watered field near the irrigation well. He has only recently purchased this field. We talk, squatting under the sky, in the middle of a newly planted *chana* field, where the saplings were just peeping out of the rich black soil characteristic of Malwa. My interviewee, Ambalalji is *balahi*, a retired *patwari*, whose uncle, Nanuram, his father's younger brother, had been *patwari*. Nanuram had been appointed by the intervention of the British, and the liberal policy adopted by the Holkar state, more specifically, Yashwant Rao's father, in the 1930s. This ensured that Nanuram, a *balahi* was appointed to this crucial post in 1935. As *patwari*, he had had to face discrimination of various kinds from many sources, for untouchability taboos were much stronger. None of the high castes wanted a *balahi* to sit in their courtyard, no matter how wealthy established or landed he might be. The British authorities at Mahidpur, a cantonment, and also the *pargana* town, warned the people that if they protested too strongly, they would employ a 'bhangi' in the post.

Ambalalji is obviously well established - and has been so for at least a couple of generations. His nephew is the present *patwari* and has passed the requisite examination and gone through the mandatory training. They also employ labourers-men of the *moghia* (criminal tribe, settled by Holkars in the 19th century) and *khati* castes, and own almost 200 *bighas* of land. But families like

this are few. And the social structure at Kanthdi - where balahi families are few in number, eighteen to twenty households, in a village with a total population of 542³⁷ and yet quite powerful and dominant - can by no means be called typical. There are two teachers and two *patwaris* (counting himself) from their community here, but he regrets that there are no other postgraduates besides himself. No, he is not the follower of any cult. About four or five households have converted in the last few years to the panth. However, most of the balahi members of the village are vegetarians and teetotallers, and have been so for a long time.³⁸

I have a long trudge ahead of me - back to the dusty track down which the bus to Makdone will come by. Ambalal's wife and daughter in law ask me to stay on in their house as it is already 4:00 pm. I'm quite dismissive of their suggestion and take the bus as it rolls down half an hour later. For some reason buses decide to stop plying when I reach Makdone. I take a ride in a 'share-jeep' that drops me off at the district town of Tarana by 8:00 pm. The town and bus stand are virtually asleep. The last bus to Dewas shows no inclination to move at all. I wish I'd heeded the advice to stay on in the village.

Anarlalji's case is an example of another avenue by which some balahis were able to benefit, i.e., by colonial intervention. In fact the advantages of British rule for oppressed sections particularly the lowest castes have been stressed by leaders of such castes from an early period.

³⁷. Census of India 1971, Madhya Pradesh, Series X, p.128, Part XA and B, Ujjain District Census handbook.

³⁸. Interview with Ambalal Malwiya, village Kanthdi, tehsil Tarana, 16.12.94.

Jotiba Phule, for instance, articulated these views in the 19th century, when he wrote, "The (British) government has introduced many good reforms for the welfare of the subjects and are planning to undertake many new projects beneficial to the people at large".³⁹ One finds that even the rulers of the states like the Maharaja of Dewas (Senior Branch) aided balahis occasionally, and, as Mayer notes, balahis (weavers, according to him) did become headmen (patels) of villages sometimes. However, he goes on to write that this occurred in villages which were settled by balahis, and a member of the caste was made headman. "When other castes moved in, notably Farmers (presumably the backward cultivating castes) they tried to get the headmanship transferred but the Maharaja ruled that the Weavers had done their work loyally and refused to penalize them because of their caste status."⁴⁰

With a poorly developed political consciousness and no strong leadership, the scheduled castes of Madhya Pradesh, 'ati-sudras' in Phule's terminology, continued to suffer all the disabilities attached to the members of their castes till the 1960s. When sons of balahi peasants went to school they were made to sit on separate 'taat-pattis' (strips of sacking) near the door of the class-room, away from the

³⁹. Phule, Jotirao, Collected Works of Mahatma Jotirao Phule, Vol II, Selections, "A Warning", p.25, Government Central Press, Bombay 1991.

⁴⁰. Mayer, 1960, p.70, fn. 1.

'savarna' children.⁴¹ Yet even before 1947 abolition of untouchability always remained an objective of even moderate bodies like the Indore Rajya Praja Mandal. These movements might have had some impact in urban areas. In cities like Ujjain, for example, boarding houses for 'harijan' boys were in existence in the 1930s, like the one run by a certain Parsi gentleman, Jaal saheb, influenced by the Gandhian movement and part of the Congress movement in the princely state.⁴² Some balahis like Bapulal Malwiya (later MLA and MP) who were able to pursue higher education in cities, were thus also influenced by these movements.

Conventional landmarks in economic history, such as the Depression of the early 1930s are not mentioned by any of the scheduled caste interviewees. It is possible that the low agricultural prices at this time did not affect the bulk of the group, who were primarily agricultural labourers and/or poor, or at the most, self sufficient peasants. It is also possible that any residual memory of the time was overridden by the subsequent shortages and harassment faced by the village folk during the second world war.

The balahi talk of this period of less intense (than the *Chappan*) but more recent and thus more widely remembered deprivation - *control ka samay* - when people had to eat the 'rotten' jowar issued by the Control/Rationing authorities

⁴¹ . Interview with Bapulal Malwiya, Dewas, 23.12.94.

⁴² . Ibid.

stationed in the bigger towns. People in Barandwa speak of the 'tokens' issued to them to get limited amount of provisions - they had to walk all the way to Tarana to get even the basic necessities.⁴³

The universal complaints about the 'Control' period are about the long distances people had to traverse to get food and about the poor quality of food, particularly jowar that they used to get. They call it variously lal jowar or ghoda-daant jowar. They also remember that they had to eat 'chana' and pulses instead of cereals sometimes. Unlike the 'Chappan' however nobody died during the 'Control', I am told in response to my ill-informed question about this period. I am completely unable to place it chronologically, nor able to fathom why there is so much anger and vehemence about it.

A closer reading of administrative reports of the three states concerned reveals, that 'control' refers to the wartime rationing imposed on the states during the Second World War. Bapulal Malwiya, erstwhile Congress MLA and MP from the area, and prominent member of the balahi caste in Malwa confirms this. The rationing was supposed to deal with shortage and ensure that the Malwa states, which were said to be suffering from a grain shortfall would have enough to feed even the poorest in the region. Then why were those who were supposed to benefit from the programme not appreciative? The answer lay in the complete mismanagement

⁴³. Interviews in Barandwa, 10 December 1994, Balahi and Bagri mohallas, (Lachmanji, Ratanbai)

of the rationing process, and the fact that direct and sudden official intervention in people's lives is always resented. Rationing seems to have started in the states from about August 1942. In Indore the suggestion was originally made by the Rajya Praja Mandal. The plan there was to issue 1/2 seer of cereal for all those over 12 years of age, and 1/4 seer for those below. The rationed issue of grain channelised through government shops, the only stores from where grain and other essential items like sugar, gur, kerosene and so on could be purchased. Already in early 1942, state control over procurement, distribution and supply seems to have grown, with definite efforts being made to curb free trade. In Dewas (Junior Branch) essential foodgrains were rigorously procured from the peasant and sold initially at controlled prices by authorised merchants, who were replaced by government shops.⁴⁴ The rates of wheat and jowar sold in these shops varied according to the annual income of the consumer. The government shops were often miles away from villages, and all consumers in small *kasbas* and villages were issued coupons on which they had to get the signature of the rationing official every month. Then there were the crowds at the shops, which were understaffed and understocked. All in all, getting food and other necessities meant that people would have to waste at least

⁴⁴. Administrative Report of Dewas State Junior Branch, 1942-43, p.87. Other information about the control is derived from Indore Rajya Praja Mandal Papers, (MSS, NMML), File No. 8, Indore Rajya Anaj Parishad, 1944, 1947.

one or two days, which for labouring people like balahis, also meant the loss of wages. By this time wages were entirely paid in cash and for them the only source of getting grain were these shops. The grain that was supplied in these shops was often rotten and Praja Mandal pamphlets denouncing the faulty implementation of the Control policies spoke about how the government did not have enough space in which to store the procured grain, causing it to be piled out in the open for months. They also speak of people having to eat pulses instead of cereals, and how the quota fixed for each adult and child were utterly insufficient for those who ate only the cereal quota without having the means of supplementing it, while doing hard labour in the fields all day (the class to which most of the Mandal's own members belonged becomes clear from the demand that the amount of sugar and gur issued to people be delinked from the income bracket of the consumer). Nonetheless the mandal did take up the cause of the labourer in this campaign, as well as that of the cultivator who it was said was often left with less than his subsistence requirement. It also objected to the grain surplus zones, (from which large amounts were imported into Malwa), making a profit out of Malwa's scarcity, and to their sending damp and spoilt grain. Moreover it called for efforts to stop the active black market in essential goods that had come into existence. The black marketing had been made possible by the state policy of making cheap grain available in urban areas irrespective of the grain prices in

the villages. These unrealistically low prices allowed the urban moneyed traders to buy up quantities of grain (many ways and means were contrived to evade the rationing limit- and much of this hoarding occurred in the initial stages of the 'Control' prior to the implementation of rationing). This grain was often sent across the borders of the Holkar state, the Mandal complained.

What caused this sudden shortage in grain production? Perhaps one reason why the 'Control' was resented by people, apart from the obvious one of the bureaucratic red-tape and inconvenience involved, was that there was no obvious and dramatically poor harvest that led to it. The possible actual shortfall was combined with the factors of requisitioning on account of defence requirements and then the Bengal famine in 1943, both causes to which the Malwa states contributed generously. This kind of 'Control' continued in Malwa at least till 1944, and remained etched on peoples' minds even fifty years later.

WORK AND LIVELIHOOD

WEAVING

Weaving was only a secondary occupation for balahis, and in many villages like Devli and Kanthdi, people had stopped practising it even at the time of the famine. Weaving required an entire supporting network to supply raw

materials and marketing of the product produced that may not have been available. Lack of accessibility to cotton in a region where only moderate amounts of it are produced in a few pockets, could also be an important reason for abandoning this part time occupation. The coming up of a number of cotton mills in Ujjain and Indore in the 1930s (for instance, Hira, Vinod, Hukumchand and Kalyan mills) also led many weavers to abandon their work and turn to full time agricultural labour. Some balahis from weaving areas got absorbed as mill workers.⁴⁵ Many ginning factories, like the ruined one which can be seen today at Jhonkar, had been set fairly early at both state and private initiative. These were established close to sources of cotton- trade routes or areas of cotton production, often in kasbas or large villages, unlike the mills that came up later in the big cities. Due to various reasons cotton production in the area dwindled in the '40s and villages like Jhonkar receded in importance as proximity to the railway line and the Agra-Bombay road caused nearby Maksi to rise in importance. Nimar, in the south became the main centre of cotton production. Even the big mills are closing down today- due

⁴⁵. Interview with Shamlal ba of village Pipalya Talai, distt. Ujjain, 15.12.94. He told me that many balahis from his village had got jobs in the Hira Mill before the 'Control' period. Also, interview with Sitalal Jain (age 52, Maksi, 8.12.94), Lachmanji Delamya (age 50, Barandwa, 10.12.94), Salokibai (age 85, Dudhlai, 15.12.94). Sitalal's and Lachmanji's fathers used to weave, while Salokibai's father in law's father was called 'Bunkar ba' in the village and used to weave. She is probably referring here to a period prior to the famine.

to labour trouble and other problems similar to the ones that afflict many Bombay mills.

Writing of Nimari balahis in the 1940s, Stephen Fuchs noted that, "The Balahis weave a coarse type of cloth... In recent times weaving this type of cloth is no longer profitable and the balahis have to find out other employment either as field servants or in towns as labourers".⁴⁶ Even those balahis who did weave in the 1940s, mainly wove cloth for '*pagris*' and '*safas*', or at the most the *joda* (a pair of clothes, the upper and the lower garment). Fifty year old residents of Barandwa recall the existence of pit-looms and charkhas in their houses in their childhood. But none of this continued beyond the 1960s. Most didn't have the capital to buy small power looms and make a transition to full time weaving. Around this time, when some balahis were being ousted from a part time profession, "...the political situation in Central India improved and consequently more land was taken into cultivation by immigrants who moved in great numbers" (it is not clear from where). "Thus a great demand for agricultural labourers was created, conveniently met by unemployed balahis. Undoubtedly, at this time they could also have acquired land for cultivation at cheap rates but their low social status must have prevented many from aspiring to the respected position of cultivators...".⁴⁷

⁴⁶ . Fuchs, 1981, pp.180-181.

⁴⁷ . Fuchs, 1950, p.372.

The claim of several Kabirpanthi mahants, that balahis are somehow primordially or naturally inclined toward the panth because they were weavers and shared an occupational affinity with Kabir has worked fairly successfully as a mobilising strategy. For weaving is certainly considered to be more prestigious than the actual traditional balahi occupation. It would not have been difficult to make balahis accept the idea of a more 'respectable' original occupation. The average balahi's familiarity with Kabir's sayings and teachings, whether he/she is a member of the panth or not, is quite astounding. It could only be partly explained by the common occupation of weaving, especially because despite attempts of Kabirpanthi mahants, for balahis, their identity as weavers is still not very strongly developed. The relatively widespread adoption of the panth is a recent phenomenon and in many areas where it has spread, the balahis do not have any memory or history of weaving. It is possible that it was the areas where balahis used to weave that first adopted the sayings and the *bani* of Kabir and then it spread to non weaving areas through the caste network and other channels. However this point is entirely at the level of conjecture.

AGRICULTURAL LABOUR, AND THE FACTORY EXPERIENCE

It is in agricultural labour that the maximum number of balahis are engaged. Breaking up the undifferentiated

category of agricultural labourer one must remember the vast number of occupations subsumed under this category by census enumerators. And a large number of these activities are in turn performed by women, even among the relatively well to do families, as and when required and available. Most balahis even though labourers are often landholders as well. The scale of landholding is limited and very often both women and men from families that own land, need to supplement their earning with casual labour, particularly at harvest time, more specifically, during the harvest of the cash crop soya bean, when the wages are much higher. Even though irrigation is coming in and in villages like Barandwa many balahi families have their own pumpsets, the rains in the kuar month are still crucial for the kharif.

We've had no jowar this year, for the kuar rains failed completely. We actually had to buy jowar from the market - the crop produced on our own land was not enough to fill a small *thaili*. We have much more wheat these days, of course, and the young people mostly prefer to eat wheat! But I am too old to change my ways now - my stomach just doesn't get filled with wheat rotis. This is Bheraba village chaukidar, Barandwa, in 1994, Vikram Samvat 2051, almost a century after the year when the failure of these rains caused the disastrous famine. Bheraba's face bears the imprint of the nearly 90 years spent outdoors, nowadays, just grazing villagers' cattle, for he is too old to till the soil. He scoffs at the idea of retiring and sitting at home as his son tells him to. He is illiterate but has a vast repertoire of Kabir bhajans which he remembers perfectly and sings to the tune of his ektara occasionally in

the evenings, when people ask him to. He also steadfastly resists efforts by zealous village Kabirpanthis to convert him to the panth - he laughs them off once again by pleading that he is too old to mend his ways.⁴⁸

There could be several reasons why the failure of rains in 1994 was far less disastrous, as compared to a similar failure about a century ago. Two important ones are better irrigation and the availability of a new wonder crop. The first has ensured far more extensive wheat cultivation, and the second has given people a successful cash crop that grows with very little water and labour input. This crop is the soya bean. Today, big signboards outside Dewas proclaim it as the 'Soya City' of the country. Though introduced here in the 1970s it was in the '80s that it was actively promoted and has quite literally found favourable soil here. It competes with jowar and other crops in the kharif season. The decrease in area under jowar is glaringly evident in recent years,⁴⁹ hence Bheraba's lament. But his too is not an unqualified regret - for the cash crop has brought in a

48. Interview with Bheraba, Barandwa, 1.12.94. His regret about the jowar crop is shared by many, and Gangabai, of the same mohalla (interview on 11.12.94) puts it well, "Jwar mata (goddess) is angry with us", which is why, she feels, less jowar is growing each year.

49. Between 1949-50 and 1986-87, the area under jowar in India has gone down by 13.5 %. The production of soya bean in the same period has shot up in the same period. While it was not sown on even 1 lakh hectares in the 1950s, it was grown on 13.1 lakh hectares in '86-'87, and increase of 3666.7%. M.P accounts for 14.4 % of the nation's oilseed production and also takes the lead in the production of soya bean. Source : pp. 380 and 364, Techno Economic Research in India, 1990 (TERI), Agricultural Statistical Compendium, Volume I (Foodgrains), Part I.

measure of prosperity to all landowners, in which category many balahis can today be included. Linked to economic changes consequent to the introduction of soya bean are inevitable dietary changes. Old men's food preferences can't hold out against the overwhelming economic logic of growing the more lucrative crop.

THE NEW CASH CROP

Among the agricultural labourers - part-time or full-time, balahi or chamar there is unanimity on one point. That life has changed significantly since soyabean was introduced in Malwa as a cash crop. For the landowning cultivator, the state policy to encourage the cultivation of this crop, has meant much higher levels of prosperity. It replaces primarily groundnut, and increasingly jowar as a kharif crop. It demands short intense spells of concentrated labour input, particularly at harvest time. Labour requirement at harvest time is extremely high and agricultural labourers get paid as much as Rs.50 per day. But not much effort is required for the crop throughout the year. On the other hand groundnut that was by and large taken over by soya, used to require a steady labour input throughout the year. For the agricultural labourer, though the harvest time wages were not very high, a steady income was ensured through the season. Moreover after the groundnut was harvested the landowners allowed everyone to have free access to the field

to dig out any leftover groundnuts, which people did right through the winter.

The general feeling among the agricultural labourers, many of them balahis, was that the high earnings that soyabean gave them generally got spent on liquor and feasts, and few if any, managed to save any of it.⁵⁰

While even landowning balahis agree that the new cash crop is detrimental to the interests of the agricultural labourers, nobody is demanding its outright rejection. Meanwhile the economic position of the community is steadily improving. Apart from external signs of prosperity, and an increased ownership of land, an indication of this can be seen in the gifts that balahis today can give to their *bhats*. These range from fairly large sums of money to cycles and motor cycles. Even after accounting for the escalation in costs, this is much more, surely than the meal and Rs.10 that used to be given to them in the 1960s.

INDEBTEDNESS

British authorities and commentators writing more than 40 odd years ago and balahi caste leaders and Kabirpanthi mahants agree upon the 'spendthrift' nature of the balahi as a 'caste'. Yet obviously today there is a section of the caste itself (the above mentioned leadership) which

⁵⁰. Interviews at Barandwa, Luniya Khedi (Ujjain district), Devli (Dewas district), November-December 1994.

recognises these tendencies as detrimental to the interests of social and economic mobility. Balahis spend on 'nuktas'- feasts given to the community on certain occasions, and 'mrityubhoj' - (a feast given after the death of a family member). They spend on weddings - on the brideprice and feeding the guests primarily. Loans are taken from both big landlords and professional moneylenders. In semi urban settlements such as Jhonkar (Dangi informed) there were traders and shopowners who functioned as moneylenders. Big landlords who did give loans were paid back through the system of permanent or fixed labour from the debtors, called 'mahinadari'. The earliest reference to this system dates back at least to the famine of 1899 (by Ratanbai of Barandwa) and it possibly existed much earlier as well. Fuchs mentions a very similar arrangement encountered in his field work in the 1940s. This was the "permanent farm labour" that, according to him, balahis hate to do, preferring instead casual labour that did not "tie them down". Perhaps an explanation for this reluctance would be the total exploitation that the landlord could subject the labourer to.

Fuchs writes that for financial reasons balahis were often forced to accept the 'occasional service' (since they repaid debts through these means). He notes in his work on the balahis of Nimar that the permanent farm servant does both field work and odd jobs in the house and stables of the

employer, feeds cattle, gets the agricultural implements ready, makes repairs, allows bullocks to graze while he cuts grass for the cows and buffaloes, and so on. In Nimar the balahi could not be used by high caste farmers to milk cows or fetch water for the household. In the hot season the farm servant was sent early for ploughing and harrowing and was also required to watch and guard the crops. Women were not employed as full time farm servants.

All these conditions hold true for the Malwa 'mahinadar'. He is paid a fixed amount - today about 400 rupees at the beginning of the month. Thus the daily wages paid to the mahinadar work out to barely Rs. 16, approximately Rs. 12 below the stipulated minimum daily wage. A thousand rupee loan would entail such employment for a year. During this period the mahinadar's services would also be utilised to do different kinds of work that would not normally be achieved through hired labour. His wife and children are free to do casual work - in fact they have to take it on for the amount hardly suffices to feed and clothe a family. With irrigation facilities the mahinadar's responsibilities (and work!) has grown as valuable pumpsets have to be guarded all night by the permanent servant. And as wheat fields, that have to be irrigated several times, take over erstwhile jowar land, as irrigated land is able to support the more thirsty crop, the mahinadar's work increases manifold. Little wonder then that this kind of

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permanent work was shirked by balahis in Nimar. On the other hand the *mahinadar* in this arrangement is sure of employment through the year, which is more than most casual labourers can hope to get. The completely landless peasant might actually prefer this kind of employment, since he would not have any land to fall back upon. 'Permanency' was lent to the tasks by the 'debt bondage' nature of the tie between the employer and the employee, that effectively required the latter to be virtually at the beck and call of the employer. Today the word '*naukri*' (literally 'service', normally refers to a 'job') itself means *mahinadari*, hence my initial surprise when mothers would shake their heads sadly while saying that their sons were just doing '*naukri*'.⁵¹ But changing times can be actually noticed in the fact that several landlords today also give loans simply upon the guarantee that they would eventually be paid back and the debtor would definitely work for him during the harvest of the soya bean crop. Behind this mystifying generosity, lies the peculiar nature of the labour requirement of this crop—about two weeks of intensive labour input to harvest it, or else the pods burst scattering the beans all over the ground. The catch here is that in case the debtor, say, a middle peasant like Lachmanji also grows some soyabean, he cannot harvest his own crop and has to depend upon family labour.

⁵¹. Ibid. Particularly the interview with Lachmanji, Barandwa, 10.12.94.

The princely states in the area also gave loans and cancelled agricultural debts of cultivators in years of poor harvest. In the year 1944-45 the Moneylenders Act was passed by the ruler of Dewas (Junior Branch) to "prevent money lenders from taking undue advantage of the ignorance of cultivators in the future."⁵² What is fairly remarkable is the fact that very few balahis mention indebtedness as a singular cause of misery, possibly because it is so widespread and omnipresent. Things do not appear to have changed very much from the time of Fuchs' complete denunciation of the balahi- "His whole economic system is based upon credit, he simply borrows everything".⁵³

With mahinadari what the rich peasant, or often, the upper caste moneylender, gains, is fixed labour for which he also pays much less than what he would have had to pay for temporary labour. The earlier convenient arrangement (of making lower castes do *begar* whenever any work had to be done) has gone or at any rate loosened a lot, (and scheduled castes became aware of this by the 1960s or so, mahinadars are often a boon to their employers.

WOMEN: WORK AND LIFE

A significant proportion of the labouring force of the balahis are women. Perhaps this is one reason for the

⁵². Administrative Report, Dewas State, Junior Branch, 1944-45, p. 29.

⁵³. Fuchs, Stephen, 1950, p. 129.

overwhelming prevalence of bride-price, for when a girl is sent away to her in-laws after marriage and 'gauna', her parental family loses and the husband's family gains an extra hand. Women's work, includes virtually every aspect of field work except the actual ploughing. From planting the seed, manuring, de-weeding, to work closer home i.e, cleaning the cowsheds etc. all this is traditionally done by women. Whereas today the levelling aspect of poverty and preferential legislation has ensured that thakur women also have to do field work, but they still do not at any cost sell their labour i.e, work on other's fields.

Though clearly there is no taboo on balahi women working in fields, a few sections of the community do not consider this to be very desirable. But this feeling is not very widely shared. While women do casual labour on a daily basis, they cannot enter into *mahinadari* contracts or other kinds of permanent employment.⁵⁴ As the caste consolidates itself economically and politically, one change that is rapidly taking place is the increasing tendency to take, and give dowry. Even though bride-price remains the dominant form of economic exchange at marriages, most well-to-do balahi families appear to be somewhat ashamed of it, and do not admit to this custom freely. This tendency also prevails among socially prominent families that come in contact with other castes. Another custom that still continues but is a

⁵⁴. Interviews on 23.11.94 and 27.11.94 at Jhonkar and Barandwa.

cause of obvious 'shame' for balahis interested in rising in the social hierarchy, is that of widow remarriage, or *natra*, a form of marriage to which little stigma is attached in traditional balahi society. The custom of *natra* is present among several lower castes and even among a sub-caste of the rajputs, (who rank lower in hierarchy than others). In this form, the wedding takes place (among balahis) in the dead of the night and the ceremony is brief and simple. The bride is brought to her husband's house the same day.

To the women, urban life with its attendant luxuries like kerosene stoves and running water, and no need to do field work seems much more attractive. Family members who have gone to cities and towns to work, even in minor factory jobs are envied. Urban women too count themselves lucky. It is the balahi men in the cities who complain of the constraints of city life and reminisce about the village. While retaining the caution that small towns to which balahi men move for work are hardly 'liberated' spaces for the women in any sense, they are far removed from the bound and fixed village society, deeply resistant to any change with regard to its womenfolk, judgemental of 'forward' women who complain about their lot. If nostalgia, as Patricia Waugh⁵⁵ writes, is the desire to recover the past as Paradise, then

⁵⁵. Waugh, Patricia, *Statements ? : Feminists, Postmodernists, and Unfinished Issues in modern Aesthetic*, pp 341-360, from Waugh and Arnold ed. *Modern Literary Theory - A Reader*, (Hodder Headline, UK, 1992).

this past also has to be an 'ideal' one. For the balahi woman, the modernity of an urban centre is more desirable than the past left behind in the village. While balahi men might be nostalgic about life in the village, not even one of them were nostalgic about the past, when untouchability was rife and the balahi completely disenfranchised. Waugh's comment is applicable in their case as well. This situation throws up the way in which the caste identity of the balahis is in some sense broken by gendered perception of a common experience. Yet in this case the fracture recedes in the background when the balahis collectively look upon the past very differently from the rajputs for instance, who wistfully recall the days when all other villagers were at their beck and call.

The fact also is that very few balahis live in urban areas- census statistics bear this out.⁵⁶ Even those who today have government jobs in urban offices or teach in city schools, choose to stay in their villages and commute, or at the very least maintain very close links with their village. Balahis also feel that they are close to the soil and since agricultural work is what they know adequately, they feel secure in the village. It is also a pragmatic choice, for the need to contribute to the family work (almost uniformly agricultural) necessarily means that they continue to stay

⁵⁶. In Ujjain district, for instance, while 34% of all chamars stay in towns, only about 14.56% of balahis are town dwellers, SC-ST tables, Census of India 1981, Series II, Part IX (i).

in the village. They also feel that they have little option but to stay there on account of not having any traditional skill (unlike chamars) that would help them succeed in the city. From villages like Sindani and Jhonkar some balahi men do work in nearby factories- mainly processing agricultural produce like sugarcane and soya bean. Some of the factories particularly those closer to Dewas produce industrial equipment and chemicals, e.g, the beta naptha factory, two other chemical factories, machine part producing factories like Gajra Gears in Dewas etc. These were set up in an attempt to build up the Dewas area as an industrial zone, promoted also by the fact that the region benefits from 'backward area' advantages (land and facilities at concessional rates). Some of the factories where Jhonkar men used to work have shut down due to labour trouble. Most of the workers from the balahi mohalla are unskilled though two of the 10000 strong village's three skilled workers are also balahi.⁵⁷ Owing to the nature of industrialization in the area, with factories established in the rural areas as well, it is possible for the balahis to continue to stay in the villages and work in factories. Incomes from these sources are hardly adequate (except for the skilled worker) and have to be supplemented by casual labour by womenfolk. But the importance of the factories as an alternative source of

57. Interview on 27.11.94 with Punalal Devra in the balahi mohalla at Jhonkar, one of the skilled workers who works at the Betanaptha factory. Another factory where many from here are employed is the Tristar Soya Factory.

income, close to their villages, does give many lower castes a better bargaining position vis a vis landed upper castes who might decide to deny employment to 'conscious' balahis.

I wonder why suddenly everyone is reading me a tale of woe and misery, this afternoon at Jhonkar. Today I'm meeting the factory workers as they return from their 'shift' at 3:00 pm. Their life seems to be completely deprived, and Leelabai, a very vocal woman in the group is endorsing this emphatically. Leelabai's husband and brother are both factory workers and the discussion is taking place in her house. The house with an electric fan and a television appears to be much more prosperous than many others I've seen here. We have just 10 bighas of land and no source of irrigation, she says. Perhaps I could get her a sewing machine from the city, so that she could supplement their income without going out to labour in the fields. I finally catch on to what is happening- they have mistaken me for some sort of a bountiful 'social worker'. This must account for all the recounted tragedies. This is the first place where this kind of an expectation has been actually vocalized, though I have sensed its presence elsewhere too. In their inability to comprehend or accept my reason for being there, they have slotted me as some kind of a welfare officer! After this incident I clarify my status very carefully with all the people I speak to. Government official, BSP propagandist, Christian missionary - I have been mistaken for all three. And in all these cases, the nature of the interaction with the villagers has been one of them making some request for material goods which they require. This is a sad but true reflection on their interaction with the different categories of city people. It is always the slightly better educated, the better off, those aware of the 'goodies' that officials and preachers, both the

religious and political varieties, are able to bestow, who articulate these requests.

Does that mean that everyone I've talked to so has been tailoring their answers in the expectation that I will be able to assist them in some way? Then is everything that I've been told so far, entirely 'untrue'? Fortunately, I have not yet talked to too many people - wiser now, I resolve to be more careful.⁵⁸

THE OTHERS : CHAMARS, MEHTARS, AND BAGRIS

Both in the past and today, the bagris and the chamars have been the two largest scheduled caste groups in this part of Malwa, after the balahis. The bagri normally stay a little outside the village and have a reputation as a wild, immoral 'bunch of thieves'. A bagri woman in Barandwa described her own caste group as 'bandar ki jaat' (a caste of monkeys), one which is never afraid of anyone, not even the upper castes.⁵⁹ Hunting is, till date, an important occupation of the bagris and many of them have guns which they have inherited from their grandfathers. And they happened to possess guns because they were often appointed village *chaukidars* by the patel. The rajputs seemed quite scared of this semi-tribal group and preferred to make peace with them. Many balahis added bitterly that no one could ever force the fierce bagris to do *begar*. Today many bagris,

⁵⁸. Interview at Jhonkar, Balahi mohalla, on 29.11.94.

⁵⁹. Interview with Geetabai and her daughters, Bagri Mohalla, Barandwa, 10.12.94.

traditionally hunters, makers of cane baskets, thieves or watchmen, rearers of goats, are also becoming part time cultivators. A few have also turned to the Radhaswami panth though the move has not really become popular amongst them. Compared to the balahis, who consider the bagris untouchable, the bagris have fewer people who have the potential to or are actually taking the role of caste leaders.⁶⁰

One bagri couple which is playing an important political and social role in Dewas are Reshambai and her husband Girdhari Lal. (When I went to Dewas in 1994, Reshambai won the ward elections on a BJP ticket from Radhaganj where a large bagri *basti* is located). They have adopted the surname 'Yadav' as some other bagris have also done and consider themselves to be fallen kshatriyas. Reshambai and her husband stay in the bagri mohalla at the foothills of the *tekri* and are practising kabirpanthis. But the leadership of their caste is not a task that they take up consciously. They say that it is very difficult to unite the bagri who are extremely independent and also do not have the kind of shared memory of caste exploitation (as balahis do) that could act as a cementing factor among them.

Other rural scheduled caste communities like the mehtars and the chamars have been much more mobile and have

⁶⁰. Interview with Reshambai Yadav, Bagri Mohalla, Dewas, 13.12.94.

been moving to the cities. Some balahis (as mentioned earlier) feel disadvantaged because of the lack of a special skill. Unlike the chamars who had a tradition of leather working and the mehtars who could earn their living much more profitably in cities, the balahis could not 'automatically' benefit from the opportunities offered by the city. For most of them weaving is not a viable option. Those for whom it could have been one, started working in the mills when they were set up in the '30s and '40s.

While it is true that mehtars are by and large migrating to the cities where municipalities provide avenues for employment albeit in the category of sweepers, the chamars, contrary to the impression held by a lot of balahis are not in any enviable position.

Some of them did get employment when the Tata leather factory was set up near Dewas about 15 years ago (it was later shut down and relocated on the Indore road). Most of them feel that their traditional work has been taken over by big factories like the Tatas, and others in distant towns. Making shoes and curing leather is no longer at all profitable, for nobody wants to buy or wear handmade shoes when the factory made ones have a better finish, cost less and are available in fashionable designs. A sizable section of chamars lives in Dewas town. They appear to have

REV. 1

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REV. 1

successfully made the transition to city life.⁶¹ Some of them, those who live in the 'nayi abaadi' area, have come from outside, mainly Gwalior and Shivpuri, some '60 or 70 years ago. Their parents had probably been bonded agricultural labourers. Theirs appears to have been a flight across the entire territory of the Gwalior state, into the area of a neighbouring king, the Dewas maharaj (senior branch). The latter gave them this plot of land to settle in. The colony is right in the middle of modern Dewas and built on land that was formerly a graveyard.⁶² The colony in Dewas where the local chamar community is settled is called Rewabagh. Originally a settlement of about 50 houses, today there are 250 houses of the community in this area. Almost none of the people here practise the traditional occupation. Most have government jobs or small private businesses.

I have walked into the large chamar mohalla of Jhonkar. It comprises about 65 houses. Balahis consider chamars inferior to them and therefore untouchable. For the rest of society (mentioned earlier) the two are forever paired together - mainly through their joint rights over the meat of all animals that died in the village (this is what Fuchs writes but it is not borne out by the written evidence in the revenue records. Chamars are much more directly concerned with leather working and were traditionally expected to make shoes for the patel and his family with the skin of all dead animals. Well, it seems like I have

⁶¹. Interviews and observations at Mochi Mohalla, Dewas, 6.12.94 and 7.12.94.

⁶². Interview with Bhagirath Saheb, Mochi Mohalla, Nayi Abaadi, Dewas, 7.12.94.

come at the wrong time. Most mohalla residents, daily wagers, have gone to work in the fields and those women who do not do agricultural work are out collecting grass for fodder which they will sell in the village at 2 or 3 rupees per headload. Only old women and some young mothers sit in their courtyards. My arrival stirs up the usual curiosity. Some of them come out of their houses to find out who I am. They are examining my appearance with more than normal curiosity. I feel extremely uncomfortable. Then an old woman comes closer, points a finger at my shoes and asks me where I'd got them from. A bit mystified I reply, Delhi. Perhaps I should explain that I was wearing the kind of shoes traditionally worn by men in Rajasthan. My interrogator bends down and suddenly pulls one shoe off my foot, and begins to examine it closely. I'm left wearing one shoe, standing under the noonday sun, feeling more than a little foolish! Fortunately their subsequent query clarifies matters. How come I, clearly a city person, was wearing these shoes, shoes that even people in the villages had given up wearing. Then I hear the whole story - since 'lylon' shoes - plastic shoes, 'boots' worn by almost all villagers - became popular about 15 years ago (from about 1980) their business of shoe making has come almost to a standstill. Even they themselves have started wearing plastic as have their children - for it is convenient and most importantly, inexpensive. Only the old men continue to wear the old shoes, like the one that I am wearing, more out of habit than loyalty. These shoes, called *panni* locally, cost at least Rs. 40 or 50 to make (in Delhi since all things ethnic, from cowbells to khadi are undergoing a fashion revival, the cheapest pair would be sold at about Rs. 100). 'Nylon' meanwhile costs about Rs.15 per pair.

seem to have been actively encouraged by the Dewas state and there are today a number of *akharas* in Dewas itself that were constructed in the 1930s and 1940s. Bapulal Malwiya says that he practised his *pehelwani* even in Gwalior state areas, but describes how caste taboos operated here as well, and he would have to lie about his caste in order to wrestle. He finally had to open his own *akhara*. Radheshyam *pehelwan* regrets the unfortunate trends in *pehelwani* today. Only hoodlums are *pehelwans* now, whereas earlier the *pehelwan* was the protector of the community. Interestingly he mentions that there were Muslims among his *pehelwan* friends and many of them (even non Muslims) were non-vegetarians.

The *pehelwani* tradition in Dewas fed into a nationalist agenda, many wrestlers becoming Congress workers.⁶⁴ However the same activity fed into the agenda of the RSS, which has one of the oldest bases here. Local youth could be incorporated into the RSS by involvement in such collective activity. The 'purer', specifically Hindu type of wrestling received state patronage in Dewas. This was associated with vegetarianism among the wrestlers, and the worship of *hanuman* and *bharatmata*.

⁶⁴. The Congress incorporated the *akhara* into its programme in the 1920s and in UP too, a number of Congress run *akharas* came up at this time. Re: Freitag, Sandria, *Collective Action and Community*, OUP, Delhi, 1990, p.234. *Akharas* also were a site of collective mobilisation. Both Hindus and Muslims were members of *akharas*, that could be combined or exclusive. It lent itself easily to both nationalist and communal agendas. pp. 121, 122, 134.

Politically, balahis are today a force to be reckoned with. One person who has been only consistently representing this area in the assembly and parliament is Bapulal Malwiya, who started his career as a *pehelwan* in Sonkatch.

My father was a forest guard and my mother used to do *mazdoori* so that we could study. I studied in Ujjain. I used to stay in the Jaal Boarding House, run by a Parsi gentleman, Jaal sahab. It was a hostel for harijan students. My teachers were Date sahab, Sharma sahab... all of them, as well as Jaal sahab, were part of the freedom movement. We used to be part of the *prabhaat pheris* and picketing programmes that were undertaken. My teachers gave direction to my life and I came into politics under the guidance of these political people. I passed my matric and intermediate examinations, and then decided to join politics full-time. I went back to Sonkatch and launched a temple-entry programme in 1936-37. Before the harijans entered the temple I gave them soap and told them to wash up well. No one should say that harijans are dirty. After entering the shrine and offering prayers, we went to the 'hotel' and had tea, and then to the barber and demanded hair-cuts and shaves. We had to face a lot of opposition, people even got out their guns to face us when we went to fill water from the village well...⁶⁵

Malwiya then extended these programmes against untouchability all over Malwa. He stood for elections for the first time in 1956 when the states of Madhya Bharat and Madhya Pradesh merged together to form the largest state in the country. He was a Congress MLA for 25 years, then state

⁶⁵. Interview with Bapulal Malwiya, Dewas, 23.12.94.

minister for 3 years (1982, '83 and '84). In 1985 he became MP and remained so till 1989. Then he was denied a Lok Sabha ticket in the next elections due to faction fighting within the Congress.

I was the one who wrested the Sonkatch seat for the Congress for the first time. It was a general seat for a long time, unlike the Dewas and Bagli reserved seats, and for 20 years after independence, it remained under the monopoly of Jan Sangh. And yet there was no recognition within the party for a person who had devoted his whole life to politics and to the party.⁶⁶

He insists that his opponents were in cahoots with the upper castes who did not want a balahi to 'come up' in the world and wield so much power, and become popular. As far as members from his own caste were concerned they supported him wholeheartedly. It is only now that some people are beginning to turn away - in the sense that they are joining other parties like the BSP and even the BJP, he adds. But by and large the community continues to vote for the Congress. Malwiya seems to bear a strong sense of injury towards his party today. What is significant is his conviction that almost all political competitors and opponents are opposing him on grounds of his caste.⁶⁷

Apart from Bapulal Malwiya, Radhakrishna Malwiya is another person who won assembly elections from the area on a

⁶⁶. Ibid.

⁶⁷. Ibid.

Congress ticket and is at present a Rajya Sabha member. Politically the savarnas clash strongly with the scheduled castes in the area because of conflicting party loyalties.⁶⁸ For the area with its Maratha ruling stratum is a strong base of the RSS and the Jan Sangh and subsequently the BJP. The shrine of Dewas now bears the legend - 'Bajrang Dal welcomes you'- on top of it. The last scion of the royal family of Dewas (Senior Branch), Tukoji Rao Pawar won the last assembly elections and is the current MLA. He won on a BJP ticket. In an interesting aside, voters from *Mochi Mohalla*, Dewas, otherwise looking upon the Congress and Indira Gandhi as their 'mai-baap', and in recent years, turning also toward Kanshi Ram and Mayawati, voted for Tukoji Rao this time. The reason, according to them was simple - they were just repaying the two generation old debt-burden of the plot of land given by Tukoji's grandfather for them to settle in.⁶⁹

STATE POLICIES

While on the subject of the ruling family itself, it has been mentioned that the tiny state was divided into two sections down the middle of the town by the Agra-Bombay road and ruled by two different rulers belonging to the Senior

⁶⁸. Interview with Narayan ba, sarpanch, Barandwa (10.12.94), Mahant Ambaram, Mochi Mohalla (7.12.94), Bapulal Malwiya (23.12.94).

⁶⁹. Interview with mahant Ambaram and Bhagirath saheb, Mochi mohalla, Dewas, on 7.12.94.

and the Junior branch. The Junior Branch died out after independence and today the only palace that is inhabited is the old palace belonging to the Senior Branch, with its long unkempt driveway, broken down outhouses, and mullioned windows with several panes cracked. Krishnaji and Tukoji Pawar stay in one section of this palace. Fifty years ago the two states appear to have had fairly different policies. The chief policy behind the rule of the Senior Branch of the family is articulated in 1935 in a message from the maharaja, then at London, "The trend of politics in this part of the hemisphere is gradually showing that democracy has failed and that too miserably. Benevolent despotism or the oriental patriarchal form of government with necessary additions and alterations is in the majority of cases proving itself to be the best form of rule".⁷⁰ The benevolence in this case, however does not extend overtly to the harijans nor is there any strong espousal of the Congress or the Gandhian cause. It is the Junior Branch ruler of the 1930s whom lower caste citizens of Dewas remember fondly as Khase Rao Saheb sixty years later. Khase Rao Pawar was a strong Gandhian. After coming to the throne in 1934 he was "keen to give powers and responsibilities to

⁷⁰. Puar Sarkar Gazette, Dewas State Senior Branch, 1935, pp.1-3, Maharaja's message to the subjects, in a letter dated 21.9.35.

all his subjects" in a state where public agitation for reforms was "practically nil".⁷¹

Apart from actively encouraging the spread of education among the harijans, starting night schools and reserving seats he was a staunch advocate of khadi.⁷² Moreover the tradition of pehelwani in the area must have undergone a revival at his time because of the active encouragement given in the state to "physical culture" among village school boys and the rural population. Wrestling tournaments were routinely organised under his patronage and training instructors employed. Apart from issuing regular official declarations that all men were born equal, harijan dinners were held every year where the maharaja and his family would dine with them. Harijan conferences were organised with state assistance. In fact "a special man (was) employed for Harijan propaganda. He tours villages, visits their localities, he preaches to them to remove untouchability first among themselves, to live neat and clean and above all to give up vices. Attempts are also made to remove their

⁷¹. Dewas State Junior Branch, Administration Annual 1941, ed. Ramchandra B. Dube, p.2

⁷². Interview with Bapulal Malwiya, 23.12.94, Dewas. Also p.6, Administration Annual (ibid.) : 204 harijan students were enrolled in middle and primary schools between 1934 and 1940. Also p.11, "locally made khadi cloth should be used as far as possible by various depths and also by sardars and officers of the state...". A Khadi Bhandar was opened in Dewas Town and a weavers' association was formed in Sarangpur, the source of the finest weaves in the area.

poverty".⁷³ Though official reports do not mention the name of this harijan welfare officer it is quite possible that he was Sakharam, whose name was mentioned by Bapulal Malwiya, as the person who coordinated these activities for the state.

The Holkar and the Gwalior states did not have any policies of this nature. For the Gwalior State, with its capital at Lashkar in modern Gwalior town, the Malwa Prant was at one extreme end of its territory and as Bapulal Malwiya remarked, the state, particularly the rural areas had hardly any scheduled caste students in the schools. Khase Rao of Dewas was truly exceptional, he added.

In the Gwalior state's administrative reports and the Gazette published weekly, one finds little evidence of liberal policies towards the scheduled castes.⁷⁴ However the state did set up agricultural research institutes, experimented with seeds and new technology. The tour reports of the maharaja are mainly concerned about the state of agriculture, its productivity and yields. In areas like Bhind, untouchability upliftment programmes were undertaken but the state did not play any active part in these activities. After the second World War some rural reconstruction work was taken up - some small scale

⁷³ . Ibid., pp.32-33.

⁷⁴ . Administrative Reports, Gwalior State, 1931 to 1944, and the Gazette of Gwalior State, Lashkar Press, Gwalior, 1931-44 (M.P. State Archives).

industries were set up with weightage given to harijans in recruitment. Drinking water facilities were to be made available to them.⁷⁵ Thus some steps were taken for the welfare of the scheduled castes though these were not remotely like the personal crusade undertaken by Khase Rao. The Holkar state seems to have been quite bereft of such motivations, though Ambalal Malwiya had stressed that Yashwant Rao Holkar's father had had a liberal attitude in these matters and stressed the need to appoint harijans to important posts.⁷⁶ Such royal impulses do not seem to have been recorded in the administrative reports and gazettes put out by the state. From the files that I was able to look through in the Madhya Pradesh State Archives, the Holkar state seems to be more interested in framing stringent laws to 'control' the populace, with a very powerful judicial and police establishment.

The Dewas state (Junior Branch) stood out in yet another way. From about 1939 it seems to have conferred heritable rights over plots of land carved out from its own land to people in villages across the state.⁷⁷ Among those who were granted land were a large number of balahis as

75. The state agreed to proposals of the Gwalior Rajya Sarvjanik Sabha to hold its 24th annual convention and undertake Gandhian programmes like khadi and abolition of untouchability. (Gwalior Govt. Home Deptt. Police Sec., B Class, 28.5.42, Samvat 1998, File no. 5+11, Basta no. 27/46).

76. Interview with Ambalal Malwiya, Kanthdi, 16.12.94

77. Dewas Sarkar Gazettes (Junior Branch), 1939-1945.

well. Khase Rao also seems to have been very fond of bhajans. A mandatory aspect of all the tours and inspections he went on was the bhajan session with which he was greeted everywhere. A popular and pre-existing tradition of bhajan singing, and particularly *nirguni* bhajans, appears to have got some encouragement from this.⁷⁸

Perhaps these state policies and the spread of Gandhian ideas in the countryside account for the still dominant use of the word 'Harijan', and for the popular perception that things had changed ever since Mahatma Gandhi 'made things better for the Harijans'.⁷⁹ It could be pointed out that much of the territory under survey was not in the Dewas state. However similar ideas prevail across the region indicating that political frontiers cannot stop the movement of ideas among a culturally homogenous group.

It is developments in the realm of ideas and consciousness, and their complex relationship with the material developments outlined here that will be discussed in the next chapter.

⁷⁸. The 1936 Dewas Sarkar Gazette abounds with examples of both the popularity of bhajan singing as well as royal encouragement to the tradition. For instance, while the Maharaja went on a tour of northern Dewas, he was greeted with bhajans in village Sunwani Gopal (gazette of 13 April, 1936, p.2 to 4); when he returned, the gazette of 11 May, 1936 notes bhajans were sung in greeting in Dewas and the *mandali* compensated.

⁷⁹. This was the refrain in every village - that things improved tremendously for the balahis since Mahatma Gandhi's age. As voters too, balahis vote overwhelmingly in favour of the Congress. The BSP, which is very active in this area, has not been able to make any significant inroads in this community.

Chapter Three

IDEOLOGIES AND CONSOLIDATION: SECT AND CASTE

Village Dudhlai is in Ujjain district, about 2 km from the Maksi Ujjain road. This road in turn branches off from the Agra Bombay road, (National Highway 3) at the 'naka' or level crossing just before entering Maksi town if one is going from the Dewas side. I meet Lachmanji¹ at the 'naka' and we proceed towards the village. We are mainly walking through bare fields that have just been cleared of the kharif crop. We stop on the way at the house of one of the other guests who, like us, is also going for the 'chauka'² programme at Dudhlai village. After much loud exchanging of 'sahebs' (the standard Kabirpanthi greeting), we meet other local luminaries of the panth. There is 'phalahari baba', who was in the army earlier. He has been living on fruits alone for the last ten years. Then I meet 55 year old Sheetalbai, also balahi like the baba, originally a native of Maksi. She is his 'sevika', who 'serves' him all day and stays next to his house and ashram. Both she and her husband have become converts and serve the guru devotedly. This service could include virtually anything, I'm told with a snigger, by one of the men here. The two of them got initiated at the Kabirpanthi gathering at the Kumbh Mela, only "10-12 years ago". However their family has been living 'cleanly' for a long time - from "just two years after the Control period". Then, there is Shankardas 'Tyagi', who has given up the pleasures of 'worldly life', hence the name 'tyagi' (meaning, 'one who has renounced') that he has adopted. He also claims to be utterly devoted to the panth and to Kabir Saheb. He is deeply

¹ . Introduced on p. (v), preface

² . Kabirpanthi ritual, described later in the chapter.

suspicious of me, I can sense that immediately. Unfortunately, I am with Lachmanji here. Lachmanji's skepticism of the increasing ritualism within the panth, and his association with Eklavya which shares these views, is well known. For all these people whose authority depends upon the aura bestowed by their control of these rituals, he, and now I, are threats.

And then I meet the mahant Parbatdas (of Bhaisakhedi) who is going to perform the central Kabirpanthi ritual of 'chauka aarti'. He is dressed like all the others in a not-too-clean white dhoti and kurta. A bidi dangles from his hand and he is laughing loudly, revealing pan-stained yellow teeth. Later in the evening, when he sits in the chauka, (a square area marked out with four poles and several yards of white cloth that defines the site where the ritual is performed), dons the 'taaj'(a conical cap of the kind Kabir is supposed to have worn) and the 'shaili'(a black necklace), he will become Kabir for the observers. He will then grant the wishes of those who are organising the aarti programme today. Our host, I learn, is Atmaram 'Mistri', balahi like all the other Kabirpanthis in the gathering. He is a 'sutar' by profession now, who lives in Indore with his 'modern' second wife who is a Nimari balahi. She is tall, slim and beautiful, in keeping with the reputation of Nimari balahi women. His first wife is a simple village woman who lives in the family house in the village with her mother-in-law, Ambaram's mother, Salokibai.

Our little entourage starts walking towards the village. 'Tyagi' falls in step with me - and then begins interrogating me. He is unbelieving when I tell him why I am here. Then, in classic Kabirpanthi fashion he starts asking me formula questions about the ideological content of the panth. These are phrased in certain set ways and

concern difficult and odd sounding concepts- 'ingla', 'pingla', 'susmana' etc., which, at that time I had just about heard of. I insist upon my ignorance- 'Tyagi' is derisive, and persists in baiting me. Lachmanji comes to my rescue when I have begun to feel fairly miserable. He seems to know all the answers. I realise that he knows quite a lot about the panth. Suddenly I understand how complex the cult of Kabir is, how difficult it is to penetrate the harsh language and understand the nature of its 'bhakti'. But how many people in the villages understand all these things? What is it that ties them to these gurus? To what extent are the gurus 'true' carriers of the panth?³

Although all estimates suggest that only about 15% of all balahis in this belt in Malwa are actual converts to the Kabirpanth, almost all know the perfect Kabir *doha* to suit every occasion. Since estimates are all one has to go on, they also suggest that about 90% of all the Kabirpanthis in the area are balahis.⁴ Though Kabir himself lived in the 14th-15th centuries in Benares, his cult was questionably started by his disciples (some would argue by Kabir himself; from most accounts there were four leading disciples of Kabir- Surati Gopal, Dharmdas, Jagudas, and Bhagudas who founded the branches of the panth in four different areas). One of the disciples, a wealthy trader from Bandhavgarh later became the founder of the Chattisgarh branch of the

³. Based on interviews at Dudhlai (Ujjain district) and Maksi (Shajapur district), 15. 12. 94

⁴. Information based on interviews in villages Barandwa, Jhonkar, Soochai, Kanthdi, Devli, Renail, Tonk Khurd, Sindani etc., July-December, 1994.

panth, after adopting the name Dharmdas.⁵ It was his son, named (supposedly by Kabir) Churamani nam Saheb, who was proclaimed the first mahant or acharya of the panth. He shifted the seat of the panth from Bandhavgarh to Kudurmali in Chattisgarh. Apparently it had been prophesied, by Kabir himself, that descendants of Dharmdas would lead the panth for 42 generations. The seat of this branch today is in Damakhera, a village roughly 50 km from Raipur. The chief difference between this branch and the one at Benares, Kabir's birthplace, lies in the latter's staunch espousal of celibacy and a monastic order.⁶ Lorenzen points out that "members of the Kabir Chaura sakha on the average come from castes of somewhat higher status than those of the Chattisgarh sakha".⁷ It is the Chattisgarh branch which has gained strength in Malwa in the 1980s and 1990s. The Kabir bhajans that are sung in the area are also largely influenced by verses generated by the Dharmdas branch, and these have been sung here for many generations.⁸ But there also could have been other causes that were responsible for the popularity of Kabir's poetry. This kind of Kabir bhakti in Malwa is possibly a part of the 'western' tradition of

5. Dwivedi, Kedarnath, Kabir aur Kabirpanth, Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, Prayag, 1965.

6. Ibid., pp.169-174. Also interviews with mahant Narottamdas, Dewas, 17.12.94.

7. Lorenzen, David, article 'Kabir Panth and Social Protest', p.291, in Schomer and McLeod ed., The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1987.

8. Interviews with Lachmanji Delamya and Bheraba, Barandwa, Nov-Dec 1994.

the panth, represented by written collections of Kabir's verses in the 'Adi Granth Sahib', compiled in 1604 under the 5th Sikh guru in the Punjab, and the 'Panch vani', teachings of 5 *nirguni* sants, compiled by the disciples of the sant Dadu Dayal probably late in the 17th century.⁹ These differ from the harsh and hard hitting Kabir of the 'eastern' tradition¹⁰ and are marked by a surfeit of devotion, 'bhakti' in the sense that we understand it today. The verses in these collections contain many more obvious singing devices than the eastern collection. *Bhajan mandalis* in villages here sing Kabir's *bhajans* converting the original 'Sadhukkadi' dialect (mixed dialect used by many sants in the area at the time; Kabir's 'sadhukkadi' is however strongly influenced by Awadhi) into Malwi. In Malwa the popular Kabir tradition has been retained primarily by the singers and some others, all of whom belong to one community. This community, that has thus inherited Kabir is the scheduled caste group called balahis.

Most villages tend to have at least one Kabir *mandali*, and the members usually, are all balahis. There are other

⁹. Hess, Linda, Three Kabir Collections, pp.111-141, in Schomer and McLeod ed., The Sants, (Berkeley, 1983). The two western collections are much more closely related to each other than either is to the eastern collection. The latter is the 'Bijak' compiled by Kabir's disciples and popular in Benaras; it is considered to be the most authoritative source of the 'real' Kabir.

¹⁰. This is popular in the area around Banaras in UP. It is represented by the written compilation of Kabir's verses made by his disciples, the 'Bijak'. It has been considered to be the most 'authentic' and 'original' collection/source of Kabir's couplets and poetry.

singing groups in the villages as well. Some of these are nathpanthi mandalis which sing 'nirguni' bhajans but have a partiality for songs by Gorakhnath. Some of the singers and groups are also followers of the 'mai panth', a mother goddess cult indulging in what is referred to in hushed tones as 'raat ka kaam' (literally, work of the night). This primarily involves drinking and sacrificing goats to appease the deity, and giving meat offerings to the goddess and then eating it as 'prasad'. Central to this cult are also the collective singing sessions in which Kabir bhajans as well as others dedicated to 'Bheruji'¹¹ and other deities are sung. Maipanthi mandalis are differentiated from Kabirpanthi ones also by their instruments, for they play the large cymbals, *khanjari*, while Kabirpanthis traditionally played the *ektara* and the minuce cymbals, *manjira*. Many balahi Kabir singers like Bheraba,¹² have a very large repertoire of Kabir bhajans, which they then sing to the sound of the *ektara*, and increasingly nowadays, the *peti*, or harmonium.

The religion of the balahis of Malwa (despite attempts of the Kabirpanthi mahants) remains overwhelmingly centred on Bheru maharaj and the 'mata' whose hunger for goats is acute. Kabir is accepted as one of the gods in their pantheon. Though there are more formal Kabirpanthis (i.e,

¹¹. Bheru is a ferocious aspect of the god Shiva. He is supposed to have both fair and dark sides. His most important function is to 'make prosper those who acknowledge his power (op.cit., Mayer, 1960, pp.188-193).

¹². Earlier mentioned, re: p.51, Chapter 2.

initiated members of the panth rather than just knowledgeable about Kabir's life and teachings), than there were 40 years ago, what Fuchs wrote of the Nimar balahis, by and large holds true for their Malwi caste-brethren forty years later. He wrote, "...the balahis' religion is of 'shakti' not 'bhakti'". Kabir is "not worshipped by the balahis, no offerings are made in his name. His influence is enormous and his widely popular songs...are quoted by low and high in all contingencies of life. They quote Kabir freely and frequently whenever practical life seems to demand a closer following of Hinduism". However he also notes that "the Balahis regard him (Kabir) as the spiritual leader (mahaguru) of their caste, and believe that Bhagwan assumed the body of Kabir to teach mankind the right principles of life...The great mass of Balahis...practise the ordinary Hindu religion though one and all profess to be adherents of Kabir".¹³ The situation here in Malwa today differs only to the extent that Kabir is worshipped more formally by at least the group of Kabirpanthis among the balahis, but they do not abandon the rest of the pantheon to do this.

The coexistence of all these 'equal' deities shows how little the 'nirguni' aspect of Kabir bhakti is comprehended by the common balahi. It would however be incorrect to say that nirguni and satirical poems are not amenable to transmission by singing. Many songs with such themes are

¹³. Fuchs, 1950, pp. 233-234.

sung in Malwa, and "constitute a large portion of the western collections". To aid comprehension "they were sometimes 'devotionalized', especially in the opening and closing lines".¹⁴ And at some level while singing Kabir's songs, recounting his life or quoting a pithy 'doha' while speaking of caste oppression in the village, there also seems to be a sense of identification with Kabir as one among them. For his devotees in Malwa today, whether panth members or not, Kabir occupies this peculiar position, a special niche within the mainstream pantheon.

A brief random survey of the bhajans that are sung in the area today would demonstrate how Kabir is at the same time similar to, as well as unique among the other deities worshipped by balahis.

The explicit critique of caste ridden society is so clear that it would not be possible for the singer to sing it mechanically without at least comprehending its powerful social message. (example: "Katu vachan Kabir ke...")- rough translation below...

Kabir's words are harsh
Hear them and they burn you
The calm listens rapt
The ignorant fool gets burnt.
(TEK)- refrain:
Men of both creeds, they are butchers
Hindu kills the goat brutally

¹⁴. Hess, in Schomer and McLeod, 1983, p.118..

And Musalman the cock;
 With flourish of knife they slit the throat
 Make rivers of blood flow.
 Hindu doesn't let you touch the pot
 If you do he picks a fight
 If he finds a whore he sleeps with her
 Where did his Hindu-ness go?
 I've seen the Hindu's Hinduness
 and Turkishness of Turk
 They know not the worth of Allah-Ram
 The oaths they swear are false.
 The Brahmin wears a thick sacred thread
 But does not let the brahmani
 So she is Sudra for centuries
 But he eats the food she serves!
 On the banks of a river a pig lay dead
 And the fish devoured it;
 And then the Turk ate that same fish
 Where did his Turkishness go?
 Musalmans and pirs Auliya¹⁵
 They all propogated their faiths
 Says Kabir, Hear this man
 They celebrate together at home!¹⁶

This verse is present in some form the eastern collection (Bijak), but the singers have mixed together stanzas of different verses to formulate their own bhajan. Similar mixes can be seen in other bhajans, in which the poets lash out against excessive ritualism, untouchability,

¹⁵ .Pirs here, refer to Sufis, members of a sect that had revolted against orthodox Islam. By the time of Kabir, they had become part of the establishment themselves.

¹⁶ . 'Avadhu, dono deen kasai...' (translation-self and Ramya Sreenivasan), 'Kabira soi peer hai, jo jaane par peer- Kabir bhajano ka sankalan', 2nd edn., p.27, Eklavya, Dewas, 1992.

religious divisions, and stress that the Supreme Being does not have a caste or religion and dwells within each individual.

The musk is in its navel¹⁷
And the deer seeks in the forest
As Ram dwells in each one
And the world does not know it.

Where dwells the immortal one
Where else is heaven, my brother?¹⁸...

Other verses that clearly speak out against sacrifices, implicitly sanctioning vegetarianism, and against idol worship, also form a part of the balahi bhajan singer's repertoire.

This is the wisdom of the world
Like a flock of sheep-
As one falls in the ditch
All the rest go the same way.

Why do you forget your land, madwoman-
O why do you forget your land.

The gardener's wife forgets and breaks off a leaf
Every leaf is alive
She offers the broken leaf to the god
But that god is lifeless.

¹⁷ .The word used is 'kundali'- literally, 'navel'; but believed in some schools of Yoga to be the centre of human beings existence; carries metaphysical significance that heart does in the English language.

¹⁸ .This is an excerpt of a bhajan (Kasturi kundali base...)in the same compilation cited above ('Kabira soi...', p.10, Dewas 1992), also heard in bhajan session in Maksi at a workshop organised by Eklavya, October, 1993.

The branch is Brahma, the leaf Vishnu
The flower is Shankar Dev.
You pluck the flower and offer to the god
That god is lifeless.

With clay they make the goddess Gauri¹⁹
Men and wives offer worship
Holding her leg they throw her in the water,
Where is her might now.

Bhopas²⁰ are called from various lands,
Taken around from house to house.
He breaks the coconut and offers the shell,
And eats its flesh himself;
'Kheer' is made of rice and milk,
He offers the god the kheer
A dog urinates on the god
And a squirrel eats up the 'kheer'.

When the father's alive, you throw shoes at him
When he dies you take him to the Ganga
When he was hungry, you denied him food
Now you see him in the crow.²¹

You pray for children to Bheru and Bhawani
And offer the head of a goat
Says Kabir, listen, good man,
Do not sacrifice another's son.²²

¹⁹ .Clay figurines of goddess 'Parvati' made during the Gangaur festival, popular in western India.

²⁰ .Priests supposed to be representative of the deity of the Gangaur festival.

²¹ .The crows which come to eat the rice balls offered to ancestors during funeral and memorial rites in Hinduism are believed to be the spirits of ancestors.

Other verses paint a vision of a caste-less society but stress the importance of an improved lifestyle and behaviour in order to be accepted among the community of 'wise ones', of 'true converts', not merely those who change their ways superficially.

There is a land of swans
Where there is no caste
But if the crow can't give up its ways,
How can it become a swan.

You get nothing brother,
by adopting just another name.²³

Some verses seem to be of indigenous Malwi manufacture and others are attributed to Dharmdas. Bhajans are being written and sung till today. In this corpus therefore attempt to identify and separate out 'authentic' Kabir verses would be a futile exercise. Some verses like the one below are clearly not spoken by Kabir but composed by some devotee from Gujarat.

Heli²⁴ mine, flowering youth has put a black stain
on my heart;
Heli mine, you don the guise of a dancing woman
And swing and sway from house to house;
Heli mine, visit Garh Patan,²⁵ where the Saheb²⁶

²² . Ibid., 3rd edn., p.3, (Aisi mati sansar ki...); also bhajan session, Dewas, 2.7.94, also in Barandwa, 1.12.94.

²³ . Ibid., p.33, (Nam se milya na koi...); also bhajan session, Dewas, 2.7.94.

²⁴ . Heli- friend (feminine gender); also carries sense of 'Hel', optimism, excitement, hope.

²⁵ . Town in Gujarat.

Has set up his market fair;
Heli mine, the wise one goes to trade there,
The worldly one²⁷ squanders all;
Heli mine, Bhawaninath²⁸ said, the saint is mad.²⁹

This kind of bhajan is very commonly sung and is generically called 'Heli', and all 'Heli' songs seem to include references to 'Garh Patan'.

The origins of other bhajans are more difficult to identify. In some songs devotees have mentioned the name of their own immediate guru, the mahant in the area. In others they have incorporated their own names in the bhajans. For instance the name of Bhawaninath, incorporated in the last bhajan could refer to the composer of the bhajan or his guru. In another song words like 'kamaan' (cannon), 'sipahi' (soldier), 'topi' (cap), 'danka' (bugle), 'bandook' (gun), 'goli' (bullet), 'fauj' (army) are used continuously, that the composer knew of these and the audience was able to understand these terms.³⁰

²⁶ .Normally, Kabir, or the guru.

²⁷ .The Malwi/Kabirpanthi 'sugra' describes one who has the Word, the one who has been initiated:

²⁸ .Bhawaninath could be the name of the composer or even the name of the 'guru' of the composer. The metaphor of trading and market indicates that the intended audience was familiar with such activity, or perhaps the composer was from a similar background (point made later in the text).

²⁹ . 'Heli, mhari badhti jawani...', in unpublished collection compiled by Eklavya, from personal notebook of Ramprasad Golwatya (for ICHR project on Kabirpanth). Similar 'heli' also sung by Tipaniyajji, Luniyakhedi, December, 1994.

³⁰ .Ibid.

Compared to the padas of the Benares Kabir, the bhajans of the Malwi Kabir (or should one say balahi Kabir) seem to be conceptually simpler, and easier to comprehend. The upside down language of Kabir in some of the eastern 'padas' requires a deep understanding of the metaphorical allusions in the poetry. As Linda Hess writes, their "satire is more pervasive and unmitigated".³¹ Metaphors like "a barren woman's son born without a father", "climbing a tree without feet", "seed without sprout", or even "a lamp without a flame and flame without a lamp" are strung together, with a cryptic line ("if you have the knowledge, you will become aware; Kabir clings to Hari").³²

This kind of language is used in Malwi songs, but the meaning is always clarified and explained at the end of the song. For instance, in a bhajan with a list of such 'upside-down' metaphors, like 'the boat sinks and the stone floats', 'the mother plays on the son's lap', 'the goat sells rich meat', 'dogs steal and the thieves are hungry', is a line that clinches the verse, 'This is the Brahman's topsy turvy knowledge'.³³

The corpus of Malwi bhajans includes a fairly large number which if sung independently, seem to be generally

³¹ . Hess, 1983, p.117

³² . Kabir Granthavali, compiled and edited by Shyamsundar Das, p.105, Nagari Pracharini Sabha, Varanasi, Samvat 2045.

³³ . From Ramprasad Golwatya's personal notebook, compiled by Eklavya, op.cit.

praying for peace and prosperity, for the community and the 'guru'.

Come, O friend, sing for the well-being of the guru

Sing of the well-being of the guru

Understand the message of the guru.³⁴

The song later goes on to speak of the preparation done for a *chauka*, the piles of clove and betel nut gathered, the *chauka* area itself prepared for the 'aarti', and so on. With a mixture of sandal, sugar and saffron the singers sing about putting the auspicious mark upon the forehead of the guru.

In actual fact, as Lachmanji explained in Dudhlai, these songs are meant to accompany the rituals of the Kabirpanth (mainly the *chauka-aarti*), like prayers and songs that accompany most Hindu rituals, and today, with the panth's active proselytisation, the younger people are learning these songs more than the others.

The other songs are openly critical of the social structure, and compared with the compiled *Bijak*, they are explicit, less abstract, not overly insistent upon internal self examination or exploring personal morality. To reiterate a point made earlier, their most noticeable characteristic is that they seem to be almost brimming over with *bhakti*. There is a "dramatization of the relation

³⁴. Ibid., 'Chalo ri...', also heard at Dudhlai *chauka aarti*, 15.12.94.

between the devotee and God; fervent prayers to the personalized God, who has the power to save as opposed to the devotee, who is powerless; and emphasis on typical saguna themes like viraha and darshan"³⁵.

It is this familiarity with Kabir among the balahis that has been utilised by the mahants (authorised preachers of the Kabirpanth) to actively proselytise among them.

They stress upon the centrality of Kabir by focussing the entire Creation myth around him. One kind of venue where views of this kind can be communicated to potential converts is a *chauka-aarti* programme³⁶ where the audience is dazzled by the grandeur and omnipotence of the guru and of Kabir. The mahants constantly attempt to convert the Kabir-bhajan loving (*bhajanandi*) but meat-eating and liquor consuming balahis into a community that adhered to the basic tenets of the panth as well. These primarily include vegetarianism and abstinence from liquor and other vices. These mahants share a firm belief in the incarnation of Kabir in different forms in the four eras- *Satya, Dwapar, Treta* and *Kalyug*. In the

³⁵. Hess, in Schomer and McLeod, 1983, p.133.

³⁶. This is the main ritual of the panth performed at births, marriages, deaths and other auspicious occasions. The *chauka* is square space created with poles and cloth, with the top covered. It is specially prepared for the ceremony. A seat is prepared for the mahant and so is the 'pan-parwana', the betel-leaf offered to each initiate. *Chauka* programmes are accompanied by initiation of new members into the panth. This is a fairly solemn procedure by the end of which the initiate hears the 'mantra' (the 'name', 'word') and gets a necklace of wooden beads, the 'kanthi', to indicate his altered status. The ceremony is accompanied throughout by bhajans, and is followed by a feast.

last era he was incarnated as Kabir.³⁷ This close identification of Kabir with the kalyug, his reputation as a deity who lends an ear to the poor and the lowly, makes the kalyug the age of the lower castes and classes, an age when their 'saviour' would possibly be able to ameliorate their oppression. The classic era of decline in Puranic chronology, therefore becomes an age of hope and deliverance for the balahis, as with many other scheduled castes.³⁸

To find out more about the Chattisgarhi Kabirpanth to which most influential mahants in Malwa belonged, I went to the headquarters of the panth located in Raipur district in the eastern end of Madhya Pradesh.

Village Damakhera, near Raipur, Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh. It is long way from the narrow stretch in Malwa where I have seen a fairly sudden spread of the Kabirpanth, among the members of one caste from about 1980. The branch of the panth that is spreading rapidly among many upwardly mobile balahis in Malwa is based here, in Chattisgarh. Why is this branch alone becoming more popular? It is to find out more about this that I have come here on a hot and muggy mid-May afternoon. At Damakhera, renamed Dharamnagar by

³⁷. Interviews with Parbatdas, Dudhlai, 15.12. 94; Radheshyam pehelwan, and mahant Narottamdas, 7.12.94.

³⁸. The word 'kalyug' was broken up in a novel manner by a young balahi teacher in Sindani (see preface) as 'kala+yug', the age of art and skill, not of status determined by birth. This links up with efforts on the part of prominent members of the caste and even groups like the one the teacher was part of, to make the balahis part of the mainstream, encourage them to acquire skills and set up businesses. The 'low birth' of the balahis seems, to these people like an easy hurdle to cross in this age when skill and merit were the only valid bases to earn merit.

Kabirpanthis, a few extra tea-shops are all that indicate that the village has a 'special status'. The bus-stand (where the bus rarely stops) is also rendered somewhat 'special', by the installation of a large multicoloured and life-size seated statue of Raidas, donated by a devotee who belonged to the Sahu community. But the *math* itself, about 2 km from the main road, (approached by a dirt track) lives up to the expectations I have built up on the basis of the accounts given by Malwi devotees. There are numerous *dharamshalas* on the way to the math. Most are closed at this time for there is no large fair or festival entailing a large influx of people in these months. Two brand new cars (purchased out of the private funds of the mahant, I am told) are parked outside. The math is a large three storied structure. Opposite its gate is the 'samadhi'- an enclosed courtyard with a covered area at one end. The gate has the year '1977' engraved upon it. I later learn that though the larger structure was built up in 1977, it was only in 1992 that the building was extended and lined with marble. In this covered area, the ashes of the gurus who had their seat at Damakhera (three generations before the present acharya) are interred. Damakhera is the only '*vansh gadi*' in the Kabirpanth- it is the only one in which the gurus are householders. Each of the wives of the past acharyas (and almost each had more than one) like the acharyas themselves, has a marble slab to herself. There are depictions of Kabir and other gurus on the walls of the courtyard and devotees are offering coconuts to these images, and before the marble slabs. I get a number of strange looks because I am not bowing double before each image, not offering anything to them. Here in the shrine made of marble, with its cleanliness, the quiet church-like atmosphere, the well behaved and polite devotees- the Kabirpanth

of Chattisgarh seems to have truly 'arrived', in every sense of the word.³⁹

There is some controversy over the origin of the Kabirpanth. One group of historians and litterateurs believe that Kabir himself was opposed to the multiplicity of sects and cults in medieval society and could not therefore have started one himself.⁴⁰ His followers might have thus organized the panth around his teachings. Others including the official historian of the Damakhera math insist upon the 'authenticity' of the panth in that it was founded by Kabir himself and his lead disciple was Dharmdas, the originator of the panth in Chattisgarh.⁴¹

The credit of organising and consolidating the sect, laying down its rules, norms and also compiling the 'Bijak' (according to some) goes to a large extent to Dharmdas. The official history claims that Kabir came to Dharmdas's home

³⁹. Observations at Damakhera, Raipur district, M.P, 27 May, 1996.

⁴⁰. There is some controversy regarding Kabir's and Dharmdas's dates. K.N Dwivedi places Kabir's lifespan between 1368 and 1448 AD. Charlotte Vaudeville (p.55, A Weaver named Kabir, OUP, Delhi, 1993) argues for 1398-1448. Official histories of Damakhera (eg, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Kabir panth ka udbhav evam prasar, Raipur, 1994) claim that Dharmdas was born in 1394, got initiated by Kabir in 1463, and started compiling the 'Bijak' in 1464. His second son was born in 1481. In 1483, Dharmdas was granted permission to preach from Kabir. He died in 1512. In 1513 Dharmdas's second born son was invested by Kabir as 'acharya' of the Kabirpanth. Thus they claim that Kabir lived at least upto 1513 AD. K.N Dwivedi however, claims that Dharmdas lived in the early 17th century, and never met Kabir (this claim is made on the basis of a fairly convincing study of the texts of the Kabirpanth - op.cit., Dwivedi, pp.159-163)

⁴¹. Prasad, Dr. Rajendra, Kabir Panth ka Udbhav evam Prasar, pp.1-3, 2nd edn., Gita Printing Press, Raipur, 1994. Prasad is the official historian of the Damakhera branch of Kabirpanth.

town of Bandhavgarh (to the north of Chattisgarh) when he was called there by his disciple in the early 16th century. And prophesied that Dharmdas would have the credit and the responsibility of spreading Kabir's message. His family, Kabir is said to have predicted, would be the leaders (mahants/acharyas) of the panth for 42 generations. His son Churamani, was invested by Kabir with the title of 'mahant' and thus became the first acharya of the panth in Chattisgarh. He was given the name Muktamaninam, and the suffix 'saheb' was attached to his name, as per the 'Kabirpanthi' tradition. The other disciples set up their branches of the panth in their own regions. The Chattisgarh branch, having got the sanction from Kabir, was destined to remain the only 'householder' or 'vansh' branch, as opposed to Banaras (Kashi), where the followers and preachers have to take a vow of celibacy⁴² (mentioned earlier).

Dharmdas also laid down the rules and rituals which today form the central plank of the panth. The main ritual as observed earlier, was called the '*chauka-aarti*'. The main purpose of the ritual, however, was to initiate more people into the panth, a basic necessity for its existence and continuation⁴³.

Prakashmuninam saheb, the current acharya of the 'vansh gadi' is the 16th descendant of Dharmdas,

⁴². Dwivedi, K.N, 1965, pp.169-175.

⁴³. Gold, Daniel, The Lord as Guru: Hindi Sants in the Northern Indian Tradition, p.96, OUP, New York, 1987.

and the 15th acharya of the Kabirpanth of Chattisgarh. This lineage, this 'vansh parampara' has not gone unchallenged, he says. Even my father's succession was challenged by some discontented disciples who wished to turn this 'bindu' ('point' or 'seed') tradition of the sect- i.e, succession by birth, into a 'naad' (sound, word) tradition- i.e, succession to the position of acharya by formal initiation, not blood ties. This has been the main point over which other branches like Burhanpur, Nandiya, and Kharsiya have broken away. The other related point of disagreement has been on whether to maintain celibacy or continue the householder tradition. So today there are many 'maths' in Chattisgarh, and also other parts of Madhya Pradesh but they all accept the ultimate leadership of Damakhera, the vansh gadi, or at any rate, accept it as the oldest math. All members of the organized steering committee in charge of math affairs (the 'Sadguru Kabir Dharmdas Saheb Vanshavali Pratinidhi Sabha, regd. trust) have an equally imperialistic attitude towards other 'maths'- and also other panths. For instance, when I speak of the Satnampanth, (a sect with a largely lower caste membership) in Chattisgarh, its founder Ghasidas is coopted as the dissenting younger brother of a Kabirpanthi acharya in the early 1800s.

The house where Prakashmuninam today lives was renovated and extended by his father when he was born in 1967. About 40 or 50 men eat at all mealtimes- the lowest that this figure goes down to is 30, as it is on the first day that I go there. Prakashmuni himself is tall dark and well-built, a youth with longish hair dressed in an impeccable white kurta pajama. The walls of his city (Raipur) residence are covered with rather startling, large photographs of him dressed in dark glasses, and colourful cap and clothes. He claims not to have had any formal training in

Kabirpanthi texts- nor any formal education for the matter. He never 'prepares' for any of the 'pravachans' (religious discourses) he gives. He does not "even know what he is speaking about" (what about his audience, I wonder!). This ability is being put across as a special gift that he has as a guru. The mahant's lack of preparation is repeatedly mentioned by others at the math, and again at his house in Raipur by his 'sevak' (and general dogsbody!) Chintamandas. While I sit with him at the math, a number of people come in and bend over to touch his feet three times in the traditional 'bandagi' (greeting) posture. They offer him coconuts and some money.⁴⁴ People have come from distant villages and are grateful to have got his 'darshan'. Because, for about two weeks every month he remains on 'tour', visiting 'sevaks' and maintaining contacts.

Damakhera became the seat of the panth in the late 19th century (in the 1880s). Ugranam saheb, the twelfth acharya established it when his succession was questioned. The earliest mahants, immediate successors of Mukhtamaninam saheb, were roving sants. actively preaching all the time, trying to establish the new born panth. It was these early gurus who by their 'roving' succeeded in their task even though they did not set up any grand 'math'. They did

⁴⁴. The coconut has a special significance in the Kabirpanth. Offered to the guru and broken by him, it comes to represent the created being in many dimensions. "The roundness of the coconut apparently can at once recall the *brahmand*, the finite Universe; the human body which the Kabirpanthis call *pind* - a ball, most obviously the human head. The head is the seat of the *Niranjan* as Kabirpanthis often call the (negative) principle of the 'mind', conceived of as 'demigod'. Thus according to Dwivedi, when the guru breaks the coconut he at once 'releases the soul from the bonds of ... *pind*, *brahmand* and *Niranjan*", Dwivedi, op.cit., p.204, cited in Gold, 1987, op.cit., p.94.

establish one or the other base or seat in their lifetimes- the first acharya chose to set up his ashram in Kudurmāl (Chattisgarh), then subsequently Ratanpur, Mandla, Dhamdha, Singhori, Kawardha, and finally Damakhera became the seat of the panth. Poor communication, thick forests, and mountainous tracts must have obstructed the attempts of the sants to spread the message of the panth much beyond Chattisgarh. But within this region the panth first propagated in the 17th century by Dharmdas has a fairly large following, among several backward cultivating castes and one scheduled caste.⁴⁵ Among the distant places where the panth reached was Gujarat, mainly Sangrampura in Surat district- where early local mahants seem to have acquired the authorisation to preach from the acharya in the early years of the 18th century.⁴⁶ In fact, whether the acharya travelled from Chattisgarh to Gujarat or local aspirant preachers from Gujarat went to Chattisgarh, they would have had to pass through Malwa. Perhaps popular familiarity with Kabir's teaching in Malwa can be dated to the 18th century.

⁴⁵. The backward castes that have largely converted to Kabirpanth in Chattisgarh are the sahus (a teli, oil-pressers' caste in the area), with about 5 lakh Kabirpanthis; the kurmis, mainly in the Singhori area, about 1 lakh Kabirpanthis; the gabhels, mainly in Raigarh and Bilaspur areas, about 1 lakh Kabirpanthis. The scheduled caste that has largely converted to the Kabirpanth are the Manikpuri Panikas; about 2-3 lakh Kabirpanthis. (Estimates supplied by the Damakhera math).

⁴⁶. Dwivedi, K.N, 1965, p.171. These are the earliest 'panjas' or authorisation letters that can be found. There seems to have been a regular flow of mahants from the same village in Gujarat, to get panjas. The earliest evidence of a panja being given was to the mahant Shobhadas, in Samvat 1752, i.e 1695 AD.

Some acharyas like Pramodguru Balapir, the fourth acharya, from whose time the earliest extant preaching authorisations (called "panja") can be found, made extra efforts to spread the message of the panth. He is reputed to have kept speedy 'Kabuli' horses expressly for purposes of propaganda.⁴⁷

But the practice of touring actively and keeping in touch with as many converts as possible was started by the fourteenth guru, Grandhmuninam saheb, who succeeded to the 'gadi' in 1938. This practice gave the converts less scope to 'get spoilt' ('bigad jaanaa'), i.e, revert to old ways. This straightforward policing activity is the only way by which in many places, reversal to status quo ante can be avoided. This strategy shows the hallmark of a fine brain and acute managerial skills. Combined with burgeoning communication technology, and better means of transport it is hardly surprising that the panth has been becoming more popular, judging from the numbers that throng to hear the guru's *pravachans*.⁴⁸ All these changes started about 15 years ago when better and more accessible technology made frequent communication with disciples possible.

Even more than his father (Grandhmuninam), Prakashmuni preaches in a common everyday language that everybody can understand. The guru's reach is far greater today. He can easily summon '*sevaks*' to the math if he needs to.

⁴⁷. Rajendra Prasad, 1994, p. 16.

⁴⁸. Interview with Prakashmuninam Saheb, Damakhera, 27.5.96.

Inventions like the microphone also enable him to, quite literally, make himself more widely heard. *Pravachans* (religious discourses) were also an innovation started with his father Grandhmuninam. Their main advantage is that they enable the acharya to reach out to very large numbers at once. Mass meetings also generate a lot of feeling and emotion, specifically towards the guru himself. People chant slogans in his favour and there are near stampedes when all present try to touch his feet.⁴⁹

Pravachans are both audio and videotaped- and sometimes specifically recorded in a studio. These cassettes are then distributed for 'promotion' at '*melas*', and special stalls are set up at other compatible gatherings. The acharya himself and a leading member of the *math* committee refused to admit that these tapes are made by the *math* employees upon instruction. They insisted that 'people' had made these recordings out of their own '*shraddha*' (piety), and paid out of their own pockets. They tried to show that the panth and the mahant were above such worldly matters as 'promotion' of the panth. However this attempt did not amount to much when the person in-charge of videotaping for propaganda purposes admitted that the promotional work and expenses of the panth had gone up considerably in recent years.⁵⁰

⁴⁹. From '*pravachan*' video cassette of the '*Sant Samagam*' at Durg, 26.12.95, addressed by Prakashmuni.

⁵⁰. Interview with Bhawani Singh and Prakashmuni, Damakhera, 28.5.96.

Another attempt at organising and uniting the panth under the leadership of Damakhera can be seen in the order issued by the guru that local mahants or preachers should go periodically to Damakhera to renew their licences to preach. Though as Kedarnath Dwivedi points out, 'panjas' are meant to be renewed every three years,⁵¹ it is not a rule that has been strictly enforced in the past. Now all mahants, including the ones from Malwa, are re-tested on their knowledge of the panth when they come to renew their licences. This test as well as the initial one primarily test the preacher's knowledge of the ritual chauka-aarti, not their understanding of the Bijak or Kabir's teachings and philosophy or even Dharmdas's work.⁵²

The centralisation process that is going on is working at two levels- 1) the tours of the acharya to check the slide of the converts back into their old ways; and 2) the renewal of allegiance of the mahants and ensuring that they continue to regard Damakhera as their chief centre. Video and audiotapes and a vast number of publications merely aid this process. The thrust of these efforts is directed towards control of the form of the panth, its rituals and taboos. Local preachers are left more or less free to hold pravachans and interpret Kabir's teachings as they wish.

⁵¹. Dwivedi, K.N, 1965, p.171.

⁵². Interviews with Prakashmuni (op.cit.) and Chintamandas, Raipur, 29.5.96.

It is in the field of publications that Dharmdas's successors have kept alive his tradition of compilation, composing and copying of manuscripts. In fact, Hari Thakur⁵³ regards Dharmdas as the first poet of Chattisgarh, pointing out the strongly regional metaphors used in the verses attributed to him. Grandhmuni was the first among his successors to write and publish extensively. His advantage over Dharmdas was the age in which he lived. The print media made it much easier for him to propagate a distinct and common Kabirpanth. Grandhmuni wrote and published extensively and many books that Dwivedi in the 1950s saw as handwritten manuscripts, had been published by the time I went to Damakhera. His son has kept up the tradition as well, even though he has not written much himself. These books are either sold at cost price or distributed free for propaganda purposes.

In the 1950s, early days of Grandhmuni's period, one monthly magazine was brought out for about ten years.⁵⁴ An annual magazine reporting on the activities at the math, including the text of a pravachan by the acharya was brought out for three years, at about the same time.⁵⁵ Both were edited by Sukavi Sudha Dehlavi, popularly known as Sudhadas ji, who had quite a following of his own. These magazines

⁵³. Thakur, Hari, Chattisgarh ke pratham kavi dhani Dharamdasji, 'Surati Yog', pp.12-23, year 1, vol.3, Oct. 1995.

⁵⁴. 'Vansh Pratap Manimala', monthly magazine, 1950-1960.

⁵⁵. 'Panth Prakash', annual magazine, 1957, '58 and '59.

could not be brought out after his death. Even earlier than Grandhmuni's time a press had been set up in the first decade of the 20th century at Damakhera itself. But this could not be sustained for long and had already been shut down by the time the 14th guru succeeded to the 'gadi'.

Two years ago a fresh attempt was made and a new magazine, 'Surati Yog', a "spiritual three monthly magazine" (as the blurb declares) is being brought out. It is edited by Smt. Sarojini Gabel, a sister of the present mahant. The nature of the magazine is also slightly different, in keeping with the times. Articles by academics and scholars are included, as also, interestingly, a section on 'health' and 'well-being', not particularly 'spiritual' but definitely more contemporary. Most contributors are still disciples and followers. It is beginning to become completely self-supporting financially- through subscriptions which are mainly acquired at the time of the largest annual fair- the '*magh mela*' in February.⁵⁶

Pragmatic management of the panth seems to take up much of the time of the current acharya. No, he does not believe in performing miracles, but he "cannot really stop people from believing what they want to". In fact from the 19th century itself, acharyas seem to be less inclined towards miracle-making. Yet disciples attribute miraculous powers to many of them, and acharyas rarely try to refute these. For instance, Chintamandas who has studied till M.A (Previous) in Raipur, recounts a

⁵⁶. Interview with Chintamandas, 30.5.96.

miracle attributed to Grandhmuninam. Apparently, he had promised followers in a village in Maharashtra that he would reach there and their offerings would be accepted by 11:00 am the next day. He was at that time at a place very distant from the one he was due to reach. The following day, at exactly 11 o'clock in the morning, the coconuts in the hands of all the devotees in that village cracked open. When asked about it, Grandhmuninam, reputed intellectual of Chattisgarh, denied that he had performed any miracle (I later read about this in the 'Panth Prakash' annual magazine of 1959. The magazine regarded this disclaimer as a sign of the acharya's modesty). But Chintamandas says that this is not a patch on miracles performed by earlier acharyas like Muktamaninam saheb- who is supposed to have had the power to cure leprosy.

Though the acharya nowadays does not claim to have miraculous powers, the same cannot be said of other authorised preachers. On my next trip to Dewas, in the summer of 1996, I hear that the mahant Keshavdas has become so powerful that he can light lamps with just water, without any oil or fat. The number of his converts has grown enormously. He has established a 'Kabir Kuti' at the base of the Dewas hill after the villagers drove him away from his old ashram near Tonk Khurd. The reason behind that was the fact that he had started living with a blind girl Sukhan bai, who sings Kabir bhajans beautifully. Dewas in any case makes for better visibility, and inspite of his notoriety, he recently managed to organise a big programme in which he invited all prominent Kabirpanthis in the area. It was just before the elections and the politicians among the invitees came eagerly, hoping to cash in on the popularity of Kabir among the lower castes in this area.

Performing a small miracle is not really much trouble for a man of his capabilities!⁵⁷

Mahant Mangaldas, based in Ujjain claims that it was his father, Ganpatdas who brought the Kabirpanth to Malwa in the early 20th century.⁵⁸ It was Ganpatdas who had initiated 80 year old Anandram at Soochai village (Tarana tehsil, then part of the Holkar state) when the latter was about 12 years old. Ganpatdas is also associated with a number of miracles. His son refuses to lend an ear to these stories. Yet, Nimari balahis had already migrated from Malwa a long time before this late date (early 20th century), and they like all other balahis were carriers of Kabir bani and bhajans. Thus neither the speculation that 18th century traffic between Damakhera and Gujarat left traces of this knowledge among the lowest castes of Malwa, nor the claim that Ganpatdas brought this panth to Malwa provides adequate explanation for the popularity of Kabir in this stratum. Perhaps a more plausible explanation would be a the spread of a common *nirguni* tradition across Rajasthan and Malwa. The process must have been aided by the linguistic affinity between Malwi and Rajasthani (Malwi is thought to be a dialect of Rajasthani), and the transmission probably occurred between similar caste groups that retain Kabir.

⁵⁷. Interviews in Dewas, Barandwa and Tonk Kalan (Nov-Dec. 1994), and interview with Lachmanji, Dewas, 20.5.96.

⁵⁸. Interview with Mahant Mangaldas, Puwasa, Ujjain, 20.12.94.

Much more active proselytisation by the Damakhera branch has ensured its greater popularity compared to other branches. Popular estimates by Malwa mahants hold that every year each mahant (I spoke to 4 of the leading mahants in the area) initiates about 60-70 people. Some like Narottamdas claim to have about 1 lakh disciples all over Madhya Pradesh. He performs an aarti every 5 or 6 days and on each occasion 15-16 people get initiated. So the total number of his personal converts would naturally be much larger.⁵⁹

Forty years ago when Ambaram of Dewas Mochi Mohalla got initiated to the Burhanpur order of the Kabirpanth, he says that there would not even have been ten people belonging to the Damakhera 'shakha' of the Kabirpanth (or even Burhanpur, for the matter) in Dewas. However, there were large mandalis that got state patronage and used to sing Kabir's bhajans. For instance, there was the one led by Narayan Dhobi, to which Bhagirath saheb, who lives in the same mohalla as Ambaram, used to belong. The mandali was so large that at one time it comprised upto 50 people. Though led by a person of the dhobi caste, people of different castes, the majority of them backward and untouchable, mingled together in this group because Dewas was an urban area where segregation was not as strict as in the villages. But they were all merely music lovers, Ambaram says dismissively...

In village Pipalya Kali Talai, about 8-10 people got initiated with Shamlalba (82-85 years old) when he was about 16 years old, by Ganpatdas. Even today there are about 15 people who are

⁵⁹. Interview with Radheshyam Pehelwan and mahant Narottamdas, Dewas, 7.12.94.

'namdharis' (bearers of the Kabirpanthi name) in the village. But other converts who were his contemporaries had all died. He insists that in the last 15 years or so the number of chaukas per year had definitely increased. This conversation is being carried out as we shiver through a winter night and watch the chauka being performed by mahant Parbatdas in Dudhlai. I ask Shamlalba about the Radhaswamis who also seem to be quite popular in the area. Shankardas Tyagi, who has mellowed toward me by now, says scathingly that they basically "eat off Kabir", they are not preaching anything new. Shamlal agrees. Then gets back to his own story.

He used to be part of a mandali that had 7 or 8 members. Along with balahis, members of the gaari caste (traditionally cattle and sheep herders, listed among backward castes, above balahis in hierarchy) were also Kabirpanthis in his village. In fact an old man of this caste, a poor sharecropper had introduced them to music and to Kabir. He is the one who made us Gurumukh. There was another mandali in the village- that of the 'maipanthis'. Most of them were *naths*, and they too sang Kabir's songs. Today Shamlal's village no longer has a Kabir *mandali*. Most of the Kabirpanthis in the village are balahis too. Balahis are in a position of strength there. His grandfather had been the village patel in his time, and had owned 100 bighas of land which were auctioned off since he was unable to pay the taxes. Shamlal himself has managed to buy about 20-25 bighas of land and everything is fine, thanks to the satguru's blessings. His daughter in law had not had a son till last year- but *satguru*, in his wisdom, arranged for that too, after he, Shamlal, had arranged a large *chauka* programme in the village.⁶⁰

⁶⁰. Interview with Shamlalba, Dudhlai, 15.12.94.

Intolerance of bhajan singers and skepticism of the widely popular bhajan tradition in this region is a common reaction. Particularly among the 'hard-core' Kabirpanthis in Malwa, whether attached to Burhanpur or Damakhera. Radheshyam Pehelwan, the 'diwan' (chief representative) of mahant Narottamdas seems to echo Ambaram in dismissing bhajan singers. According to him the important thing is the internal bhajan (prayer)- not an individual's ability or inclination to sing. This he said, is often forgotten by the bhajan singers. This 'mental' bhajan, according to the formal Kabirpanthi method has to be done at 2:00 am- the one who has the 'lagan'(dedication), will do it, Pehelwan claims. The singers (he uses the word 'gawaiya' very derogatorily) do not understand all this, he claimed. There was one Narayan Jhobi (mentioned earlier), he informed. He sang Kabir and other *nirguni* sants. But no matter how much he sang Kabir, he could never have become a Kabirpanthi. His way of life was appalling. Decoded, this means that he used to consume liquor and meat. Radheshyam insisted, as did mahants like Mangaldas and Keshavdas, on bookish Kabirpanth that prescribes everything- from the right way to greet one's fellow beings, to the correct method to clean one's teeth, to the proper procedure by which one should pray, in the morning, mid-morning, noon, afternoon and so on.⁶¹

⁶¹. Interview with Radheshyam Pehelwan, 13.12.94.

Bhajans of Kabir sung in Malwi are, however, becoming quite popular among some urban audiences in Malwa and a few bhajan singers, also fairly active members of the panth, have become quite well known as Malwi bhajans. This comes in the wake of a general attempt, by the state government, the All India Radio and local entrepreneurs, to revive interest in songs in the Malwi language, from the raunchy to the devotional, prompted primarily by astute commercial sense, of course. A similar phenomenon has occurred in Gujarat and Rajasthan, with the songs of Mirabai. This has been written about by Parita Mukta, in her recent book on Mira.⁶² She discusses the commercialization and individualization of Mira's songs, a situation that parallels the process underway in Malwa with Kabir bhajans. The process had started much earlier and on a far larger scale with Mira. Exponents of classical and semi classical music, from M.S Subbulakshmi to Anup Jalota and Hari Om Sharnam have sung the songs of Mira and these versions, recorded in audio cassettes are the ones being popularized in urban and even national circles. "The emphasis is very much now on listening to recorded music and bhajans....These have begun to displace earlier expressions of community and self".⁶³ In this process, Mira's protest against both patriarchy and state gets diluted into a more 'acceptable' image of a

⁶² .Mukta, Parita, Upholding the Common Life: the Community of Mirabai, OUP, Delhi, 1994.

⁶³ .Ibid., p.209.

'pure' upper caste widow, devoted to the worship of the household deity.

The process underway in Malwa is similar and yet somewhat different. It is true that here too, lower middle class youth from small towns are drawn to Malwi Kabir bhajans, and aspire to sing standardized acceptable versions of these on the All India Radio, or record cassettes. In addition to this category of singers, classical musicians like Kumar Gandharva, residents of the area, have picked up and sung bhajans from local Dewas mandalis. But somehow the scope of this reification is limited as compared to that of Mira, as presented by Mukta.

What seems to be different about Malwa is that often the lead in this commercialization of Kabir's bhajans is being taken, not by outsiders, but by the members of the community that has traditionally sung these songs collectively. One such balahi Kabirpanthi is Prakash Singh Tipaniya. He is a teacher in a middle school in Tarana, who converted to the Kabirpanth some fifteen years ago and started singing Malwi Kabir bhajans publicly and 'professionally' in the 1990s. He has brought out two cassettes of his songs. For his recordings on radio and for the cassettes and performances, he sings in a group, but one in which his voice is the dominant one. He also sings in *chaukas* and is in high demand these days, owing to the higher number of these ceremonies. For many other balahis,

and some members outside the community as well, he is a role model of sorts. They pay frequent visits to his house in Luniyakhedi, in Ujjain district, a large mud and tile structure in the harijan basti of the village, in the hope of getting into his favour. Tipaniya has also been to Delhi a few times and sung at some state sponsored cultural programmes in Pragati Maidan. But what seems clear from this is that the scale of his activities is very small compared to, say, professional light classical singers of Mira's songs. His bhajans, sung in a dialect that is not commonly understood or popularized, also have a more limited audience appeal. His standard of living, the fact that he is continuing in his profession of teaching, all indicate that the direct 'profits' from singing must be fairly limited. There is however a growing standardization of bhajans, a reification of Kabir, individualisation of what is essentially a collective activity (bhajan singing), along with a trend of singing them to the tunes of film songs. There are still pockets of protest within the balahi community to these trends. The circularity that inevitably builds between mass and popular culture can clearly be seen in this context.

Mass culture, here signified by standard versions of Kabir bhajans aired on mass media, radio and television, and popular culture- here, traditional tunes and bhajans sung to different instruments, like the ektara instead of the

harmonium, feed into each other, as the same community sustains them both. Groups that object to this kind of standardization and commercialization of Kabir bhajans seek to 'preserve' the 'authentic' popular tradition, songs whose content or tunes might have proved non-marketable. With cooperation from organisations like Eklavya, these groups are involved in another process of reification, albeit one that does try self-consciously to retain as much of the 'original' as possible. In contrast to the excessive emphasis on *chauka-arti* songs these days they attempt to popularize the protest of Kabir, foregrounding his social critique, as opposed to the unquestioning bhakti of many commonly sung bhajans. It is these groups also that are trying to raise a voice against excessive ritualisation of the panth (to the extent that it became indistinguishable from any other cults).⁶⁴

According to most followers, the connection between greater prosperity among balahis and a greater number of *chaukas* is fairly clear. As Shamlalba put it, "People are awakening in larger numbers now. They also have more money, more work and their way of life has become cleaner

⁶⁴ . This group attempted to form a Kabir Vichar Manch to discuss the issues raised by Kabir and develop a critique of the rituals as not 'authentic', not in keeping with Kabir's views. This did not last for very long, however. Another effort, directed at getting a number of mandalis together at one place to sing bhajans of the traditional kind, seem to have been successful. A programme of this kind still takes place, once a month, and the Eklavya hosts the meeting, though the organisation is no longer very actively involved in the project.

(referring to abstention from liquor and vegetarianism). So they are able to have more *chaukas*, able to 'remember' the satguru more often".⁶⁵ According to all reports of leading devotees of the panth, mahants who even 10 years ago, were called upon to perform 10-15 *chaukas* annually, today perform at least 60-70 of them. For Radheshyam pehelwan, arranging programmes for baba Narottamdas, as and when different 'sevaks' request him to hold *chaukas*, has become a full-time job. He gave up his job in the Kirloskar factory after working there for 28 years. When he gets any free time, he preaches the message of the panth to people, not in Dewas town, but in villages en route to Indore. He like other 'bookish' Kabirpanthis in the area confirms the strong impression I have formed that the majority ("Rupaye mein baarah aane") of the converts belong to the balahi caste.⁶⁶

If these are also the people holding more *chaukas* then one could infer that at least one section of the caste is doing well for itself. Social attitudes towards them persist, nonetheless. Radheshyam Pehelwan who belongs to the Kumhar caste narrated an interesting and enlightening anecdote- that when he'd told his mother about 30 years ago that he wished to get initiated into the Kabirpanth, she had exclaimed that Kabir is a guru of the balahis- why was Bheru inclined towards him! Radheshyam's family was a prestigious

⁶⁵. Interview with Shamlalba, Dudhlai, 15.12.94.

⁶⁶. Interview with Radheshyam Pehelwan, 13.12.94.

one. His ancestors had been in the service of the Dewas maharaja for a long time. His grandfather had cooked food for them, his uncle had been employed in the court offices, and so on. Thus for him, one of the priorities while seeking a guru was that he should belong to a higher caste, he said in a matter of fact fashion. He told me how difficult his quest was, for almost all the Kabirpanthi gurus were, and continue to be, balahis. He finally found baba (his tone dipped reverentially) and Narottamdas, landed patidar from Nadiad, Gujarat, ended his search admirably, and initiated him into the panth. The persistence of caste prejudices goes against the grain of Kabirpanthi teachings of caste equality, but the contradiction does not seem apparent to people like Radheshyam, otherwise conversant with various aspects of the panth's teachings.

The significance of the higher number of chaukas is quite obvious- it is an indicator of the economic standing of those who hold the *chaukas*, in this case, the balahis. An average chauka, like the one that Atmaram had organised in Dudhlai (on the night of 15 December, 1994) cost him about Rs. 2000/-. This too after he had economised by getting his own tarpaulin sheet to cover the ground for guests to sit on.⁶⁷ The omnipresent tentwala, who has opened shop in every village supplies a shamiana to cover the area on top and the householder arranges to feed and look after his guests, and

⁶⁷. Interview with Atmaram, Dudhlai, 15.12.94.

organise the ritual itself. It is cheaper to organise the programme in summers, for in winter the guests have to be provided with quilts- and given the large number of guests (at Dudhlai, about 60 people came for the programme, at Tonk about 100), these have to be hired. The custom is for the guests to sit outside through the night and watch the ceremony being performed. These days glossy invitation cards are sent out to all invitees to the programme- further pushing up costs. The ritual itself is an expensive one- requiring costly items like a kilogram of ghee, dry fruits etc., in addition to the mahants' fee. Each initiate also gives a donation to the mahant, and each guest normally touches his feet and giving him a small donation, and of course, a coconut.⁶⁸

Along with a growing ostentation in the performance of the ritual, is the demand, again among certain leading sections of the Kabirpanth (also by and large balahi) that the panth and Kabir should be given greater recognition by the state. Some mahants like Keshavdas are taking the lead in organising Kabirpanthi 'festivals' in Dewas on a large scale. These festivals guarantee the panth some good publicity among city dwellers. However, this immediate 'boom' of the panth in Dewas town can be seen as a result of one particular mahant's efforts at self aggrandizement. For

⁶⁸. The Damakhera math annually earns over Rs, 1 lakh from the chaukas performed by Prakashmuni alone. In 1995, the income under this head was Rs,1,33,636. Source: Math accounts register, Raipur.

generally, the mahants do not or have not been organising such ceremonies on any regular basis. Nor do they live in large wealthy ashrams, but continue to live among the people they preach to, on a relatively modest scale. Personal wealth, if present, is not demonstrated. But today mahants like Keshavdas are building up considerable personal standing and following in this region.

The improved economic status of the panth and of its lead followers shows in the greater efforts and resources being directed towards the propagation of the cult. Holding *pravachans* and lectures, not just chaukas, dissemination of literature and articles not just about the Kabirpanth but also about the local mahants and their ashrams, informing about forthcoming programmes to be organised at the ashram-are clear indicators. These efforts seem geared towards making a general statement of strength. This situation is a consequence of a conjunction of factors.

To an extent of course these proselytising efforts are a result of the sheer availability of resources as indicated by the steady rise in the standard of living of the balahis, the main converts. But the more powerful reason is probably the presence of another, very powerful panth in the area-the Radhaswami 'mat'. The Beas (Punjab) branch of this cult organises an annual gathering near Bhanwarkuan, at Indore. In 1995, approximately 2 lakh people came to this gathering (called satsang) held in February every year. The Radhaswami

'mat' originated in Agra in the mid 19th century, and was started by Shiv Dayal, a Punjabi Khatri settled in the city. Referred to as Soamiji he probably had a guru in Tulsi Saheb of Hathras, though this is a bone of contention between the different branches of the panth. As Gold points out, the members of the Beas group of Radhaswamis accept their cult as a continuation of the sant mats of the 15th to the 18th centuries. Tulsi saheb, whether or not Soamiji's guru, is considered to be one of the sants in the Kabir tradition. The Radhaswamis of Agra however, consider Soamiji's vision to be unique and not part of any old 'parampara'. They point out that Soamiji in his works has never mentioned any guru.

Born into a trader caste and family, and familiar with the Granthsahib, dwelling in a town where Krishna bhakti prevailed, the Radhaswami mat developed by Shiv Dayal was an amalgam of 'Radha', seen as the loving soul aspiring to dwell with her formless lord; and 'Soami' referring to Soamiji, as well as the Lord himself. The influence of the Kabirpanth and particularly the Chattisgarh branch is strong, especially on the Beas group. 'Anuragsagar', written by Dharmdas has been a prescribed text of the Radhaswami panth from the earliest days.⁶⁹

This influence is evident everywhere. Mainly in Radhaswami public gatherings where Kabir's bhajans are sung

⁶⁹. Gold, 1987, p.113

and his 'dohas' and 'sakhis' form the core of many pravachans by the panth's gurus. Soamiji who had his first 'satsang' in 1861, is however not as significant in Radhaswami worship as the contemporary living guru. The latter's personal power is recognised by devotees. Born after the older sant tradition had become exclusivist and esoteric, the Radhaswami *mat* represents, according to some, a lineage that "still remains close to its immediate source."⁷⁰

The Beas line, popular in Malwa today, was started by a young Sikh soldier Jaimal Singh, one of the four lead disciples of Soamiji. The social roots of the panth are vastly different from the Kabirpanth. While the Kabirpanth in Chattisgarh had somewhat similar origins to the extent that Dharmdas, the founder was a Kasaundhan Vaishya, a wealthy businessman and creditor to the ruler of the Rewa state with property worth Rs. 56 crores (which he is said to have donated to the panth)- the later trajectory of the Radhasoami panth was somewhat different from the Kabirpanth. The Radhasoami *mat* developed an urban middle class base. Today it is an all India cult that holds annual gatherings and satsangs in Bombay, Nagpur, Delhi etc. Its successful propaganda and effective management of its leaders has given it repute and fame. Though a strong anti-caste attitude exists within the *mat*, and for three days of the annual

⁷⁰. Gold, 1987, p. 117.

Indore satsang, for instance, members of all castes eat together, they remain free to practise caste restrictions once they are back in their village.

While most of the leaders of the panth are Punjabi, and the prominent followers and organisers of the Indore *satsang* are Punjabi and Sindhi, the majority of the devotees are largely from rural Malwa. A number of them are agricultural labourers (*balahis* too), but a fairly large number belongs to the landed, but backward agricultural castes like *khatris*, *patidars* and *kulmis*. In this respect, the Indore Radhaswami Satsang is quite unique. According to the organisers, it is the only place where the panth has anything approximating a rural base, or as one organiser told me patronisingly in 1995, "The poor people are much more pious, they are closer to god, because they have little else on which to pin their faith"⁷¹.

The pattern of the satsang is basically one of a prolonged series of *pravachans* by the guru from Beas and local Radhaswami luminaries. One or two days are devoted to the initiation ceremony in which hundreds of people get inducted into the panth each year. The guru sitting on a high pedestal is quite unapproachable and is generally viewed and heard by devotees on television sets planted all over the tent under which the satsang is held. The guru

⁷¹. Interview at Radhaswami satsang, with Sindhi businessman, Indore, 3.2.95.

moves around under tight security, travels in a low slung white Mercedes, and while at Indore stays at the palatial residence of a leading Indore based Punjabi businessman.

The entire set up is mind boggling. I can see Tata Sierras disgorging perfumed ladies, and gentlemen who look like they have just played a fine round of golf. They join the queue of 'sevadars'-volunteers who are allocated duties at least a month or two before the satsang- a motley crew of villagers and posh city folk, all members of the Radhaswami panth in Malwa. They take on the work of cooking cleaning, repairing, manning enquiry booths and so on. The villagers park their rickety cycles next to the gleaming cars of fellow devotees with elan. This sense of brotherhood with the rich and famous might itself be quite heady. But inside the satsang ground, people stick to their own groups and at the most mingle with others from their own area (and class!), or those staying near their place in the tents that become their homes for a few days. The rich and the poorer devotees rarely exchange more than a passing 'Radhaswami' called out in greeting. 'Eating together' is the chief memory that people take back to their villages. For the lower castes it is a moment of victory- without their needing to make efforts at transforming their everyday lives.

The fact that the guru is physically distanced makes it much easier to regard him as one endowed with divine powers. I am told that the pravachans are enthralling and there is pin-drop silence the present guru delivers the lecture in Punjabi accented Hindi. But when the pravachan actually begins, some children are crying loudly and others running about and playing. The pravachan drags on for three hours. It is basically an elaboration on one or two themes. The TV screen near where I am

sitting monotonously and continuously shows the guru's face and occasionally a glimpse of the select audience sitting in the enclosure near the dais.

"Did you see how the moment guru maharaj started speaking all the 2 lakh people in the tent kept completely still? This is all the guru's doing!"- a middle aged woman who has come from Jabalpur exclaims. I object mildly, and point out that my experience had been rather different. I am tactfully silenced. The rest of her audience, in one of the tents after the *pravachan*, nods vehemently. Surprised, I even notice some women who had been sitting near me during the *pravachan*, and had definitely heard the racket that had been going on throughout the lecture.

I later realise that for the women (and also the men), the *satsang* provides the opportunity for an annual vacation, away from the daily routine. This is probably the main reason why the practice of coming to the *satsang* so popular. But it also means that casual workers and agricultural labourers lose their wages for these days. Most labourers however appear to give up their wages willingly for the intangible benefits of the *Satsang*.

The position of the guru in the Radhaswami panth becomes clear in the following passage, written in English by Shyam Lal called Guru Data Dayala:

"Before initiation...he should be treated as an elder or friend and not Guru... and when the disciple is satisfied that he possesses the supernatural power of evolving and exalting his soul, he must be treated and respected as God....In all cases of failure (in spiritual practice) the

main cause was no other than that the disciples either could not get perfect Gurus or did not treat them as God. For success in this matter it is essential that Guru. (perfect) must be given, by the disciple in all his affairs, spiritual or temporal, priority over God, until the disciple himself becomes one with Guru and God".⁷²

Daniel Gold tends to argue that in the Radhaswami *parampara* the living 'sant' retains some of the awe among the disciples that all sant traditions did in their early days of existence.⁷³ But my enquiry reveals that in the Radhaswami tradition the originating 'sant' has at no time been particularly important while from all available written records- from the 'Anurag Sagar' and 'Amar Mul' composed by Dharmdas, the Kabirpanth in the earliest days also referred back to Kabir, the 'sant' whose name the panth bears. Even bhajans and verses composed by later acharyas, no matter how great their personal charisma bore the name and stamp of Kabir. The Radhaswami panth was on the other hand not named after a person but an abstract concept that left a lot of flexibility and allowed the contemporary Guru to implement changes he desired without any restrictions whatsoever.

All over the villages I have found walls of houses bearing the photographs of the current Radhaswami guru and

⁷². Shyam Lal (Data Dayal), *Retransformation of Self*, p.xxii, Lashkar, Gwalior, G.S Nivas, 1927, cited in Gold, 1987, p.106.

⁷³. Gold, 1987, p.114

his father. When asked about the founder of the panth, not one person can answer. Some of them have even done the pilgrimage to Agra and the Beas with others in their village. Few have actually met the guru except at the time of getting initiated. Like the Kabirpanth the chief rule is vegetarianism and abstention from liquor. The large number of converts spread across the country and abroad makes it impossible for the guru to keep a 'check' on them. Also, the power to initiate is reserved with the lead guru who only visits once a year and that too at a 'mela' of this nature where the scope to check the aspiring initiate's devotion is extremely limited. All in all these factors make the Radhaswami panth an easier one to follow. As far as the Kabirpanth is concerned, larger numbers are converting to the panth today in Malwa than did even 20 years ago (though in terms of number of followers, it comes a very poor second to the Radhaswamis). But the same problem of 'superficial converts' is arising in the Kabirpanth, according to Ambaram who belongs to the Burhanpur branch. The Damakhera converts are just 'mass-produced' and do not have any dedication, he insists.⁷⁴ The situation as it stands is that from about 40 years ago the Radhaswami *mat* has been preaching in Malwa. It has gained a sizable following among the urban elite of Indore and Ujjain and the backward and some scheduled castes of the surrounding parts of rural Malwa. The balahis in the

⁷⁴. Interview with Ambaram baba, Mochi mohalla, Dewas, 6.12.94.

area were not very prominent among the member castes (of the panth). Around 15 years ago some balahis here started adopting the Kabirpanth. But the number of Kabirpanthis among the balahis never rose very high. In fact, after 1994, the balahi membership of the panth has been stagnating rather than rising. Today, Radhaswami membership both among the balahis and other low and backward castes, seems to be on the rise.

One novel but interesting reason given by some communities for not accepting the kabirpanth is that it is mostly people of the lowest castes who join the panth. Members of the Anjanika Patel and Thakur communities for instance deride the panth as a 'poor peoples cult' and Kabir as a guru of the balahis. For balahis, seeking a higher status in their immediate surroundings, it sometimes is a more canny decision to join the Radhaswamis and be part of a more diffuse but more elite community.

I keep telling the people of my community that not all members of the Kabirpanth are poor. There are a number of rich people in the panth, asserts Kanchan Devi, a prominent woman leader of the cult. There is really no ground for these people to believe foolishly that they will somehow become poor if they join the panth, she exclaims.⁷⁵

The increasingly ritualised form of worship being associated with the Kabirpanth, the greater pomp associated

⁷⁵. Interview with Kanchan Devi, Ujjain, 20.12.94.

with chauka programmes, miracles performed by mahants like Keshavdas, the use of modern means of communication to preach the message are still not proving sufficient to establish the panth effectively.

Back to Dudhlai village, the Kabirpanthi chauka-aarti programme. The tempo of the bhajans is increasing. After the mahant finishes blessing Atmaram's son and daughter in law who are holding the *chauka* in order to get a son, the fifteen odd people sitting quietly behind the mahant, come forward one by one. They seem to be outsiders, with few friends in the largely balahi circle of guests. Who are they? "Kanjars", the young balahi Kabirpanthi squatting next to me says in a loud stage-whisper. Many of them are "improving" these days, he adds. I had been warned by villagers against travelling late at night on the Agra-Bombay road, for many cars and buses had recently been held up and robbed by kanjars. Some of them are known to live by pimping off the women of the community, continues my young informant, taking great pleasure in recounting a good tale. They have their own settlement outside the village. We consider them untouchables. But of course now that they are '*gurumukh*' we will behave very well with them. The problem is that they do not remember to live by the tenets of the panth. Being 'small' people with a predilection for an 'unclean' life, they slip back into old ways. But still, if they become '*gurumukh*' at least the number of highway robberies will go down, he says hopefully.

Why are the kanjars, really the 'lowest of the low' in villages, converting to the Kabirpanth? What is attracting them to it? I hesitate to believe that it is the 'call of the satguru' - as the others at the chauka programme think it to be.

The new converts do 'bandagi' to the mahant and offer him his fees and a coconut. The representative of satguru then offers them *pan-parwana* (a piece of coconut, a betel leaf and some dry fruits) that is given to all initiates. They are also given the wooden kanthi mala.

The bhajan singers are singing with abandon now. The '*anandi chauka*' is over. The village is happy and at peace.

CONVERSION

For the balahis conversion to the Kabirpanth and the Radhaswami mat has been just the most recent of the available strategies to opt out of the stigma associated with the caste or to obtain a higher social status. Some became Christians in the 1920s like Padriba's whole family in Barandwa. One hears of camps set up in the village in the 1920s where missionaries and doctors attempted to heal the body and the spirit of the villagers, particularly targeting the balahis, the most numerous lower caste group there. Initially conversion was promoted by Protestants, Catholics too preached in the area after some time. Unlike the situation in Nimar, where large numbers of balahis adopted Christianity at the time of the famine of 1899-1900, such conversions, if they did occur in this area, were unrecorded. Their experience in Nimar in the long run must have deterred missionaries. At the time of the famine need had driven them into the arms of the Roman Catholics and Methodist missionaries who'd set up their own establishments there. But since then their numbers were on the decline and

as Fuchs laments, "from the point of view of quality the balahi is hardly a satisfactory subject for the missionary. The religious standard of the balahi is rather low".⁷⁶ The missionaries in Nimar had come to realise this by the 1930s and '40s that merely increasing the numbers of converts without and insistence on a conviction about the basic tenets of the religion was a mistake.

Almost uncannily similar was the tale told by missionaries in Kanasiya, near Barandwa, where there is an established Church, and missionary run school. There is at least one family of Christian balahis in Barandwa and several in Kanasiya. Wily old Padriba's family in Barandwa is a clear example of the typical balahi convert. They first converted to Protestantism, then came around to 'Mariam mata', or Catholicism, and then again to Protestantism. According to skeptical villagers the sect-switches were made in keeping with whichever group could offer him greater material benefits. Other villagers at Barandwa regard the current 'father' (the priest posted at Kanasiya) as 'no good'. Primarily because he does not give them anything unlike his generous predecessor, who has now been posted to Shajapur. Apparently he used to freely give people money and goods ranging from cows to pump-sets. He also did not insist upon their conversion. For Padriba's family, Christianity has been a canny and pragmatic choice. In the absence of any

⁷⁶. Fuchs, 1950, p.226.

strong Christian community he still remains a balahi, inspite of the fact that he often preaches (hence his nickname) in other villages in his status as a kind of senior convert. But thanks to conversion his son got an education almost free of cost, and has a job in Pune. Padriba lost his eyesight in his youth but because he was Christian missionary hospitals treated him (and his family, when it needed treatment) almost for free.⁷⁷

Slightly more successful has been the strategy of some Maksi based Gujarati balahis, to attain a social status in keeping with their economic standing. Once again this process of mobility was attempted by opting out of Hinduism. Maksi has been an old Jain pilgrimage centre. Some balahis converted to Jainism in the 1950s when Jain monks from Rajasthan, specifically, Shri Ahimsa Pracharak Jain Sangh under Sri Sameer Muniji Maharaj toured Malwa with this mission.⁷⁸ Ratlam and Maksi became the local base of these activities, being also the centres of Jainism in Malwa. Converted balahis came to be called 'Dharmopal Jains'.⁷⁹ Prayer books like the "Dharamopal Bodh Mala" were brought out for the special use of the new converts. In these there is a clear denunciation of the caste system based on birth alone and an acceptance of caste hierarchies reconstructed on the

⁷⁷. Interview with Padriba, Barandwa, 10.12.94.

⁷⁸. Singh, K.S, The Scheduled Castes, p.98.

⁷⁹. Interview with Sitalal Jain, Maksi, 8.12.94.

basis of 'behaviour' and 'morals'.⁸⁰ Adoption of Jainism too ultimately achieved the same ends of 'clean living and eating'. But somehow Jainism never became a popular option among members of the caste. And among the balahis, most Gujaratis converted to Jainism, possibly due to the cultural affinity with many of the religious leaders who preached in the area. Yet Dharmopal Jains today are free to marry balahis and often do so. They also marry within their own converted community but rarely with other Jains. They remain as ever different and unequal even though a special niche has been created for them by one religion.

Apart from these, less numerous but also present in the area, are balahi Sikhs, and interestingly balahi Bahais.

These efforts at conversion seem to indicate the efforts of a caste straining at the limitations of the status attributed to it by society, a basic dissatisfaction with its location. Hajariprasad Dwivedi has generalized this, attributing this kind of restlessness and refusal to be 'fixed' to all weaving castes.⁸¹ The balahi history of weaving is dubious and patchy and I would hesitate to

⁸⁰. Dharampal Bodh Mala, p.42, Shree Akhil Bharatiya Sadhumargi Jain Sangh, Bikaner. A glance through this instruction/prayer booklet indicates how balahi converts are different from the other Jains, and conversation with convert Sitalal Jain revealed that balahis at Maksi are hardly integrated into the Jain community, and their social circle is comprised exclusively of converts and his own Gujarati balahi community.

⁸¹. Dwivedi, Hajariprasad, Kabir, p. 203, vol. 4, Hajariprasad Dwivedi Rachnavali, Rajkamal Prakashan, Delhi, 1981.

generalise on the basis of evidence collected among member of one caste in a micro region.

It has to be accepted nonetheless that the move of balahis towards the adoption of the Kabirpanth and the Radhaswami comes in the wake of long history of opting for alternative paths and structures in which they have a higher status and greater respect.

ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT

The steady institutionalisation of the Kabirpanth has led to a somewhat higher membership in the last 15 years and balahis form a large percentage of its old and new converts. However it has not been able to rally together the balahi caste nor help form the forces for an aggressive protest movement aimed at bettering their material and social condition.

Contrary to Fuchs' findings about Nimari balahis,⁸² the balahis in Malwa do not have any caste organisation or a *jati panchayat* or a *jat patel*. Neither is there any formal focus around which the caste can organise itself. Yet there are aspirations within the caste to organise and consolidate itself into a powerful presence corresponding to its numerical strength. In recent years the caste has begun to organise itself around diverse foci. The basic premise of such attempts at self organisation, is a minimum level of

⁸². Fuchs, 1950, pp.30-43.

material prosperity and the emergence of a leadership that is educated, and has considerable amount of political sense.

The Kabirpanth at one time, from the 1980s till the early 1990s seemed to provide a convenient structure which could be manipulated by the leaders of the caste to consolidate it. But this had its limitations. For one, the two current leading mahants who seem to have enormous powers to mobilise public opinion are not balahi. Narottamdas is a Patidar from Gujarat and Keshavdas, a 'Sendho' patel.⁸³ They could thus not become leading figures in organising the balahis. Utilisation of the panth structure also meant necessarily that only a part of caste that belonged to the panth could come together.

The advantages of the panth as a focus around which to organise are obvious. For one, a portion of the caste was Kabirpanthi and a large number were familiar with the views of Kabir and with his bhajans. The panth also had a ready-made structure and in Malwa, was led by individuals among whom, many were balahi. Regular practices like vegetarianism, living cleanly, encouraging thrift, are all traits that suited leaders of the caste to promote.

⁸³ .Sendhos or Sondhias, are a caste of cultivators, inhabitants of Malwa, with a reputation as cattle-lifters and warriors. They claim rajput status. (p.235, Census of India, 1931, vol.XX, Part I, by C.S Venkatachar)

That there had been some exchange of ideas between the different sets of caste leaders, Kabirpanthi mahants, politicians, school teachers was obvious. Common ideas about the origin of the panth, a shared common past, its political centrality, etc., indicate this flow of ideas. One such shared notion was about the 'clean' lifestyle of balahis. All insisted that balahis were physically the cleanest among all the people in the village. Unlike the thakurs, they do not eat meat or drink alcohol.

The adoption of the Kabirpanth by the balahis can be analysed superficially as a move towards Sanskritization. That is, by adopting the 'purer' lifestyle (vegetarianism and temperance) approximating that of upper castes, the lower caste concerned tries to move up in the ritual hierarchy. In other situations adoption of the sacred thread and similar upper caste symbols have been perceived as sanskritizing efforts, normally by castes whose economic position is stable or rapidly becoming so. As M.N. Srinivas notes, "Sanskritization may briefly be defined as the process by which a 'low' caste or tribe or other group takes over the customs, rituals, beliefs, ideology and style of life of a high and in particular, 'dvija' caste. The Sanskritization of a group usually has the effect of improving its position in the local caste hierarchy. It normally presupposes either an improvement in the economic or political position of the group concerned or a higher group self consciousness

resulting from its contact with a source of the Great Tradition of Hinduism, such as a pilgrim centre or a monastery or a proselytising sect."⁸⁴ Routine moves towards sanskritisation include the adoption of vegetarianism and temperance among other symbolic brahmanical practices. So far, the definition of sanskritisation fits ideally with the trends visible amongst the balahis. Srinivas elaborates further, "The existence of a highly systematized hierarchy both favours and inhibits the Sanskritization of the lower castes. The culture of the higher castes enjoys great prestige, and ambitious lower castes would like to take it over. As against this, however the locally dominant caste, wherever one existed, wanted its culture to be exclusive property and not usurped by a low caste. But inspite of this, Sanskritization did spread...."⁸⁵

From this passage it must be fairly clear that the process currently underway in Malwa might be similar but differs from it in certain crucial ways. For one vegetarianism and 'pure' living are just signs which need not by themselves automatically suggest a higher ritual status. When these signs are adopted by an untouchable caste, amongst the lowest in an area, the handicap of the stigma may still prove to be too much to surmount. Particularly when the economic standing of the caste is

⁸⁴. Srinivas, M.N, *The Cohesive Role of Sanskritization and Other Essays*, pp.56-57, OUP, Delhi, 1989.

⁸⁵ .Ibid.

improving but it is still not exactly the most 'dominant'. What is most significant is that the strategies adopted by balahis hardly amount to actual emulation of local upper castes (as discussed later in the chapter).

However much the balahis and particularly the Kabirpanthis among them might claim that they live cleaner than the thakurs today, for the rest of society the balahi remains tied with the chamar on one of the lowest rungs. And their old familiarity with Kabir means that the upper castes 'demote' Kabir to the status of a 'balahi babaji'-inseparably linked to the balahi so that even the cleanliness the panth encourages cannot ritually 'purify' him. No matter what Kanchan devi of Ujjain attempts to argue, Kabir does remain a poor man's guru⁸⁶ in the perception of most Malwis.

The question that now needs to be answered is whether the balahi leaders, by insisting upon cleanliness, are attempting to achieve a higher ritual status?

To an extent the Gandhian influence, through the effort of the Ujjain Congress activists had percolated down to villages in the area as the common usage of words like 'harijan' and familiarity with Gandhi's name and achievements indicated. Perhaps the Gandhian attempt at defining caste inequality in terms of an opposition between

⁸⁶ .Interview with Kanchandevi, Ujjain, 20.12.94.

'cleanliness' and the lack of it had found some response in this pocket of Malwa. Thus one finds that in villages like Kanthdi, non Kabirpanthi balahis too live 'cleanly' and presumably have been doing so for a long time. Their position in the village is quite strong, leading to the speculation that efforts at defeating caste inequality have been more successful in villages where balahis are 'clean'. Cleanliness here has a strongly physical connotation and implies a meticulous tidiness, hygiene and sanitation,⁸⁷ not necessarily the performance of ritually pure actions like wearing the sacred thread or sprinkling Ganga water. Ritually, the purity of 'clean' balahis and even Kabirpanthi balahis is deeply suspect, though functionally their cleanliness does get recognition from the upper castes.⁸⁸ It is true that upper castes in Malwa villages today would be most inclined towards interaction with balahis as compared to other ex-untouchables.

⁸⁷. Menon, Dilip, ^{pp. 23-25} in his book, Caste, Nationalism, and Communism in South India, OUP, Delhi, 1994, writes of the very similar emphasis on hygiene, and cleanliness by the Congress in the 1920s in Kerala. "Caste inequality was being defined initially as a matter of differential hygiene". He adds that, the "wearing of clean white Khadi emphasized cleanliness as well as the aspiration to sameness". (Both wearing white as well as clean clothes are stressed by Malwi balahi kabirpanthis as well). Thus in Congress activity, "cleanliness became the secular metaphor for casteness". The ritual aspect of cleanliness and purity, stressed by Dumont was not so important in this case (as also in present day Malwa).

⁸⁸. Cleanliness and hygiene in the traditional Hindu scheme are not conflated with purity. Such cleanliness forms an important element of the emerging balahi identity in addition to vegetarianism and temperance.

the caste. *Beti-vyavhaar*,⁹⁰ hitherto forbidden between the different regional subcastes is now beginning and the mass marriage organised by Siyaram Dangi at Jhonkar in 1993 is an example of this. In 1995 the first 'Balahi Samaj Parichay Sannelan' was held. Dangi was associated but not among the leaders of the group. In the same category were a number of people who called themselves 'social workers', many patwaris, panchayat officials, school teachers and one worker at the Bank Note Press (BNP) located in Dewas. The chief guest was Radhakrishna Malwiya, then Rajya Sabha member from the area, and prominent member of the caste, and the chairperson of the 'sannelan' was Dr. Vijay Lakshmi Sadho (Culture and Tourism minister, MP). At this gathering fear was expressed that the population of the balahi 'samaj', which had been large, has been getting reduced on account of this conversion to 'other religions'. At the root of this conversion is the low status and the stigma attached to the caste. The need for unity was stressed to avert this 'population crisis'. And one of the means for achieving 'unity', according to caste leaders was promoting marriages between the different sub-castes. In addition the history of the caste and the means ~~by which its status can be improved~~ were stated in detail. In the brochure brought out on the occasion, the aims of this move towards unity are given.

⁹⁰ .This literally means the practice of exchanging daughters in marriage i.e, here it means that the marriage circle is limited to one's own subgroup.

They include education for all, particularly for women, with a stress on learning English; an emphasis on self-employment; learning skills and trades since reservations had failed their purpose; electing leaders of the caste unitedly at the city/village, district, state and national level so that the balahis can make their voices heard. Excommunication of all who indulge in anti caste activities (sic) is hailed as the ideal way of ensuring community feeling (the Akal Takht is held as an example to be emulated). Excessive expenditure on weddings and deaths is denounced and mass marriages encouraged. All balahis are further instructed not to sell off any agricultural land or urban property. Young educated balahis are encouraged to take up priestly work to serve the community, and in all spheres balahis are told to utilise services of persons of their own caste, with a view to promoting entrepreneurship within the caste. Vegetarianism is encouraged and the argument given is that 'all well-off communities are vegetarian and poor communities, non vegetarian'. Biological reasons are cited in favour of vegetarianism and the camel and elephant named as examples of strong and powerful vegetarian animals.⁹¹

⁹¹. 'Balai Samaj Parichay Sannelan Smaarika', 1995 (pratham varsh). Apart from the matter stated in the text, this brochure contained lists and details of marriageable children of balahis of various sub-castes.

Caste consciousness among balahis is exclusive, that is, it is not part of a larger 'dalit' consciousness. Chamars and bagris, the other two large Scheduled Caste conglomerations in the area remain firmly out of these attempts towards caste unity. In fact this unity is to an extent based on keeping out other castes which are still 'unclean'. The emphasis also is upon the social and economic mobility of the caste itself, and upon popularising the already widely shared understanding among caste members that the balahis are the oldest inhabitants of Malwa. All others are regarded a later invaders who dispossessed them of the land they had cleared, by cutting down forests and relegated them to the position of agricultural labourers, on their own lands.⁹² Balahis are originally considered to have been kshatriyas (some lineages claim Brahmin ancestry) before they were tricked by these outsiders.

Though this understanding seems superficially similar to the kind of consciousness written about by Phule in 'Ghulamgiri' the two differ substantially. The latter conception led to a demand for unity among all sudras and atisudras who are identified as the original kshatriyas and the original inhabitants of the country. Another element in this framework was that Brahmins are the invaders who came

⁹². Ibid., and also interview with balahi bhat, Raver-Sawer, 19.12.94.

from outside India, from Iran, and deprived peace-loving tillers of their land.⁹³

The political content and intention of the belief articulated by the balahis is quite different from that of Phule. For one, the balahis speak not of being original inhabitants of India, but only of Malwa. Secondly, while Phule wrote of a wider community, the balahi leaders speak exclusively of unity within the caste. Thirdly the understanding that balahis are the oldest inhabitants of a place emerged not from the conscious efforts of a social reformer but was traditionally articulated by caste genealogists, primarily to provide a subsection of the caste with a glorious past. Modern day leaders have extended the same formula to all sections of the balahi caste as they try to negate its regional subdivisions.

Thus the Kabirpanth and now the balahi caste organisation are seen to be stressing on somewhat similar goals. The organisational structure of the Kabirpanth was adopted by the same kinds of leaders of the caste in the early 1980s in order to improve the 'standards' and 'status' of the caste in the absence of any pre-existing basis of caste-organisation. But over the last two years as caste organisation takes hold balahi membership of the panth in

⁹³. Phule, Jotirao, Ghulamgiri, (Eng. translation), preface, in Collected Works of Mahatma Jotirao Phule, vol.1, Education Department of govt. of Maharashtra, 1991.

Malwa seems to be stagnating and mahants like Keshavdas are having to resort to miracle making and organising glamorous mega-events to get new disciples.⁹⁴

Many of the leaders of the panth, both Kabirpanthis and those striving for caste unity are doing well for themselves economically. Many have government jobs in offices or teach in schools.⁹⁵ It is not a far-fetched assumption that their economic standing to an extent encouraged these aspirations. It must still be remembered that not all balahis who are well-off have similar aspirations or strive for such larger identities. And as this dissertation has attempted to show, the forms of these aspirations have been changing frequently.

⁹⁴. Interviews in Dewas, May, 1996.

⁹⁵. Since caste-wise employment statistics were not available, the next best thing that could be checked was the caste of the applicants at the govt. employment exchange. At the Dewas Employment Office, in 1988-89, the caste wise break-up of those applying for reserved jobs (qualification- passed 12th std.) was as follows- 5 applicants of the chamar caste, 1 of bagri, 1 of mehtar, 1 of khatik and 14 members of the balahi caste. In 1996, till May, there were 1 chamar applicant, 1 bagri, and 8 Bali applicants. In 1981, there were 1 bairwa, 1 bhambhi, and 2 balahi applicants. Of course, the percentage of those who get placements after applying are very low, and some applications from the early '80s are still pending. Nonetheless, these statistics show, at the very least, that many more balahis (all males) are passing the 12th std. examination and coming into the job market, as compared to other SCs. Ultimately of course, many applicants would get 'private' jobs, or just go back to their fields and agricultural work. Amongst students availing of the govt. scholarship for deserving SC candidates, balahis number the highest. Eg., in the Tonk Kalan High School, 10 balahi students were getting it in 1996 (3 chamar, 3 mehtar, 1 banchda student also get the scholarship). At Jamgot High School, 12 balahi, and 7 chamar students, while in Devli Middle School, 14 balahi, and only 3 chamar, 2 bagri, 1 khatik student avail of the scholarship. (Source: *Aadim jati vikas karyalay, Dewas*).

The slow but steady process towards acquisition of a higher social status continues among members of this caste in Malwa. Some have acquired a higher status by availing of reservations. It is neither a straight-forward sanskritizing move nor a militant assertion of a dalit identity that seems to be taking place here. If the success of the process of mobility has to be gauged by how others regard it, it is not particularly 'successful'. So the barber at Barandwa still does not serve his balahi customers. But many balahis themselves feel empowered by these attempts. At the same time they are inevitably moving away from the other untouchable castes, shirking from their touch and separating themselves from the others by their cleanliness.

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NOTE: Only those interviews that were directly relevant to this dissertation have been listed. The structure of the interviews was such that often many people would sit together and collectively answer even if my questions would be primarily addressed to one or two persons. The names of all interviewees have been changed though all other details have been retained. Only the names of politicians like Bapulal Malwiya, Radhakrishna Malwiya and Resham bai Yadav and her husband, Girdhari Lal (who acts as her spokesman) have been retained. Ages (in years) of interviewees are noted within brackets next to their names.

- October 1993 Bhajan sessions at workshop organised by Eklavya at Maksi, as part of the work of the 'Kabir Vichar Manch'.
- 2.7.94 Nirguni/Kabir Bhajan session at Dewas.
- 22.11.94 Preliminary interview with Lachmanji Delamya (age about 50), at Barandwa, Tarana tehsil, Ujjain district.
- 23.11.94 Preliminary interview with Siyaram Dangi (about 45) at Jhonkar, Shajapur tehsil, Shajapur district. Followed by bhajans.
- 24.11.94 Meeting in Atmaram's (age about 25) house, balahi mohalla, Sindani village, (near Siya), Dewas tehsil, Dewas district. Also interview with and heard bhajans by another woman Sampadbai (40s), interview with Jatanbai (22-23), wife of Atmaram.
- 27.11.94 Interviews with Siyaram Dangi, his mother (60s), his sister Radhabai (late 30s) and his second wife Shantabai, balahi mohalla, Jhonkar. Also interviews in the Chamar

mohalla with Kondaji (late 60s), Dhapubai (late 80s), Kuntabai (30s), Baldeo (30s) and others.

29.11.94

Interviews with Ramchandra Sonwan (about 55-60, Mehtar samaj), his wife and sons, and women (like Ramabai who is in her 30s) in the mehtar houses next to the balahi mohalla; also Leelabai (30s), also with five factory workers, one member of mehtar samaj and all others balahi, in balahi mohalla; Ghasidas (50s), balahi babaji, son-in-law of Narbedas, Kabirpanthi preacher (mahant) in the 1920s, and Nanibai and Nanuram, (both in their 80s), balahi mohalla, at Jhonkar.

1.12.94

Interviews with Barandwa balahi bhajan mandali, and Bheraba, (age about 85), Barandwa. Also with Dularibai, wife of Lachmanji, (40s).

4.12.94

Interviews with Sharmaji, (brahmin, age about 70) follower of Singhaji (herdsman saint of Nimar), Kirtan session at 'birthday celebrations of Singhaji'- all the groups which sang were comprised of khatis, who seem to be the main followers of this 'saint'; interviews in balahi mohalla with Jatanbai (age 80, different from Jatanbai of Barandwa), Chitu Malwiya (mid 20s), old man (who had lived at the time of the 1899 famine, or so he claimed, all at Devli, Tonk Khurd block, Sonkatch tehsil, Dewas district. Also at neighbouring village of Renail Kalan, interviews with 2 devotees (members of bania and lohar castes) and old woman (caretaker) at shrine of local 'saint' Bhikaridas, and in balahi mohalla of village with old man (referred universally as ba saheb), and group of men of mali caste in the village.

- 4.12.94 Chauka-aarti programme at Tonk Kalan. Bhajans by Kanchandevi of Ujjain, Prakash Singh Tipaniya of Luniyakhedi and others
- 5.12.94 Interview with Keshavchand Malwiya (about 65), warden of Harijan Boys' Hostel, Rewabagh, Dewas town.
- 6.12.94 Interview with Bhagirath Saheb (60s), and Ambaram baba (50s), Nayi Abaadi, Mochi Mohalla, Dewas.
- 7.12.94 Interview and bhajan session, Ambaram baba, Bhagirath Saheb and two neighbours.
- 7.12.94 Interviews with Balakram (60s), his son Prakash Singh Tipaniya (40s), his wife Swarambai (60s), Sunita bai (late 20s) his daughter in law, Pappu (a teenager, Tipaniya's nephew); and bhajan session, Luniyakhedi, balahi mohalla, Tarana tehsil, Ujjain district.
- 10.12.94 Interviews with Padriba (about 90), Narayan (sarpanch), Lachmanji, Dularibai, his wife, balahi mohalla, Barandwa
- 11.12.94 Interviews with Ratanbai (almost 100), Bapuram, Bagri mohalla, and Gangabai over 70), ex-dai (traditional midwife), balahi mohalla Barandwa.
- 12.12.94 Interviews with members of family of bhats of Maru balahis, (Bheruji and Shiv Prasad, the bhats were out on their rounds), Lakhwara village, near Bagli, Dewas district.
- 13.12.94 Interviews with Radheshyam Pehelwan (late 40s) and wife Durgabai (40s), Bhonsle Colony, Dewas.

- 13.12.94 Interview with Resham bai Yadav (50s) and Girdhari lal (50s), her husband, Bagri mohalla, Dewas.
- 14.12.94 Interview with Sukhmandas Saheb (80s), Jabran Colony, Indore.
- 15.12.94 Interview with Sheetalbai (50s), Shamlalba (about 85), Atmaram 'Mistri' (40s), Salokibai (80s), Shankardas Tyagi (50s), Dudhlai, Ujjain district, Chauka aarti and bhajans, also interviews with the mahant Parbatdas (50s).
- 16.12.94 Dudhlai, bhajans sung by women of the house the morning after the chauka aarti.
- 16.12.94 Interview with Anandramba, (80s), Soochai, Tarana tehsil, Ujjain, also interview with Ambalal Patwari (60s) and members of his family in Kanthdi, also in Tarana tehsil.
- 17.12.94 Interview with Narottamdas (claims to be over 120 years old), Kabirpanthi mahant, and Radheshyam pehelwan, Bhonsle Colony, Dewas. Also at Kabir Kuti, Keshavdas's ashram (he was out doing chaukas), interviews with a new convert Kaluram (resident of Mochi Mohalla), an elderly lady called 'mummy ji', Jagdish (balahi) and some other converts.
- 19.12.94 Interview with young bhat Prakash (20s), and the older bhats looking on, Rawer-Sawer, Indore.
- 20.12.94 Interviews with Kanchan devi (30s), woman preacher and mahant Mangaldas (late 40s), Ujjain.
- 22.12.94 Interview with Shivnathji (60s), Rewabagh, Dewas.

- 23.12.94 Interview with Bapulal Malwiya (late 60s)
Dewas.
- 3-6 February, 1995 Interviews at Radhaswami Satsang,
Bhanwarkuan, Indore.
- 20.5.96 Interview with Lachmanji, Dewas.
- 27.5.96 Interviews with Prakashmuninam and Bhawani
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- 29.5.96 Interviews with math inmates, Prakashmuninam
and others, Damakhera, near Raipur.
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