

## Chapter 4

# Castes and Caste Relationships

### Introduction

In order to understand the agrarian system in any Indian local community it is necessary to understand the workings of the caste system, since caste patterns much social and economic behaviour.

The major responses to the uncertain environment of western Rajasthan involve utilising a wide variety of resources, either by spreading risks within the agro-pastoral economy, by moving into other physical regions (through nomadism) or by tapping in to the national economy, through civil service, military service or other employment.

In this chapter I aim to show how tapping in to diverse resource levels can be facilitated by some aspects of caste organisation. To a certain extent members of different castes have different strategies consonant with their economic status and with organisational features of their caste. One aspect of this is that the higher castes, which constitute an upper class at the village level, are able to utilise alternative resources more easily than the lower castes, because the options are more restricted for those castes which own little land. This aspect will be raised in this chapter and developed later.

I wish to emphasise that the use of the term 'class' in this context refers to a local level class structure defined in terms of economic criteria (essentially land ownership). All of the people in Hinganiya, and most of the people throughout the village cluster, would rank very low in a class system defined nationally or even on a district basis. While the differences loom large on a local level, they are relatively minor in the wider context.

In the pages that follow I will first describe some of the features of each of the five castes present in Hinganiya; secondly I will describe the main forms of caste interaction.

## **Rajputs**

### *(a) Background*

There are two distinct groups of Rajputs present in Hinganiya. The main Rajput population consists of members of the Bhati clan. The others are of the Soda clan. The Bhati Rajputs are descendants of one of the two original Thakurs (landlords) of the village. The four households of Soda Rajputs are descendants of one of two brothers (the other died childless) who moved to Hinganiya from Pali District about sixty years ago. In a census which I carried out in 1985-86, the four households of Soda Rajputs accounted for twenty-eight individuals; there were nineteen households of Bhatias (127 individuals).

In Rajasthan, Rajputs (literally *raja putra*, son of a king) are the principal representatives of the Kshatriya varna in the Hindu varna system, although some non-Rajput informants claim that some non-Rajput castes also have Kshatriya status. Most Rajputs would hotly dispute any such claims. For practical purposes, the words Rajput and Kshatriya are seen as equivalent by most Rajasthanis.

During the period when Rajasthan consisted of a number of princely states, all except two of these states were ruled by Rajputs. The Rajas were supported by other members of the warrior Rajput caste.

Tod, the British Political Agent to Western Rajputana early in the nineteenth century, wrote an account (1894, first published in 1829-32) of the history of the major Rajput kingdoms. He argued that the socio-political system of Rajasthan, even up to his own time, was similar to European feudalism. Without going into a debate about the utility of the concept of feudalism for comparative analysis, it is true to say that there were considerable similarities. Maharajahs were linked with local Rajput landlords, sometimes through various vassal intermediaries

In exchange for an annual rent and taxes and the provision of troops, the Rajas made grants of land to prominent Rajput lords. There were a number of distinct types of grants, all involving different obligations and rights in the relationship between landlord and Raja. A system called *Jagir* was particularly common. (I shall be dealing with the landholding system in greater detail later.) Such a grant (usually hereditary) carried the title Thakur (or *Jagirdar*) and almost complete power over the residents of villages on the land. The Thakurs sub-let portions of land to various tenants in exchange for a share of production. From the other Rajputs resident in his domain (often, but not necessarily, from his own clan, sub-clan or lineage), the Thakur maintained a fighting force for the use of the Raja on call (and often for his own use).

Just as in feudal Europe, the ties were the subject of frequent rebellions and shifting alliances. The origin of ties between farmers and

local chiefs seems to have involved something of a 'protection racket'. The development of large scale territorial units linking local chiefdoms under feudal lords was no doubt part of the same process. This is not to deny that the relationships between Maharajahs and vassals were highly ritualised and idealised.

The village Rajputs were themselves often tenants of the Thakur, and further sub-let land superfluous to their own needs. The extent to which Rajputs actually worked land held for self-cultivation themselves, or had it worked on their behalf by landless labourers, varied depending on the wealth of the individual Rajput. The *Jagir* land was something of a feudal estate, with a ruling Rajput caste headed by a Thakur, tenant farmers, artisans and landless labourers. An additional category of land (*khalsa*) was land directly controlled by the ruler. It tended to be at the centre of the kingdom.

The Rajputs, as Kshatriyas, included Rajas, courtiers and officials, Thakurs and the warrior cultivators in the villages. Increasingly the last group became cultivators, but a strong consciousness of warrior identity persists.<sup>1</sup>

Related to the socio-political structure described briefly above, was a set of values emphasising valour, honour, fame. The Rajput military tradition still exists at the village level. In Hinganiya, in 1985/86, six men were in the armed forces, and there were six retired servicemen. All of these (except one Bishnoi ex-serviceman) were Rajputs.

Rajputs have an elaborate egalitarianism in terms of food sharing. This can be seen as a form of camaraderie. Rajput men, irrespective of individual rank or prestige, eat from a common plate. When important guests are dining with their hosts both sides may force food into the mouths of the other, then proceed to eat, by hand, out of the common plate.<sup>2</sup> Rajputs are also characterised (and think of themselves as) meat-eaters and drinkers of wine, and often as womanisers.

Despite their self-image as womanisers, the Rajput attitude to the purity of their women seems similar to the chivalric code associated with feudal Europe. One Rajput told me of a Hindi saying which he translated as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> The Rajput's self-image as a warrior has been discussed by Hitchcock (1959).

<sup>2</sup> The general meaning of this as a sort of aggressive display of egalitarianism was always obvious to me. However, since working in Nepal where ritual purity is much more seriously preserved than it is in Rajasthan, I have realised how radically this sort of behaviour departs from the Hindu concern with pollution. I am not sure whether the behaviour indicates a lack of concern with pollution or whether it is a symbolic statement about Rajput solidarity which *depends* on a breach of normal purity based behaviour.

## *Castes and Caste Relationships*

When someone is spoiling your religion,  
when someone is taking your property by force;  
or when someone is insulting your ladies,  
that is the day to fight.

All of these things are symbols of dignity and honour for a Rajput. Having and defending property and defending 'ladies' and religion are the basis of Rajput perceptions of status and self-image.

The concern with the virtue of Rajput women is evident in the legend of the famous fort at Chittorgarh. On three occasions the fort was under siege. The Rajput men rode out to certain death, while the women committed ritual suicide (*jauhar*), throwing themselves on a huge funeral pyre. Rajput legends often refer to bloody events like this, all demonstrating the ideal of Rajput behaviour and often emphasising glorious defeats rather than glorious victories.

Part of the underlying theme in this legend is virtue, but also evident is a distaste for subservience. Carstairs quotes from an interview with a very senior Rajput (the former holder of what Carstairs compares to a 'dukedom'):

We had great times when he [the speaker's father] had his birthday. There would be a feast with wine and dancing girls. Yes, from 5 to 6 years old. I remember that. They were so well-dressed. We admire beauty but we do not touch it. They came from a servant caste or Beragi Saddhu caste, or Mahammedans. If a woman of high caste chose to do this work she would soon be killed. We think it is the lowest work; to be a puppet in another's hands. (Carstairs 1957:183)

Carstairs, who describes the distinct values of Rajputs, and their drinking, meat-eating and use of prostitutes, suggests that 'there is a conflict between a Rajput's caste and his religious values' (1957:124). While there is a recognition of conflict with Hindu values, this is rarely seen as important. At the same time, some Rajputs avoid meat and alcohol for religious reasons. Carstairs pressed the informant quoted above about the inconsistency of drinking and so on with 'spiritual rise' The informant argued that

. . .so long as your spiritual rise is the most important thing for you, you can engage in everyday affairs... without being deflected from the most important purpose. (Carstairs 1957:194. The direct quote is from Carstairs, not his informant.)

This is, of course, the doctrinal Hindu position for Kshatriyas.

The existence of a characteristic set of Rajput values is an important determinant of Rajput behaviour. The most significant element economically is the impetus this gives to Rajputs towards taking up military service. The conception of Rajputs as being naturally good fighters enhances the chances of recruitment.

*(b) Organisation of the Rajput Caste*

The Rajput caste is sub-divided into three *vamsh* (lines). These are the Suriyavamsh (sun-line, claiming descent from Rama), the Chandravamsh (moon-line, claiming descent from Krishna) and the Agnivamsh (the fire-line, claiming descent from Agni). Each *vamsh* consists of a number of sub-divisions. There are ten sub-divisions in the Suriyavamsh, four in the Chandravamsh and four in the Agnivamsh. In English translation these sub-divisions are usually called clans. In local usage the word *jati* (caste) is often used, although *jati* also refers to the category/group 'all Rajputs'. At first I believed that the most suitable term for these sub-divisions was sub-caste, but these groups are exogamous, which means that they do not meet an essential factor in the definition of sub-castes. A further feature of these sub-divisions is that the members claim descent from a common ancestor. For this reason, and because it is a commonly used translation, I use the term clan.

Clans are further sub-divided. The lower level of sub-division is, according to some informants, called a *khamp*. Other informants use *khamp* (usually less confidently) to refer to the clan. This confusion even exists among the more scholarly Rajputs. At the village level people very rarely use the term at all and few recognise it. As this level of sub-division usually consists of people claiming descent from a common ancestor (ocasionally the group is named after a place of origin), the term sub-clan is the most useful for analytical purposes.

Sub-clans are further sub-divided into lineages of various sizes. The word *awlad* (lineage) is used when individuals are referring to the descendants of a particular ancestor. The term does not refer to a lineage of any particular depth. It simply refers to all the patrilineal descendants of X. For example, all Bhati Rajputs in Hinganiya are descendants of Sundar Dassji (the founding Bhati Thakur) and are thus part of *Sundar Dassji ka Awlad* (Sundar Dassji's lineage). At another level it is possible to talk about all of the descendants of Moti Singh (the third last Thakur) as *Moti Singh ka Awlad*. An *awlad* is not usually a permanent named group, but a descriptive device used in specific contexts. In some cases, however, maximal lineages are permanent named groups.

There are two other structural terms that must be briefly mentioned: *gotra* and *nukh*. The *gotra* is an exogamous category theoretically quite distinct from the clan and lineage system. A *gotra* was described to me as a group descended from ancient gurus (*Rishis*) and this is close to the

original (and formal) meaning in Hinduism. It, said one informant, was originally a matter for Brahmans and Kshatriyas, but other castes now have *gotras*. In fact, outside Brahman castes *gotras* are not well known. Many village Rajputs seem not to be clear about what the word *gotra* refers to and my own observations support Blunt's statement that 'Rajput clans... possess *gotras* but ignore them for marriage purposes' (1931:45). Similarly my observations are consistent with his view that the term *gotra* (or *got*) has lost its original meaning in many (non-Brahman, non-Kshatriya) castes and is used as the term for the exogamous sub-divisions of a caste (Blunt 1931:44). In fact, it refers to exogamous clans in most castes and is used more or less interchangeably with *jati*. It is quite clear that the term *gotra* no longer has a single shared meaning, precisely because it is no longer structurally important within most castes.

Some Rajput informants told me that *nukh* is a sub-division of *gotra*, but others used it to describe the level of sub-division below sub-clan (that is, a maximal lineage). No informant was, however, ever confident about what a *nukh* is. It is also quite obvious that many Rajputs do not know their *nukh* - at least by that name.

The essential point about all of these various levels of division is that there are either no indigenous general terms for a level of division, or the term is rarely used and often not known even by people who regard themselves (and are regarded by others) as experts on Rajput history and culture. While there are no widely used generic terms, the levels of division are socially recognised.

As Blunt points out (1931:10), the lack of consistently used indigenous terms for caste sub-divisions is true of castes generally in northern India. Different terms have different meanings to different people within a caste and are used differently between castes. A consequence is that the technical terms used by anthropologists and other scholars are also inconsistent.

In the absence of any consistently defined terms for the structural sub-divisions of castes, it is important to specify my own 'technical' definitions. The terms are used consistently in this study, but sub-divisions coinciding with each term do not exist for every caste.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> My usage is another attempt to get over a problem that has plagued scholars for some time:

'The terminology of subdivisions of the caste is extremely vague. In 1885 Sir Denzil Ibbetson, Sir Herbert Risley and Mr Nesfield laid down certain English terms for use in ethnographic enquiries called "subcaste" and "subtribe" respectively; the largest exogamous groups were designated "section" and "sept". The attempt failed largely because there were no general vernacular terms to correspond.' (Blunt 1931:10)

I use the term caste to refer to an endogamous unit and, where they exist, I use sub-caste to refer to the smallest endogamous sub-divisions of that unit. Branch refers to major sub-divisions within the major unit (caste). Clan refers to a named exogamous unit which asserts descent from a common ancestor. Sub-clan refers to a named exogamous division asserting descent from a lower level common ancestor. Lineage refers to lower level descent groups, which might or might not be named, according to context.

Table 4.1 summarises Rajput caste structure on the basis of my terminology and indigenous terminology. I must stress that Rajputs often don't know the indigenous terms for structural divisions, (as opposed to the names of specific groups) and rarely use them anyhow. Rajputs (and members of other castes for that matter) use a sort of segmentary logic when talking about castes and lineages.

Rajputs do not ask 'What is your *khamp*?' They ask 'What is your *jati*?'<sup>4</sup> Sometimes the answer will be 'Rajput'; at other times it will be a clan name; sometimes it will be a sub-clan name. It may be a sub-clan name on the assumption that the questioner will know to which clan a given sub-clan belongs. For example, in Jodhpur District a large proportion of Rajputs are from one of two clans, Rathor and (to a lesser extent) Bhati. Within the region, resident Bhati or Rathor Rajputs will usually identify themselves by their sub-clan (for example, Jodha, a Rathor sub-clan or Jaisaha, a Bhati sub-clan). Any other Rajput living within the region will be familiar with the sub-clans of Rathors and Bhaties. Members of other clans (for example, Inder or Parihar) would usually identify themselves by the name of their clan, since questioners might not be familiar with the sub-divisions. Whatever the response, if the questioner wants further detail he will simply ask 'Which Inder?' or 'Which Parihar?'

This can all be rather subtle. The Bhati Rajputs in Hinganiya are of Bhati clan, Jaisaha sub-clan, Bera Dasot maximal lineage. If a stranger was attempting to place one of them socially the conversation might go like this:

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<sup>4</sup> In my view *jati* has often been mistranslated. It usually is taken to mean an endogamous unit and is glossed as 'caste'. In practice it means something like 'group', and has shifting references according to context. It often actually refers to exogamous groups. Rajasthanis also use it to refer to religious affiliation, as in the following series of questions put to me.

Q. What is your *jati*?

A. No *jati*.

Q Muslim?

A No.

Q Christian?

**Table 4.1**  
**Rajput caste structure**

<i>English Term</i>	<i>Indigenous Term</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Structural Importance</i>
line/division	vamsh	Chandravamsh	No structural importance apparent
clan	jati (also used for all Rajputs)	Bhati	Exogamous
sub-clan	khamp	Jaisaha	Exogamous
maximal lineage	awlad?	Bera Dasot	Exogamous
lineage	awlad	Sunder Dassji-ki-awlad	Not corporate group, nor permanently named group

Q. What is your jati?

A. Rajput.

Q. Which Rajput?

A. Bhati.

Q. Which Bhati?

A. Jaisaha.

Q. Which Jaisaha?

A. Bera Dasot.

Occasionally major steps are left out. On one occasion one of the Hinganiya Rajputs met a group of Rajputs migrating with herds from Jaisalmer. Neither side knew the other side's affiliations. The questions went like this:

Q. Where do you come from?

A. Jaisalmer.

Q. What is you jati?

A. Rajput.

Q. Which Rajput?

A. Bhati.

Q. Which Bhati?

A. Bera Dasot.

In other words the respondent omitted the sub-clan level. Presumably it was understood that the questioner would know that Bera Dasot was a

sub-division of Jaisaha. Perhaps it was also assumed that any Bhati from Jaisalmer would necessarily be a Jaisaha.

This exercise, and the description of Rajput caste structure which precedes it, demonstrates the operation of the lineage principle within the Rajput caste. Rajputs are not divided into endogamous sub-castes, but into exogamous clans, sub-clans and lower level lineages. Particularly below the level of sub-clan what we find seems something like a segmentary lineage system, at least in the sense that lineages have shifting boundaries. The boundaries depend on whichever level of ancestor is thought to be significant for whatever reason. Internal Rajput caste structure is based on a segmentary, fissioning principle, not a principle of endogamy.<sup>5</sup>

*(c) Marriage Exchange*

- The main functions of clans and sub-clans is to regulate marriage exchange. Rajput marriage rules are as follows:
- The Rajput caste as a whole is endogamous.
- Clans are exogamous.
- Sub-clans are, as sub-divisions of exogamous clans, also exogamous by definition.
- There are also rules prohibiting a man from marrying into his mother's sub-clan or his father's mother's sub-clan. (These are

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<sup>5</sup> While compiling genealogical data for the Jaisaha Rajputs in Hinganiya I was able to produce six separate charts linking members of various households into minimal lineages of varying depths. Despite the claim of common descent from Sunder Dassji (as members of his lineage) and common sub-clan membership, I was unable to obtain even a tentative guess from any informant as to how these descent groups might be linked. No informant had any claim of genealogical knowledge beyond three ascending generations. Most have even less knowledge. One Rajput informant explained that detailed knowledge of such matters is unnecessary, because each clan has a genealogist who knows the details and keeps written records. Genealogists visit all members of the clan for which they are responsible every three years to keep their records up to date. The genealogists for Bhati Jaisaha are from the Rau caste and live in Udaipur District.

The shallow genealogical knowledge and apparently low level of concern for genealogical knowledge is emphatically different from the situation regarding the other castes in Hinganiya. In the cases of the Nayaks and Meghwals genealogies covering all members of each caste in the village were relatively easy to compile. In the case of the Meghwals, with a total population of under thirty, this is not, perhaps, surprising. But in the case of the Nayaks, with a population only slightly less than that of the Bhati Rajputs, the difference in knowledge is striking. Oddly, the linking Nayak genealogy was provided by a Nayak informant in the presence of Rajputs who seemed substantially aware of the genealogical details of the Nayaks, to a much greater depth than the genealogical knowledge they held of their own caste.

fairly standard Hindu rules. but they are usually applied to a clan not a sub-clan.)

The various lower level lineages (i.e. below sub-clan) are, by definition, also exogamous (as sub-divisions of exogamous groups). They have no significance for marriage, except that marriage into a particularly prestigious lineage (for example the lineage of a Maharaja or Thakur) might be sought after. The *vamsh* have no structural significance in marriage, as they are neither endogamous or exogamous.<sup>6</sup>

The most apparent feature of these Rajput marriage rules is the emphasis on exogamy below the level of the entire Rajput caste (effectively the entire Kshatriya varna). What is striking is the size of the category of potential marriage partners. It is not a case of having only a few tens of thousands of potential marriage partners within a sub-caste, but a case of having perhaps hundreds of thousands of potential marriage partners, with a few tens of thousands restricted because they are too closely related.

Despite the implications of these formal rules, there are two ways in which it could be argued that there is endogamy operating at a lower level than the category of 'all Rajputs' in some sort of *de facto* sense.

Firstly it could be argued that marriages occur within a locality and that this creates *de facto* local sub-castes. It is easy to reject this argument. It is true that people in villages tend, for practical reasons, to marry people who live reasonably close. However, while I do not have detailed data on all Rajput marriages (marriages-in and marriages-out) involving Hinganiya, I know of only two cases of a marriage involving a partner from an adjacent village. I am aware of no other marriage involving a partner from a village less than ten kilometres away. On the other hand I know of several marriages involving partners from greater distances. The tendency is to marry outside of a core circle of nearby villages and within a larger circle loosely defined by practical factors such as cost. Because the same approach applies in other villages, this does not create a local endogamous unit since the boundaries (loosely defined anyhow) vary for each village and thus overlap. Hinganiya Rajputs may be able to marry into village A sixty kilometres to the south-west, but not into village B one hundred and twenty kilometres in the same direction. Rajputs in villages A and B might, however, find it practical to marry each other.

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<sup>6</sup> Whatever its original significance, the *vamsh* now seems to be significant only in terms of religious affiliations. The clan gods are determined by the *vamsh* affiliation of the clan. Bhatias, as Chandravamsh, are officially followers of Krishna. In fact the greeting used by Bhati Rajputs is 'Jai-sri' or 'Jai-sri-Kishan' (victory to Lord Krishna) as opposed to the general Rajput greeting 'Jai-mata-jiri' (victory of the Mother Goddess).

The second possible argument for *de facto* endogamous sub-groups is that clans tend to restrict marriages to a limited number of other clans. Rathors and Bhatīs will marry, but marriage between either and an Inder Rajput would be unlikely because the Inder clan is not at all prestigious. The prestige of various Rajput clans varies immensely. Clans which have royal lineages (such as the Rathors, who ruled both Jodhpur and Bikaner, and the Bhatīs, who ruled Jaisalmer) are usually given high prestige. Even a poor Bhati Jaisaha Rajput in Hinganiya shares some of the prestige associated with having a royal lineage within his sub-clan. The question arises: to what extent could clusters of clans with similar prestige become effectively endogamous?

At first sight endogamous clusters of clans with similar prestige seem very plausible. In fact, of twenty-five Bhati marriages in Hinganiya for which I have data, all involved marriages with men or women from various sub-clans of the Rathor clan. Nevertheless, I would argue that this does not set up endogamous sub-castes because Rajput marriages are non-localised and the boundaries are not fixed. The high incidence of marriages between Bhatīs from Hinganiya and Rathors from other villages is probably related to the very high proportion of Rathor Rajputs in the area, as well as to their high prestige.

As wife-taking is more prestigious than wife-giving there is a tendency towards hypergamy. Bahadur (1978) sets out in great detail the clans from which each Rajput clan will take wives and the clans to which it will give wives. Blunt (1931) sums up the situation, and the crucial limiting factor:

Amongst Rajputs, the relative rank of the various clans is carefully determined; every Rajput knows into what clans he may marry a son or daughter. If the practice were uniform everywhere, it would be possible to lay down an exact warrant of marriage precedence: but a clan ranked high in one district is often ranked low in another, and in the second gives brides to clans from which in the first it accepts them. (Blunt 1931:47)

As endogamy associated with a tendency towards hypergamy (high status groups taking women in marriage from lower status groups) is commonly associated with caste (Dumont 1970), some hypergamy could also be accommodated within a model of ranked clusters of clans approximating sub-castes. However, the variability of ranking between regions, combined with inter district marriages, means that clan clusters based on similar prestige levels could never effectively become endogamous groups, or even endogamous groups with a tendency towards hypergamy.

The reasons for selecting a certain marriage partner are connected with obtaining prestige and creating alliances. Village Rajputs with relatively high prestige will seek marriage alliances with people with similar (or higher) prestige, and this often means having to go fairly far afield. The question of creating alliances is important in terms of establishing a network of people who can provide accommodation and hospitality (inter-village visiting being a favourite Rajput occupation). Affines may even mind livestock in conditions of local shortage of fodder, water or labour. Affines may also assist in obtaining positions in government or private service. For this reason a marriage with connections in Jodhpur is particularly advantageous. The general adaptive advantages of such networks are obvious.

The objectives of making prestigious marriages and creating alliances are particularly evident among the wealthy, educated Rajputs in the cities. Rajputs from the ruling lineage in Jodhpur (a branch of the Rathor Jodha sub-klan) have made marriages with Rajputs as far away as Nepal and Gujarat. In Chapter 9, I will be examining one household cluster of Hinganiya Rajputs which has placed great importance on marriage alliances as a strategy for developing economically useful urban connections.

The importance of alliances is reflected in the exchanges of gifts and money associated with marriage and in the cost of ceremonies. Exchange at marriage consist of a variety of gifts. The *dayza* consists of gifts from a father to his daughter. These are in the form of useful items (beds etc) and jewellery. The *dayza* also includes gifts to the bride from the husband (perhaps in the form of jewellery or watches). *Tika* is money from the bride's father to the bridegroom. It is usually given at the time of engagement and acts as a guarantee that arrangements cannot be broken. Various other exchanges of gifts occur. For example, the bridegroom's side gives clothes (or money for clothes) to the bride. Jewellery can be given, but clothing is essential. The bridegroom's father gives no gifts to anyone. The bridegroom gives money to the bride before the marriage is consummated.

Costs of the marriage are shared by the two sides. The costs of the wedding (payment for Brahman etc.) are paid by the bride's father, whereas the costs of the *barat* (the journey by the bridegroom's party to the girl's village) are paid by the groom's father. The share of the costs to be paid by each side are decided at the *sagai* (engagement). The breakdown and total to be spent depend on the details of this agreement and the availability of money. Among Rajputs, the larger share usually (but not invariably) falls on the bride's side. One of the Hinganiya Rajputs, married in 1984, claimed that his father-in-law paid about Rs 50,000 (including about Rs 20,000 in jewellery) whereas the groom's side spent only about Rs 8000. Generally the greater share comes from the

girl's side, although this is apparently not always the case. The absolute cost and the costs to each side naturally depend on the relative wealth of the two parties and the relative desirability of the two partners, especially in terms of the potential long-term benefits to be gained through affinal ties.

In this section I have briefly mentioned the existence of characteristic Rajput values. I have also argued that the structure of the caste consists of segmented lineages (with named groups at the upper levels). Within the context of the wider endogamous caste the structure emphasises lineage exogamy rather than sub-caste endogamy. This structure facilitates quite widespread networks of marital alliances which would have been useful in the days when Rajputs were mostly concerned with fighting wars, enforcing the wills of the rulers and with feuding. The same networks now provide contacts which can be utilised in seeking employment and in opening economic options in other ways. All of this happens at the cost of substantial ceremonial expense as well as the costs of dowry and travel.

### **Bishnois**

In the Rajput period the Bishnois were tenant farmers. Now they are a politically influential and fairly prosperous caste, still primarily involved in agriculture. In the following pages I will pay some attention to Bishnoi history (and mythology) because much of the current status of Bishnois can only be understood in terms of their history, their distinctive religious beliefs, and their use of religious beliefs as political symbols. A discussion of their caste structure will follow.

#### *(a) Ecological Saints or Kingmakers?*

The Bishnoi caste was originally a Hindu sect which took members from all castes, although Jats (the main caste of tenant farmers) were predominant. While it remains a sect concerned with the worship of Vishnu, it has become endogamous and is now regarded as a caste. Blunt (1931) refers to the Bishnois as a sectarian caste and I will adhere to this usage.

The sect originated near Nagaur, between Jodhpur and Bikaner, and the Bishnoi population is now mostly concentrated in the arid parts of Rajasthan. Erskine wrote in 1909 that Bishnois in Rajputana were concentrated in only four states: Jodhpur, Bikaner, Jaisalmer and Udaipur. Bishnois are also found outside Rajasthan, particularly at Hissar (in Haryana, originally the Punjab). Bania Bishnois (that is of merchant caste origin) are reported at Muradabad (the former North Western Provinces) (Maclagan, 1892) and as far away as Bijnaur (near Meerut in Uttar Pradesh) (Sherring 1974).

The Bishnois are well known in Rajasthan, and are an important caste politically. However, while there are many references to them in various gazetteers and glossaries of tribes and castes and in the popular press, relatively little of substance has been published, at least in English. A Village Survey Monograph in the 1961 Census of India series (Gupta 1965) deals with the village of Mukam, a major Bishnoi centre, and provides the only monographic publication I have seen on the sect. In Hindi there are several biographies of Jambhaji, the founder of the sect, by his followers, plus a collection of his sayings called the 'Jambh Sagar'

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In his childhood Jambheshwarji is said to have begun tending his cows which he continued upto the age of twentyseven. After the attainment of this age he is said to have propagated the teachings of his sect. According to another legend Jambheshwarji was dumb upto the age of twelve. The parents were greatly worried on account of this disability of their son and they sought the services of a learned person from Nagaur to perform some ceremonies for curing Jambheshwarji of this trouble. Some earthen lamps put at the place of worship by the learned man could not be lighted. Jambheshwarji is then said to have lowered an unbaked earthen pot in the well with the aid of an untwisted thread and to have drawn out water from it. As soon as the water was sprinkled on the earthen lamps arranged by the learned man they began to burn spontaneously. All those who witnessed this miracle were wonderstruck and from that moment onwards Jambheshwarji was taken to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. (Gupta 1965: para 26)

I have already mentioned that the defining characteristic of the Bishnoi is that they are a sectarian caste devoted to the worship of Vishnu and that Jambhaji is regarded as an incarnation of Vishnu. The code of twenty-nine rules is the cornerstone of the sect's social and religious life. (The rules are provided as an Appendix.)

The rules include references to the purity of women after child-birth and menstruation, the requirement to bathe daily, to be faithful to one woman and so on. A number of rules show a high regard for the protection of life. For example, Bishnois are instructed never to take life, and, as far as possible to stop others from doing so; to never cut a green tree; never to geld a bullock; and to examine wood before burning to remove any insects or living things from it. This emphasis has recently led to a conception in some publications (e.g. Malhotra 1986) of Bishnois as some sort of ecological saints, profoundly concerned with conservation. This view has been picked up by many articles in popular publications (see, for example, Morrison 1985). While this is perhaps romanticised, there is obviously an extreme concern with the sanctity of life within the Bishnoi sect.

The Bishnois are particularly concerned with the preservation of the *khejri* tree and of the blackbuck. Deer are not specifically mentioned in the twenty-nine rules. The protection of the deer seems to fall under the general admonition to never take life, but there is no doubt that deer have a special place in the Bishnoi world view and the relationship with deer is one of the defining characteristics of the Bishnoi in the minds of other castes. While deer are legally protected they are nevertheless commonly hunted by members of other castes. Hunting trips are a popular past-time of Rajputs and Nayaks. For all that, great care is taken to hide hunting trips from Bishnois, or at least to refrain from making them too obvious.

Hunting is usually an activity of the late afternoon and early evening. At this time the concentration of deer around the Bishnoi *dhanis* is overwhelmingly obvious. It is popularly believed that deer know they are safe near *dhanis*. From my own observations I have no doubt whatsoever of this. I know from at least one first hand account of a wounded deer actually going inside a *dhani* to escape a hunting party.

The protection of animal life is the basis of several other customs. While the twenty-nine rules suggest only that sheep and goats should not be sold to a butcher, only one sheep was owned by a Bishnoi in Hinganiya. One informant said it was a rule of the Bishnois to keep no sheep and goats at all. A Bishnoi woman said that any Bishnoi who kept sheep and goats would be fined by the caste. The fine would be in the form of grain left out for birds.

Clearly a general rule has developed into something much more specific. On the other hand the rule that Bishnois should not eat opium is openly ignored, even flouted. Public gatherings at which opium is taken are among the occasions when Bishnois conspicuously interact with other castes. The opium used in Hinganiya (by all castes) is actually grown by and obtained from Bishnois in Kota District. The fact that the rules which might be described as 'conservationist' are taken very seriously, whereas

girl's side, although this is apparently not always the case. The absolute cost and the costs to each side naturally depend on the relative wealth of the two parties and the relative desirability of the two partners, especially in terms of the potential long-term benefits to be gained through affinal ties.

In this section I have briefly mentioned the existence of characteristic Rajput values. I have also argued that the structure of the caste consists of segmented lineages (with named groups at the upper levels). Within the context of the wider endogamous caste the structure emphasises lineage exogamy rather than sub-caste endogamy. This structure facilitates quite widespread networks of marital alliances which would have been useful in the days when Rajputs were mostly concerned with fighting wars, enforcing the wills of the rulers and with feuding. The same networks now provide contacts which can be utilised in seeking employment and in opening economic options in other ways. All of this happens at the cost of substantial ceremonial expense as well as the costs of dowry and travel.

### **Bishnois**

In the Rajput period the Bishnois were tenant farmers. Now they are a politically influential and fairly prosperous caste, still primarily involved in agriculture. In the following pages I will pay some attention to Bishnoi history (and mythology) because much of the current status of Bishnois can only be understood in terms of their history, their distinctive religious beliefs, and their use of religious beliefs as political symbols. A discussion of their caste structure will follow.

#### *(a) Ecological Saints or Kingmakers?*

The Bishnoi caste was originally a Hindu sect which took members from all castes, although Jats (the main caste of tenant farmers) were predominant. While it remains a sect concerned with the worship of Vishnu, it has become endogamous and is now regarded as a caste. Blunt (1931) refers to the Bishnois as a sectarian caste and I will adhere to this usage.

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## *If Rain Doesn't Come*

Mandor in 1458 and in 1459 he laid the foundations of Jodhpur Fort and shifted the capital from Mandor to Jodhpur. Rao Jodha's son Bika founded Bikaner state and another son, Rao Duda, annexed Merta.

What we have, then, is a number of cities ruled by Rathors. The surrounding areas were under variable degrees of control. Some were more effectively under control than others and the extent of effective control varied from time to time. The previous political structure seems to have been based essentially on small chiefdoms and to some degree this remained the case. Many of the people in the area between Bikaner and Jodhpur were pastoralists, often nomadic. It is understandable that they would not have been easy to pacify or control.

Max Harcourt (pers. comm.) argues that the development of the Karani Mata cult at Deshnoke, in the desert about thirty kilometres from Bikaner (and on the modern road between Bikaner and Jodhpur), was supported by the Rathors as a way to extend control over the rural population. It is surely no coincidence that the Bishnoi sect developed a few kilometres away in the same period and it is possible to show links between the consolidation of the Rathor states and the growth of the Bishnoi sect.<sup>7</sup> One aspect of this is the apparent attempt in a myth about Jambhaji, to provide a charter for Rao Duda's conquest of Merta.

In 1486 (or, perhaps, 1485)

. . . Merta was taken from Rao Duda by Mohindra and he was obliged to fly; he happened in his flight to alight at the village Peepasar; and at the time of his arrival the dumb Jamba was watering his flocks and herds at the village well. Duda observed that as he made a sign by lifting up his hand only so many of the cows as there was room for at one time at the well came to drink, as one set finished he again held up his hand when another lot of animals came forward to drink and this went on until all had quenched their thirst. Duda thought this a very wonderful proceeding and concluded that the cowherd must be imbued with supernatural powers; he did not like to speak to him there, but when he drove off the cattle, followed him on horseback. He found that when riding though always keeping in sight he could never overtake him; this again appeared most extraordinary. So dismounting he followed on foot and came up with him. Duda then put his hands together in a position of entreaty and asked his name. The man who had been dumb for thirtyfour years then spoke, said

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<sup>7</sup> Jambhaji was a contemporary of founders of other major sects: Kabir (1440-1518); Nanak (1469-1538). Michael Allen (pers. comm.) has drawn attention to the significance of this. It is quite possible that the appearance of a number of major sects at the same time is related to the same processes of state building and consolidation that I have described in regard to the Bishnois.

his name was Jamba, and in return asked Duda what he wanted. Duda related all that had occurred, how he had lost Merta and asked his advice as to what he should do to recover it. Jamba had a small... [axe] in his hand, and with this he cut a piece of stick from a Kher tree and out of it manufactured a straight sword, this sword he gave to Rao Duda, told him at once to proceed to Merta and retake it, and that so long as the sword remained in his family he would hold Merta.... Duda did as he was told and was successful.

From that time Jamba abandoned his occupation of shepherd.... In the same year... there was a great famine in the land. The Jats of all the countries round about where Jamba was living, began to make preparations to emigrate to more favourable lands. Jamba, however, told them that if they would become his followers he would feed them and that there was no necessity for leaving their country. They obeyed his instructions and became his disciples. . . . (Walter, n.d., quoted in Gupta 1965.)

The implications of this legend as a myth of charter (for Rao Duda) are obvious. The first words spoken by Jambhaji in his lifetime are a promise to a dispossessed ruler who goes off to regain his kingdom. The gift from the prophet is a cutting from a *khejri* tree and prohibition of the cutting of live trees (particularly the *khejri*) later becomes one of the twenty-nine tenets of the sect. Further, the connection between Duda and the prophet is dated to the same year as the foundation of the sect.

A further story (this one with a definite historical basis) shows the political aspect of Bishnoi sectarian practices. In 1631, during the reign of Maharajah Abhay Singh, troops were sent to the Bishnoi village of Khejarli about 20 km south of Jodhpur to cut timber for renovations to the palace. According to the story 363 Bishnois, mostly women, put their arms around the trees in order to protect them. At the orders of the Maharajah's official they were slaughtered. The Maharajah was so touched that he vowed that the beliefs of the Bishnois would thereafter always be respected. At the present day village, the massacre is commemorated with a monument, a temple and a nursery where *khejri* seedlings are grown. A fair held there in 1985 was attended by large numbers including a Bishnoi who was a government minister.

The Bishnoi rules are used in two ways in this story. Firstly, for the Bishnois themselves the *khejri* tree is a symbol of political resistance to the Rajputs. Secondly the story suggests that the Maharajah apparently decided that honouring the beliefs of the sect would be a better way of establishing control than by attempting to over-ride them. Again the story presents a charter for a special relationship between the state (this time Marwar) and the Bishnois.

There appear to be two related processes at work in the period. Firstly, the ruling Rajput clans attempted to neutralise the potential for revolt by using the sect (and other sects such as the Karani Mata sect) as a means of validating power, perhaps by enhancing their own credibility with the population at the expense of the credibility of rival Rajputs. Secondly, the Bishnois used the tenets of their sect as a symbolic focus for resistance, or self-assertion. This process, I have suggested, continues today.

If, as I have argued, the Rajput clans used the sect to validate their power, it is possible that the Mughals may have done the same thing, perhaps after Jambhaji's death.

According to Walter (n.d., quoted in Gupta 1965), the Muslims, who ruled over Nagaur in Jambhaji's time, forced Jambhaji to include some Muslim tenets in the sects rules. Among the practices cited was the practice of burial of the dead rather than burning. This suggestion is given some support by the fact that burial is normal Bishnoi practice even though it is not prescribed in any of the twenty-nine rules. Another was the use of readings from the Qu'ran at weddings. Blunt (1931) also refers to Muslim influence.

I have seen no evidence whatsoever of Qu'ran readings or Muslim greetings. It is quite possible that such practices have occurred in the past. It is also likely that any Muslim influences would have declined since partition. Gupta says that Bishnois at Mukam deny any memory of Qu'ranic recitations at the time of marriages. He suggests that the absence of any reference to Muslim practices in the twenty-nine principles or 120 *sabdās* (sayings) attributed to Jambhaji combined with evidence that he was a bitter critic of Muslim practices makes it appear certain

... that the introduction of the Muslim rites in the ceremonies of the Bishnois. . . which are conspicuous by their absence now-a-days, relates to a period after the death of Jambhaji. . . . (Gupta 1965:9)

#### (b) *Caste Organisation*

The caste structure of the Bishnois is much simpler than that of the Rajputs. Essentially the whole caste is divided into exogamous clans (called *gotra*, *got* or, occasionally, *jati*). Some of the *gotras* are divided into two sub-divisions called *nukhs*. According to some informants, these *nukhs* developed simply because the particular *gotras* got too big and were split.

There is also a category of Bishnoi priests, since the Bishnoi do not regard themselves as inferior to Brahmans. These are the *gaenas*.<sup>8</sup> The

<sup>8</sup> A second category of holy men, called *sadhs* is often referred to in the literature. See for example Blunt 1931:108). As far as I was able to ascertain the term merely refers to any sadhu who also happens to be a Bishnoi.

*gaenas* have separate exogamous clans (eleven according to one *gaena* informant). While the *gaena* clans are exogamous, the *gaenas* as a whole are an endogamous sub-section. A *gaena* must marry outside his or her clan but into another *gaena* clan.

Besides this endogamous priestly sub-section, Bishnois assert that all Bishnois can marry into any clan besides their own. This contradicts some of the early accounts of Bishnois. According to Fagan (1893) the Bishnois maintain the caste of their ancestors before conversion to the sect. Thus we have Jat Bishnoi, Rajput Bishnoi, Bania Bishnoi. Blunt says there are 'eight endogamous sections', corresponding to original caste (1931:134).

There is an ambivalence about the way Bishnois handle this contradiction. A Bishnoi will assert that the Bishnoi sect is a religion (*dharam*), not a caste (*jati*), thus paying lip-service to the anti-casteism of Jambhaji. Yet the same person will slip into using the term *jati* in reference to the Bishnoi. Similarly one individual boldly asserted that there were no Rajput Bishnoi or Chaudhary Bishnoi; later in the same interview he described himself as a Chaudhary Bishnoi. When this inconsistency was drawn to his attention he said he was a Bhadu Bishnoi. Many Bishnoi clans have the same names as Jat (or Chaudhary) clans, and Bhadu is listed by Gupta (1965) as one of these. Awareness of Chaudhary origins of his clan would not automatically mean that my informant regarded Chaudhary Bishnoi as an important social category, but the fact that he initially identified himself as a Chaudhary does. Other Bishnois consistently deny any implications of endogamy within caste of origin.

The fact that some Bishnois obviously recognise caste of origin while there is a general assertion that this does not form a meaningful social category is an obvious inconsistency. How can it be resolved? My view is that the caste of ancestry is sometimes (perhaps often, but this is not certain) remembered and less often used as a basis for *preferential* endogamy. It clearly does not represent a basis for sub-dividing all Bishnois (or even most) into endogamous sub-sections. Chaudhary Bishnoi is, then, a category, not a bounded group. In some contexts preferential endogamy may lead to something approximating a bounded group, but this is rare and of fairly local significance. In other areas and contexts, endogamy by caste of origin is simply not structurally important.

Beyond the essential clan exogamy, modified by the existence of a sub-division of *gaenas* and the possible occurrence of occasional preferential endogamy in terms of caste of origin, the marriage rules are those of Hindu law/convention, prohibiting marriage within the *got* of mother, mother's mother and father's mother.

## *If Rain Doesn't Come*

The tendency of these rules is broadly similar to those applying to Rajputs: potential partners are available from a large proportion of caste members. But the size of the group prohibited by rules of exogamy is much smaller than that of Rajputs because there are a very large number of Bishnoi clans and they are smaller than those of the Rajputs. The effect is that, while the Rajputs are *forced* into wider ranging marriage alliances, the Bishnois are *able* to make marriages much less wide-ranging. Consistent with the structural possibilities, marriage practices and preferences reflect quite different strategies from those of Rajputs.

Wide-ranging marriages are not often sought after by Bishnois, as marriages tend to be made with Bishnois from relatively nearby villages. A direct exchange of sisters for brothers is a quite common, even a preferred arrangement. In this arrangement X marries Y's sister and Y marries X's sister. This sort of marriage is sibling-set marriage, described by Kolenda (1978).

In stark contrast a direct exchange of sisters is unthinkable for Rajputs. A direct exchange of cousins is 'legal', but highly disapproved of.

According to Blunt (1931) the levirate occurs among the Bishnois. In fact, he says that sometimes widows marry an elder brother, as well as the more common form of the levirate, that is marriage to a younger brother of a deceased husband. Again, any question of widow remarriage is unthinkable to Rajputs.

Bishnois are popularly thought to be very promiscuous. The continued practice of polygyny, although illegal and probably not common, seems to contribute to this image. (On the part of Rajputs there is some inconsistency here, as polygyny was quite common among Rajputs in the recent past.) There was one Bishnoi man in Hinganiya who admitted to having two wives. One wife normally lives in her own village. The two wives apparently do not get on together - the older wife certainly does not like the idea. When she mentioned the second wife in discussion there was an atmosphere of embarrassed amusement in the conversation between her and my Rajput companion which suggests that the practice is now unusual.

This exchange highlights another Bishnoi characteristic. Bishnoi women have high status within their caste and act relatively independently. They are often quite relaxed in conversation with outsiders, in sharp contrast to Rajput women.

Child marriage is very common among the Bishnois and may well be the norm. However, it tends to be under-reported, because it is illegal.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The illegality of both practices (under *The Hindu Marriage Act 1955*) probably explains why the census monograph on Mukam (Gupta 1965) reports high age of marriage and no 'bigamy' (polygyny).

Regarding Bishnoi marriage practices in Mukam, Gupta states that there is no brideprice and that dowry is not stipulated. The bride's father presents whatever he thinks is proper. Caution is needed here. What Gupta describes is the legal situation under the *Hindu Marriage Act 1955*: dowry and brideprice are illegal, but gifts are legal. It is quite possible that the census investigators were simply given a description tailored to the legal requirements, rather than a description of actual practices.

Nevertheless, I think Gupta is correct about the low level of exchange of gifts and dowry associated with Bishnoi marriage, despite the problem of obtaining unambiguous data. It seems to me that the practices of child marriage and sibling-set marriage are generally related to low or nil dowries. Bishnoi child marriages are often organised as mass-marriages at *nyarts* (feasts held about ten days after a death). Keeping the cost down was given as one reason for Nayak mass-child marriages, which I will discuss later. If, as Gupta says, dowries are relatively unimportant, this is consistent with the high incidence of child marriage and preference for sibling-set marriage.

The pattern which ties all these Bishnoi marriage practices together is that they all tend to consolidate inheritance and property and to avoid undue redistribution of property at marriage.

A considerable degree of political unity exists within the caste. This is achieved largely by shared religious identity. Further, unlike the Rajputs, the Bishnois have caste councils. There are caste assemblies (panchayats) which are held at the four important annual Bishnoi festivals - two held each year at Jambha (a village founded by Jambhaji) and two held each year at Mukam. These caste panchayats have judicial functions relating to breaches of the twenty-nine rules. The functioning of caste councils is explicitly focused on religious matters, but the outcome is a relatively homogeneous political interest group.

In my view, religious beliefs and practices provide a symbolic medium for the expression of Bishnoi caste solidarity, which is not at all to say that one causes the other.

The former tenant castes (particularly Jats and Bishnois) have been a very powerful force in post-Independence Rajasthan. The Bishnois have been, given their numbers (perhaps one or two hundred thousand in Rajasthan), disproportionately prominent. Generally the ex-tenant castes have been strong supporters of the Congress Party and Bishnois have held important ministerial posts in both Rajasthan and Haryana. Interestingly Bishnois have held posts which fit the Sect's concerns with trees and animals: Bishnois have been senior Ministers, both in the Haryana and Rajasthan Governments. One has been Minister of State for Animal Husbandry (Ram Singh Bishnoi in Rajasthan), another for forests.

## *If Rain Doesn't Come*

The Rajputs, have (particularly in recent years) generally been supporters of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), largely because the Congress Party has always been seen as an opponent of Rajput class interests, especially in supporting land reform as a major policy. In the Rajasthan State Parliament the Congress Party was in power throughout my period of fieldwork. The BJP was in opposition.

I have argued that Rajput caste structure allows for (and encourages) territorially dispersed marital alliances, which are utilised to widen the range of economic options open to an individual. These are, however, individually-centred networks, and there is little focus for a sense of corporate solidarity among Rajputs as Rajputs. The caste structure and marriage practices are essentially divisive, placing great importance on membership of lineages rather than caste solidarity. Among the Bishnois, on the other hand, wide-ranging alliances are less evident and important. The focus is on marriage practices (some of which Rajputs would regard as incestuous) which emphasise conservation of resources. Through their identity as a religious sect, however, the Bishnois are able to achieve a sense of caste solidarity which the Rajputs lack. Historically, their sectarian beliefs have been used as a political weapon against the Rajputs as well as having worked as a symbolic base for caste solidarity.

### **Jats**

There is only a single household of Jats resident in Hinganiya (a total population of seven). I do not propose to discuss the Jats in detail because I have already mentioned them in the section on Bishnois, because the caste structure is relatively simple and because I am less familiar with Jat social structure than that of the other four castes. In the period of Rajput rule the Jats were tenant farmers. Now they are, like the Bishnois, a comparatively prosperous caste of cultivators, politically aware and influential.

Within the endogamous Jat caste, there are a large number of *gots* (clans). The clans are exogamous. Most of the generalisations made about Bishnoi marriage practices are equally applicable to the Jats: child-marriage is common; sibling-set marriage is also common and was first described for the Jats (Kolenda 1978). Like the Bishnois the Jats are regarded (by Rajputs) as being somewhat incestuous in their marriage practices.

Rosin (1968) argued that the social organisation and marriage practices of the Jats were an important factor in the emergence of the Jats as a major political force in post-Independence Rajasthan. The argument is that the marriage practices led to networks of kin ties which provided the organisational basis for Jat political solidarity.

Given a similarity between the social organisation and marriage practices of Jats and Bishnois, a similar argument could be made for the Bishnois. (Rosin does not mention the Bishnois.) It might, however, be a mistake to take this argument too far. By placing heavy emphasis on the role of Jat marriages in building networks of kinship ties, Rosin rather misses the importance of consolidating property and avoiding redistribution of property at marriage. (Of course, the marriage practices could do both things at once.) In any case, it is difficult to see what sibling-set marriages (common among both Jats and Bishnois) could contribute to building *networks* of kin, since they are direct exchanges between two families.

### **Meghwal**

The Meghwals are also known as Bambhis and are a scheduled caste. In 1985/86 there were five households in Hinganiya, comprising twenty-five individuals. Traditionally Meghwals were leather workers or carpet makers, although, with the exception of one part-time resident who works as a labourer in Jodhpur, all of the Meghwals in Hinganiya are small-scale farmers and agricultural labourers.

There are three branches of Meghwals: the Basira Meghwals claim Rajput ancestry; the Jata Meghwals claim Jat ancestry; the Jatiya Meghwals are descended from Jata Meghwals. Traditionally the Basira Meghwals and the Jata Meghwals are blanket makers. The Jatiya Meghwals are shoe makers. Each of the three branches is endogamous and marriage outside a branch allegedly results in excommunication.

Each branch is divided into exogamous clans which are named after an ancestor or the Rajput or Jat clan they claim descent from. The Meghwals in Hinganiya are Basira Meghwals of the Anikpal clan claiming descent from a Rajput called Anik Singh.

There is a local level political structure which is effectively a local sub-caste. For each branch there is a sub-division into local areas (*keraa*, lit. area) consisting of 10-20 villages. Each clan from each village has a 'Pradhan Panch' (headman) and all the 'Pradhan Panches' from the 10-20 villages meet as a caste panchayat. Their role includes matters of caste discipline. The *keraa* can be thought of as a local sub-caste. It is important to note that a local sub-caste is specific to one of the three branches, which maintain their separateness at this level. If all three divisions of Meghwals were present in an area there would be three local sub-castes.

Marriage is usually within the local sub-caste but this is not a rule. Marriage outside the local sub-caste is difficult and expensive, but quite alright for a '*paisewallah*' (rich man) according to one informant.

Marriage with someone from ego's own clan, mother's clan or paternal grandmother's clan is prohibited.

### **Nayak/Bhil**

Nayaks are included on the list of scheduled castes for Rajasthan. On the separate list of scheduled tribes the Bhils are a scheduled tribe. Yet, the Nayaks in Hinganiya use both names. Most higher caste villagers assert that Bhils and Nayaks are the same thing, something which, administratively and legally at least, is impossible. Furthermore, according to the 1971 Census there was no scheduled tribal population in Hinganiya; the 1981 Census recorded a scheduled tribal population of 101 (Census of India 1981a). It appears that the Nayaks had been reclassified or had reclassified themselves.

Much of the confusion exists because the names are used in different ways in different localities. Kothawalla (Census of Marwar 1911) notes that the Bhils of the hill areas of Rajputana are distinct from the Bhils in the north eastern parts of what is now Jodhpur District (Hinganiya is in this area). In north eastern Jodhpur State the Bhils are also known as Nayaks, Thoris and Aheri. This confusion in names is tied up with a debate about whether Nayaks are true Bhils. There are some suggestions that Nayaks are descended from marriages between tribal Bhils and caste Hindus. It is also quite possible that the Nayaks are the descendants of Bhils who came from Mewar as guides for Rao Jodha (B.S. Tanwar, pers. comm.). This is plausible, as the name Nayak literally means watchman or guide.

In Gujarat the 'Naiks' (also called Naikdas or Naikas) are regarded as a separate tribe from the Bhils (Shah 1959). However, Shah refers to linguistic evidence which supports the view that, in Gujarat, 'the two groups are probably only local variations of one tribe' (1959:251). In Rajasthan the term Bhil seems to have a specific reference to the tribal Bhils of southern Rajasthan and also to be a general term for people of tribal descent. I am not sure whether the Nayaks of Hinganiya are genealogically related to the tribal Bhils of southern Rajasthan.

Culturally, there are close similarities. Among the Bhils of southern Rajasthan there is a category of shamans called *bhopa* (Doshi 1971). Among the Nayaks there are two types of people called *bhopa*. The first group can be described fairly simply as shamans. They participate in rituals in which they dance and apparently whip themselves into trances. Their second type of Nayak *bhopa* (*bhopi*, fem.) is a performer who sings an epic to Pabuji, a Rajasthani folk hero.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Smith (1986) has given a detailed account of these epic performances.

Whether the Nayaks were originally tribal or whether they are just loosely categorised as Bhils is impossible to judge. In any case they are now clearly Hindu; they regard themselves as being part of the caste system and the others in the village (untroubled by theoretical distinctions between caste and tribe) regard them as a caste, nevertheless usually calling them Bhils.

The ambiguity seems to be inherently administrative, not social. Shifts in which category was reported in censuses are evident in the early censuses of Marwar, so the switch in Hinganiya between 1971 and 1981 was not a new phenomenon. I suspect that the reclassification from 1971 to 1981 reflects the assumptions of the census collector at the particular time, rather than any attempt by the Nayaks themselves to profit from a change in status, either in terms of prestige related to caste ranking or in terms of seeking advantages from the scheduled tribe quota. A Nayak informant attributed the classification to the Patwari (land registration officer), who was the 1981 census collector.

I have gone to some length to discuss this issue because I wish to demonstrate that many divisions and sub-divisions, which the various glossaries of tribes and castes and early census reports describe, are attempts to construct a model which includes every group in a bounded universe. In fact, attempts to look at the whole population from the outside and to divide it into coherent groups are misleading. A Nayak in Hinganiya sees himself as one of the larger category of Bhils, but a Bhil from Udaipur might not recognise this claim. Thus, the boundaries of the group shift depending on the point from which it is defined.

The extent to which categories are consistent depends on the extent to which social intercourse and ties extend. In the case of the Meghwals and Nayaks, this goes little beyond the local sub-caste and adjoining sub-castes. Beyond these boundaries the category tends to be 'other Nayaks' or 'other Bhils'. There is no need to classify people with whom you are unlikely to have contact or, especially, who you are not going to marry. In the case of Rajputs, where marriage ties are comparatively extensive, systems of classification are much more consistent. The role of genealogies and the importance of alliances between lineages, clans and states, underly this difference.

Thus, within the north eastern parts of old Jodhpur State the Nayaks are regarded as one of at least two groups who are loosely called Bhils (the Thoris are another). Each of these branches is endogamous. Below this division into endogamous branches are exogamous clans (called *nukh* or *gotra*). The Nayaks are also divided on an area basis. The local division is called a *nyart*, has a panchayat (council) and is headed by a *nyart* Sarpanch. The *nyart* has a diameter of around 20 *koss* (60 km). Most marriages take place within this local sub-caste, but this is not

## *If Rain Doesn't Come*

essential and depends on practical considerations. Unlike the case of the Rajputs the tendency to local marriage leads to preferential endogamy because the local area is bounded and has a political identity.

Other marriage restrictions exist. As is common in Hindu society, a man cannot marry into his mother's clan or his father's mother's clan. There is a further Nayak restriction. While a man can marry a woman from his mother's mother's clan, he cannot marry into her village of origin.

Like the Bishnois and the Meghwals, the Nayaks have a political structure which gives a strong element of caste solidarity, but only at the *nyart* level. One of the important functions of the *nyart* is to gather together when a member of the *nyart* dies, for the funeral feast (also called a *nyart*) held up to twelve days after a death, depending on auspicious dates. On these occasions child marriages are sometimes arranged. On two of the occasions during my fieldwork when Nayak men died in Hinganiya, multiple child marriages were arranged and held some weeks later. On the occasion of the first mass marriage I witnessed (December 1983) there were eighteen child brides from Hinganiya married to boys from other villages. On the second occasion (1985) there were two brides from Hinganiya. Following the marriage the bride and groom visit their respective in-laws and get to know each other, but they do not cohabit until a *mukhlawa* is held when they reach puberty.

Mass child-marriages are common practice among the Bhils. Many other castes also have child marriages, usually *en masse*. It is difficult to obtain much firm data on this because child marriage is illegal. (Rajputs do not have this practice in Hinganiya nowadays and assert that it is not a Rajput practice at all.)

I was told that the main reason for mass marriages is that it is cheaper to hold them since all parents share the cost of festivities. Furthermore, no dowry is involved and gifts are divided among the participants. That is to say that gifts to the brides and their families are divided equally and gifts to the husbands and families are divided equally. At the *mukhlawa* stage a dowry is provided by the girl's father to set her up for her future life. There is no indication that this is paid to the husband or his family.

The marriage rules, the caste structure, the practice of child marriage and the tendency towards marriage within the local area, show a concern for marriage as a way of holding limited resources within narrow boundaries. At the same time the major ceremonials and the role of the Nyart both demonstrate and reinforce solidarity at the supra-village level, but not at the level of Nayaks as a whole.

### **Patterns of Interaction Between Castes at the Local Level**

In Chapter 3 (Table 3.1) is a summary of the castes present in each of the four villages in the cluster. To a varying degree all of these castes are involved in the social, economic and ritual lives of the people of Hinganiya. The village is also visited by groups of migrating Raikas and members of other nomadic castes including Banjaras, Gadulia Lohars, Gawariyas and Joghis. All of these have economic roles as petty traders, craftsmen or entertainers.

Caste interactions are shaped by the rules of commensality. As the general nature of such practices is well known, I will not describe them here, although I would argue that one of the functions of the rules is to divide the population into two broad categories (ritually 'clean' and 'unclean') which are closely related to economic and political power.

While there are subtleties involved in commensal interactions between various clean castes at the top of the purity-based structure (Brahmans, Jats, Rajputs, Bishnois), these subtleties involve food, not tea, cigarettes, bidis (local cigarettes), pipes, or opium. All of these things are conspicuously shared at gatherings called *sabha*. Tea is taken from enamel cups, which are washed and passed around freely among the clean castes. Opium is particularly significant. It is taken in liquid form (crushed and mixed with water). All of the clean castes sit around the filtering apparatus which is usually operated by a senior Rajput or an honoured guest. When taking liquid opium, a member of the clean castes always drinks it from the cupped hand of another clean caste participant. The important thing is that there are no caste restrictions about members of one clean caste taking it from members of another. The Bishnois, who are very fussy about following strict rules of commensality as regards food, are fully involved in the opium ceremonies, even though taking opium is specifically against one of their twenty-nine rules.

Members of the unclean castes sit outside the main semi-circle. As the *sabha* usually takes place on a platform, this means that they sit (squat) below the platform. A clean caste person pours the opium from the container into their hands and they drink from their own cupped hands.

The symbolism is strikingly obvious. An in-group (the ritually clean castes) make no distinctions among themselves in sharing the opium and conspicuously demonstrate their broadly equal status in terms of purity by drinking from each other's hands. The out-group (the ritually unclean castes) passively receive the opium in a way that symbolically isolates them from the higher castes, and even from their own caste fellows, since they do not take opium from each other's hands in this context. All of this is an implicit statement to the unclean castes that they are dependent and have an inferior place in the society.

In fact, the dependency carries over to the economic system. The two unclean castes in Hinganiya are the Nayaks and the Meghwals. Their average landholding by household is much less than that of the other castes (see Chapter 5). To a large extent the unclean castes are heavily dependent on wage labour on the land belonging to the clean castes. There is some patronage involved in providing employment. Furthermore, patron-client ties often mean that food (or even cash) will be available in times of emergency. The implicit threat of the withdrawal of patronage encourages conformity. Both Nayaks and Meghwals in Hinganiya treated me as a Rajput, because I was living with Rajputs, but when they realised that rules of commensality were not of concern to me personally, some individuals made it quite clear that their reason for keeping the rules was based on concern with not rocking the boat. On several occasions the rules were broken, but always when Rajputs were not nearby.

The threat of withdrawal of patronage usually remains implicit and latent. Frequently patrons and clients have relationships which are based on mutual respect and friendships across the caste barrier are quite common. Nevertheless, breach of rules of commensality, or taking too many liberties, can lead to problems for lower caste people. As a comparatively prestigious visitor, with huge resources by local standards, I found that I caused some conflict myself. On one occasion a Nayak who was both a close friend and a frequent informant was told not to visit a Rajput house because I was 'giving too much to him'.

The second aspect of caste interaction is the question of caste economic specialisation and the *jajmani* system. The main economic activity of most of those who live permanently in any of the four villages is a combination of agriculture (including, in many cases, paid agricultural labour) and pastoralism. The Raikas in Khokhariya specialise in pastoralism, but have some involvement in agriculture. There are a few full-time merchants in Kur and in both Kur and Kukunda there are some people working in their caste specialties as carpenters (Suthar), tailors (Darzi) and barbers (Nai). In these villages, but not in Hinganiya, a few Meghwals engage in their traditional trades (shoe-making or blanket-making). However, even those who work as specialists are often involved in some agriculture and pastoralism. To a large extent caste specialties are secondary to agro-pastoralism, or at least carried out in some combination with agro-pastoralism.

Ritual roles are carried out by one of the Brahmans in Kur (who covers Khokhariya and Hinganiya as well), by Dholis (drummers) from Kur and by the barber (Nai) from Kukunda. For the Meghwals and the Nayaks ritual specialists come from other villages further afield.

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Although there are some remnants of the *jajmani* system, they are now fairly minor. Where payments are made on the basis of the traditional system they tend to involve the ritual specialists performing ritual roles. The barber continues to be paid in grain for routine barbering, at a rate of ten kilograms of grain per adult male per year and five kilograms per child per year. Most other payments are made in cash. Outside of the few cases of *jajmani* payments in kind there is a second category of payments in kind. I am referring to the practice of paying for goods or services, for which cash is normally involved and for which there is a specific cash value, in grain. The value of the grain is the equivalent of the cash price asked for goods or services. For example two rupees worth of vegetables may be sold in exchange for one kilogram of millet, which has a cash value of two rupees. The underlying medium of exchange is cash in these situations. The millet is used because there is a shortage of cash.

*Jajmani* appears to have been in operation up until the time of Independence. The 1947 Settlement Report for Hinganiya (Chand 1947) contains some snippets of information regarding *jajmani* relationships. According to this account the Bambhis (described as 'village servants') receive ten measures<sup>11</sup> of grain per year as salary from Rajputs. The Thori (Nayak) described as 'chowkidars' (watchmen) received five measures per year from Bishnois and other castes. There are also references to the *jajmani* payments due to Suthars (carpenters), Lohars (blacksmiths) and Nais (barbers). The report seems to suggest that these three castes were resident in Hinganiya, but all my informants insist that they were not resident at all. Presumably, then, the reference is to a *jajmani* system which included other villages and itinerant service castes (such as Lohars).

The decline in the *jajmani* system since independence is hardly surprising given the massive social changes of the last thirty-five years. Land reform, in particular, has changed the entire balance of power in Rajasthan. The transition of tenant farmers to self-cultivators and of lower caste village functionaries and wage labourers to at least partial dependence on self-cultivation made a transition to cash inevitable. Further, the *jajmani* system depended on a social structure revolving around a semi-feudal estate.

Elder, in reference to the link between land ownership and successful attempts to improve caste status in Uttar Pradesh, shows the connection between centralised land control and *jajmani*-type services:

Why might rural land control be so important in improving one's ritual status? One reason may be that in an agricultural setting, land

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<sup>11</sup> The measures were translated as kilograms, which seems very unlikely given the date of the report. However I was not able to obtain a copy of the report and cannot check.

is the major commodity for establishing relationships of continuing dependency. Thus, the family which controls land controls, in part anyhow, the lives of those who ultimately depend for their survival on that land - agricultural laborers, artisans... and any who trade their service for grain. Furthermore, in an agricultural setting, resident dependents have few alternatives. They either work for the local landlords, or they don't work - at least in that locality. (Elder 1977:205)

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have shown some differences between the internal caste structure of the Rajputs and of other castes represented in Hinganiya. The Rajput caste is a large caste divided on a segmentary fissioning principle, into exogamous clans with various lower levels of sub-division. The Rajput marriage rules, combined with the structure of the caste, lead to the opportunity to form wide ranging marriage alliances. On the other hand, they work against Rajput solidarity. Historically, Rajput kingdoms and chiefdoms were built and maintained by clans and lineages, partly on the basis of their ability to muster allies. Marriage alliances were a part of that process. Nevertheless, as units competing for land and power, they never achieved any cohesiveness at the level of the entire caste. This lack of permanent cohesion as a caste continues. The strategy of seeking wide ranging alliances is useful now as a means of opening employment options. The fact that marriages of Bhati Rajputs in Hinganiya tend to be exchanges between Bhatias and Rathors reflects the relative prestige of the two clans, the predominance of the two clans in Jodhpur District and the advantages associated with alliances between clans well placed politically and economically.

On the other hand the Bishnois have a caste cohesion which is largely the result of their religious identity. Through this they have become a significant factor in State and even National politics. Their marriage practices suggest concern with maintaining resources rather than with building alliances.

Both Bishnois and Rajputs are 'clean' castes; both castes consist largely of landed peasant farmers; in Hinganiya, both have similar average land holdings per household (see Chapter 5). However, they approach problems of politics and economics rather differently and these varying approaches are related to caste structure and value differences.

The Nayaks and the Meghwals are 'unclean' castes; they are marginal peasants or near-landless labourers, or something between the two. As castes they are quite cohesive at the local level, but do not have any corporate organisation at the level of the whole caste. Their marriage

## *Castes and Caste Relationships*

practices tend to be very much concerned with preserving scarce resources. Marriage ceremonies, among the Nayaks, are occasions for expressing sub-caste solidarity rather than for establishing wider alliances.

I have mentioned briefly the breakdown of the *jajmani* system as the basis of inter-caste economic relationships, while emphasising that a broad line between clean and unclean castes continues to exist. In Chapter 5 I will examine the extent to which the caste system and land ownership are connected.

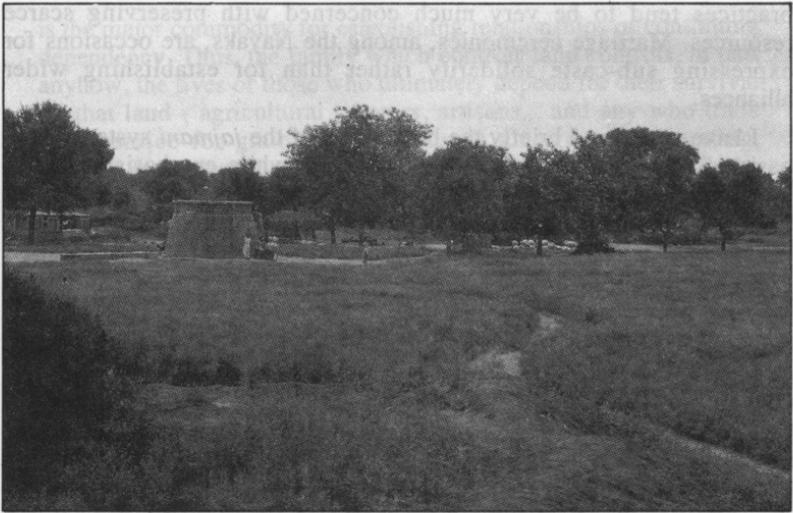


Photo 1

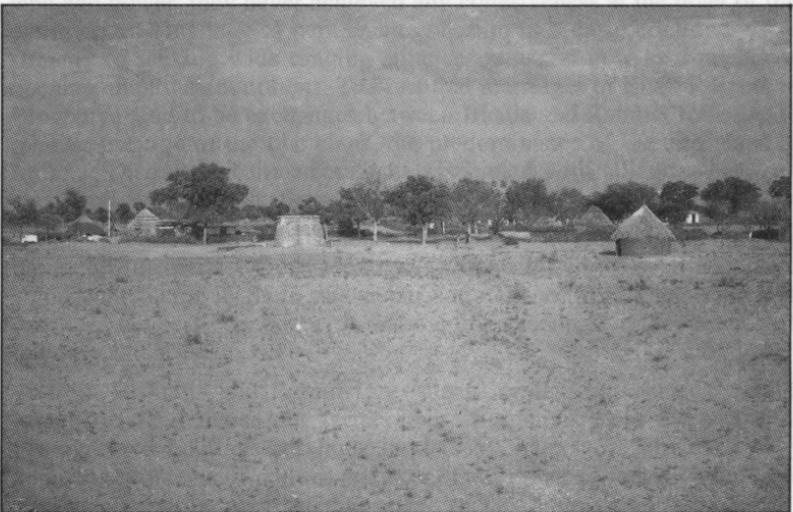


Photo 2

The Nayaks and the Megh... 'clean' castes; they are marginal peasants or near-landless laborers... something between the two. As... any... marriage...  
Photos 1 & 2: A graphic illustration of the effects of variable monsoons. Similar views of Hinganiya taken in late August of two different years, 1983 (Photo 1) and 1987 (Photo 2).

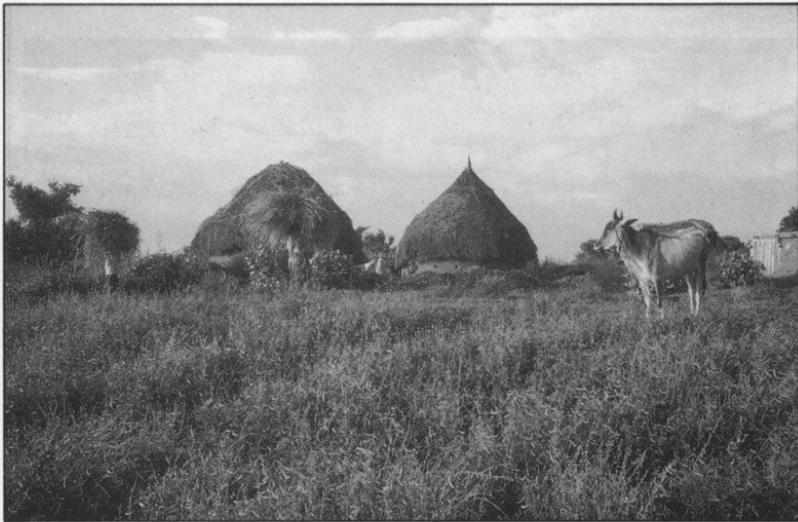


Photo 3: Rear view of Rajput houses taken in September 1983 (post-monsoon).



Photo 4: Area to the rear of Rajput houses, November 1985. Note the very limited natural, vegetation in comparison to Photo 3.



Photo 5: The village centre of Hinganiya.



Photo 6: A cluster of Rajput huts.

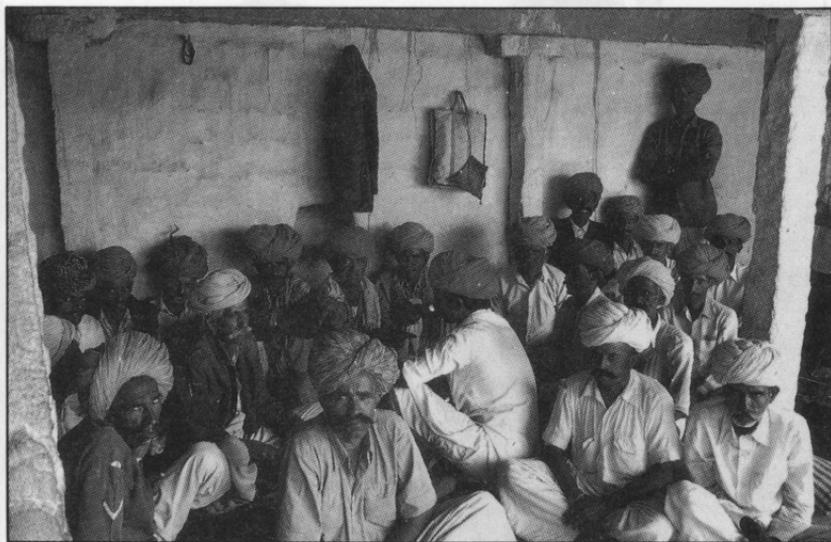


Photo 7: Gathering (*sabha*) of Rajputs under verandah at time of a marriage.

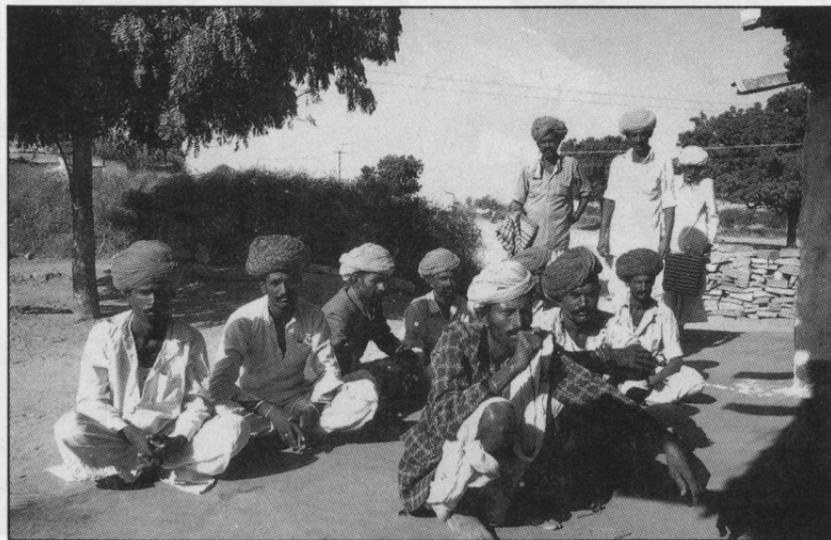


Photo 8: The Meghwals and Nayaks remain squatting outside.

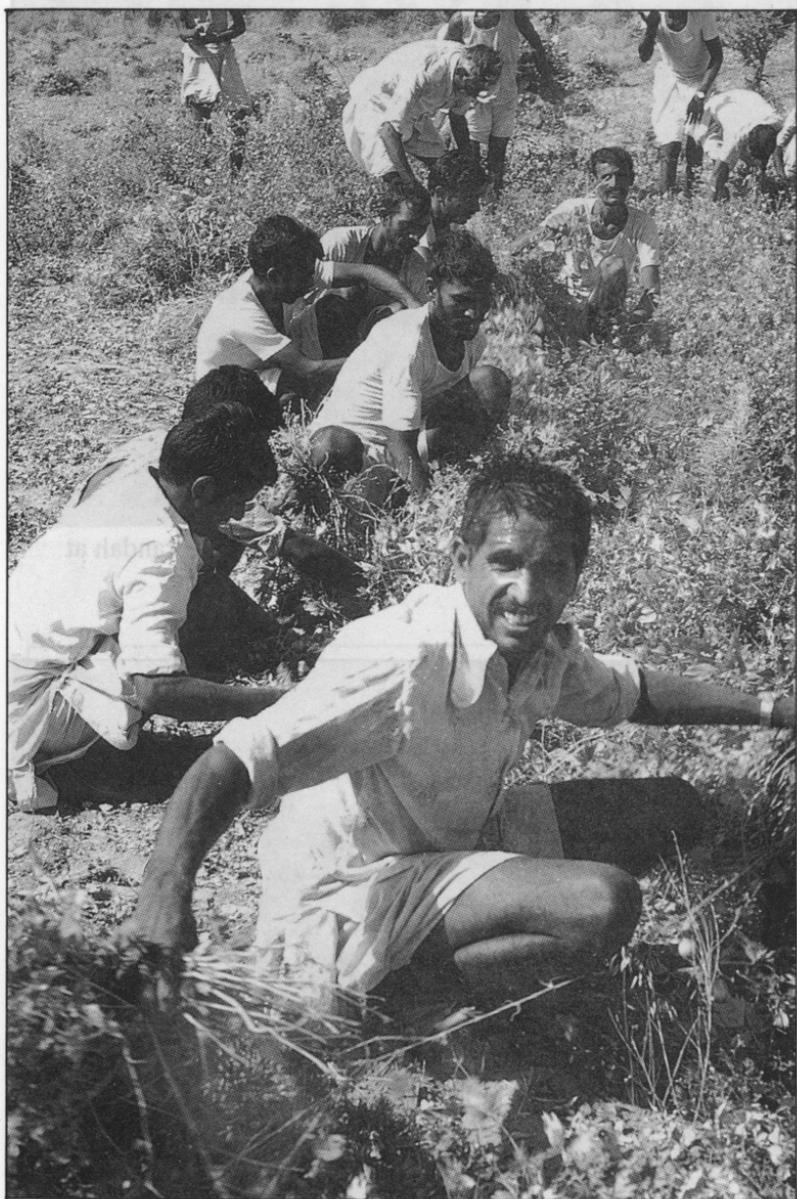


Photo 9: An adola (1983).



Photo 10: Winnowing *bajra* (1983).



Photo 11: Livestock being watered from underground storage reservoir (*tanka*).

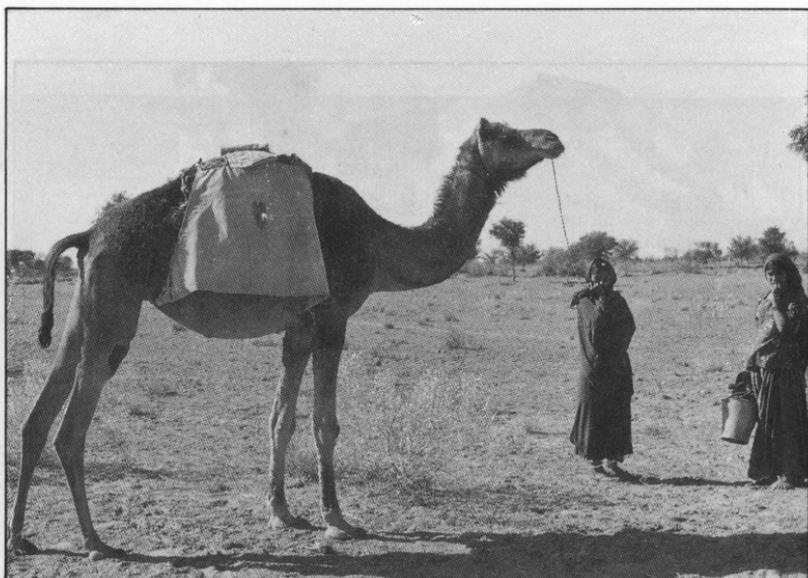


Photo 12: Camel transporting water to Bishnoi *dhani*.



Photo 13: Emergency drinking water delivery during the failed monsoon (1987).

the *Jagir* system. I will now discuss land tenure under the system in greater detail, before looking at land reform legislation in Rajasthan.

Prior to the land reforms of the 1950s, land tenure in western

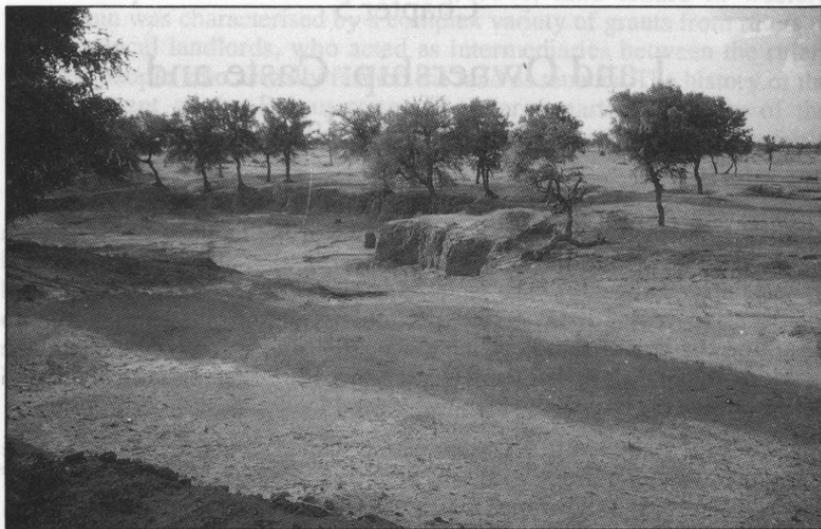


Photo 14: The *nadi* in August 1987. In good seasons it holds rainwater for several months after the monsoon.



Photo 15: A private underground tank, with concave surface for collection of rainwater.