

# Bhil Villages of Western Udaipur

## A Study In Resistance To Social Change

G Morris Carstairs

IN the proud history of Mewar (the "Vir-Bhumi" of Hindustan) the Bhil tribesmen have played an important part. It was a Bhil who brought up Bappa Rawal, a forefather of the Maharanas of Udaipur; and for centuries Bhil armies fought with their Rajput rulers, against a succession of invaders. Thus it is that the Bhils though themselves illiterate and lacking even a tradition of popular ballad-history, such as the minstrel *charans* and *bhats* provide for their near neighbours, are yet commemorated in the writings and verse of the Rajputs; and their long association is symbolised in the Mewar royal crest which shows a sun in splendour, with on one side a Rajput, on the other a Bhil warrior. It is therefore all the more striking that in spite of centuries of such contact, the Bhils have maintained their quite separate and distinctive social structure and mode of life.

In the minds of its inhabitants, the former State of Udaipur was considered to consist of three main parts: the plains of the north and east, known as *Mewar*; the foothills called *Magra*, and the highlands of the south and west the *Bhomal*. Of these, the first two divisions were decisively mastered by the Rajputs. There Bhils are in a minority; many of the farmers being of Gujar, Dhangī, Rebarī and other Hindu castes within the larger village groups of Rajputs, Brahmins and Banias as well.

The Bhomat, however, presents a completely different picture. There the Bhils were never conquered: even the *Jagirdars* are of Bhil ancestry. Some can show *jmttas* granted them by Rana Partab for services rendered to him in his life-long struggle against the Moghuls. In the valleys among these jungle-covered hills, the population consists almost entirely of Bhils.

Villages in this Bhil country are quite unlike those of the plains. Bhil houses are built at some distance from each other. Sometimes a man's married sons will build their homes close to their father's but most houses are alone, built strategically on the top of a small hillj or on a jungle slope so as to command a view over the paths of approach. To a stranger these houses seem to be scattered at ran-

dom all over the countryside; but stop and speak to any Bhil and he will be able to say to which village, his house belongs, and who is his *Mukhi* or headman. Village names are very numerous, and refer sometimes to a group of only four or five huts in a tributary valley, but a *Mukhi* always belongs to a larger group, of a dozen or more households; and in some cases several smaller hamlets come under his jurisdiction. Thus Malia belongs to Mithi-bor, a hamlet of five houses, which is an offshoot of Bodi village. If he is involved in any dispute, he may consult old Ladu, the *Mukhi* of Bodi; but if it is a really serious matter, they will both resort to Kuma, the *Mukhi* of Tep, whose authority is acknowledged by all three villages.

This post of *Mukhi* is hereditary, with the provision that the most capable and not necessarily the eldest, son of the previous headman is accepted by the villagers as his successor. The *Mukhi* represents the village in all dealings with other villages or with the Ruler's representatives. His authority is unchallenged provided that it is sensibly exercised; because all the time there is an accompaniment of discussion of each village event among the senior heads of houses and only if the *Mukhi's* decisions are endorsed with their approval does he command his villagers' obedience. The Bhils here are organised in exogamous patrilineal lineages, akin to the *gotra* of caste Hindus. When referring to one another by name, they quote the lineage as a surname; thus the three men whose names we have mentioned above are known as Malia Bhumaria, Ladu Kheir and Kuma Dhangī respectively. If further identification is necessary, they add "of such and such a village". The usual Hindu practice of quoting a man's name and then his father's is new to them, although they are rapidly becoming familiarised with it on ration cards and this year on the voter's roll.

Each village has a nucleus of households of the lineage as its *Mukhi* who is traditionally descended from the first settlers in that area. But in almost every case other lineages are also represented. In about ten per cent of marriages the couple finally settle in the

bride's village. Most villages also have one or two families who have settled in the course of the last few years, either bringing their cattle to new grazing, or staying to clear a strip of jungle and plant crops. Such in-comers are generally related more or less distantly to some members of the village; but strangers may also come, and having obtained the *Mukhi's* consent, build their home in the outskirts of the village' area.

As may be inferred from the above, there is no serious congestion in this territory. Everyone raises *rnakai* (maize) in the rainy season— as much as he can tend and still a good deal of available land in the smaller valleys is left to run wild. In winter, the hill streams usually do not dry up and their waters are led by ingenious series of earth and wooden channels, called *saran*, to irrigate fields of wheat and gram. In consequence, most of the fields lie idle until the next rains.

The jungle provides good grazing all the year round and every family has a modicum of cattle and goats, whose milk they turn to *ghee* and sell at the nearest trader's shop. This, and the sale of bee's wax found in the jungle, and leaves for the wrapping of *bidis*, provides them with a few annas a day just enough to buy the essentials of life salt, pepper, grain and tobacco. Their diet rarely includes any vegetables: occasionally it is relieved with small game, which they hunt with bows and arrows. Their idea of luxury is a feed of *gur* and a drink of *daru*, the spirit locally distilled from *mahwa* flowers.

To a newcomer, a striking feature about these northern Bhils is that they all go about armed, carrying bows and arrows, or muskets or swords and invariably a sharp dagger in a sheath at their waists. When they see a stranger walking in their hills, they stand with weapons at the ready, looking to see who he is; and this wariness is not misplaced, because robbery and violence are of common occurrence. At night they sleep huddled round a log fire, on the earth floor of their flimsy leaf and bamboo huts, and they sleep with one eye open, ready to rush to the attack if a raider tries to steal one of their cattle in the dark. When this happens, they

March 1, 1952

cry "thief", and someone runs to beat the drum which is kept in every *Mukhis* house. This, brings out all the men of the village armed and ready for a fight. If the thief is caught, he is given a very thorough beating and then let go.

In an idle and hungry time, like the present year of drought, robbery is especially rife. Thieves who get away with a valuable prize, such as a cow or a bullock, will try to drive it to a distant part of *Bhomat*, or southwards into Gujrat, and there soil it; but if the chase is too hot, they hide, and slaughter the cattle, and have a feast. They do not share a Hindu's abhorrence of eating beef.

If they rob each other, they are still more prone to rob strangers, passing through their countryside. Wayfarers are set upon, beaten and robbed of all they have, down to the last shred of their clothing. For this reason, travellers find it necessary to move in parties, carrying guns, or else to employ Bhils to give them *agwa*, that is, to provide an armed escort to protect them from the others.

When grazing is scarce in the plains of Me war and Marwar and Sirohi, numbers of Rebari herdsmen come to these jungles with herds of sheep, goats, cattle and camels and they are regarded as fair game. The Rebaris are told by the villagers in whose area they have camped, that they must sacrifice a young buffalo to the village goddess, then they can rely on the Bhils' support in case of theft. They do so, and the villagers have a feast—but still in spite of their vigilance (and here the Rebaris also carry weapons all the time) they suffer a constant toll of beasts stolen in the jungle.

Besides preoccupation with theft, the Bhils devote a good deal of time and energy to the pursuit of love and to the feuds that break out whenever a husband discovers that he has been cuckolded. In a group of five villages it was found that 15 per cent of all marriages were cases in which the bride had been abducted, usually with her own connivance. They call this "zai baraw" or "gis len ayo" or "tani layo"—and always they smile with relish in recalling this gallant sport. Such an abduction causes a state of hostility to break out between the villages concerned, especially if there is an aggrieved husband in the case. "My nose has been cut off," he says, and his

kinsmen often help him to avenge the insult by attacking the offender's village. In such a fetid, it is not necessarily the abductor himself who is the target of attack, but the most eminent man in this village: he may be shot at or waylaid and beaten.

Later on, when tempers have cooled a little (and preferably before blood has been shed) the *Mukhi* of the offender's village begins to negotiate a peaceful settlement'. This is done through the girl's family; if she were married before, the wronged husband must be paid a considerable fine (Rs 100 to 300), usually in the form of calves and young bullocks. If the girl were unmarried, a much more modest sum (Rs 15 to 30) is given to her father as *dhapa* or bride price.

It has been mentioned that the Rajahs of this Bhil country are themselves reputed to be of Bhil descent; but they themselves are more anxious to assert their superiority than their kinship. In fact, they are all "Chauhan" or "Solanki" Rajputs now; and, like other recent converts, they have tended to exaggerate the characteristics of their new allegiance, so that as Rajahs they were fierce and more despotic than their Rajput models. It might be argued (and it was) that so lawless a tenantry must be kept down with great severity; but the brutality of their soldiery, and their practice of demanding forced labour and free maintenance for their servants when they travelled abroad, did little to endear them to the Bhils. Indeed the Rajahs would have been unable to remain masters of their own lands if it had not been for the authority of the Mewar Bhil Corps, which provided a background of semi-martial law throughout the *Bhomat*. It was thanks to the influence of this Corps that the Bhil country first began to be opened up by motorable roads, and that trading with the outer world commenced

Politics in the modern sense reached this Bhil country just after the First World War when a Congress pioneer, called Moti Lal Tejawat, began to tour the hill tracts, preaching the need for reform. In part, his teaching was like that of the *bhagats* who appear from time to time among the Bhils, and command a sporadic allegiance.. Like them, he said: "Stop eating meat, stop drinking *dara*." But he went on to say: "Stop robbing Banias "

—he came himself from a Bania family, with shops in certain *Bhomat* villages. Moti Lal enjoyed a sudden fame, and was even worshipped as a god, being carried from village to village seated upon a *charpoy*, while Bhils approached to clasp his feet and offer him the homage of a coconut and a rupee.

The reason for his popularity lay not in his familiar prohibitions but in a new teaching which he propounded: "This land is yours, the Bhils, You should be the masters 'hen' yourselves, and not obey the tyrant Rajahs, nor pay taxes to the Government." This was a dangerous doctrine to preach to a warlike populace. On the positive side, Moti Lal and other Congress pioneers did succeed in first modifying and then abolishing the exactions of forced labour and tribute in kind; but he was also responsible for exciting a spirit of anarchy and revolt. The height of his influence was reached in 1922, when an army of Bhils was confronted by a detachment of the Mewar Bhil Corps near the village of Nal. Moti Lal told his followers that he would speak a *mantar* which would turn the soldiers' bullets to water: and when they fired a warning volley in the air, the Bhils believed his *mantar* was taking effect, and they attacked boldly; but the next volleys killed many of them, and the rest fled, among them Moti Lal. He has never since been able to recapture that first entire devotion.

During the recent elections, in which he stood as Independent, having fallen out with Congress, the writer heard him explain to two bewildered Bhil constituents that this was just one of many Sahibs who constantly came to visit him and he went on to bewilder them still more with tales of London where the streets are of solid silver, and of Paris, where houses are built of gold and studded with jewels. He did not win the seat.

In the daily life of these Bhils, magic and witchcraft plays a very important part while religion occupies a minor role. It is true that they sometimes invoke Bhagwan, whom they regard as being above all other gods, but seldom intervening in the lives of ordinary mortals; and they have a smattering of knowledge of some of the Hindu deities. Indeed, every large village has its separate *devra* a small roofless stone hut, in which are placed a row of images—of Dharm Raj, Kala-Nag, Bhairav and one or

other Mataji. These images are of baked clay, and brightly painted. They are made in the village of Molera, near Nathdwara, and it costs the Bhils a six-day journey on foot to bring them. They refer to them as "those Mewar gods". Once brought, however, these handsome images are neglected, left out in all weathers, so that in most *devras* they lie colourless and badly worn. On one night in the year, there is a *jagaran* at this shrine, but for the rest of the year no one bothers to visit it. Whereas in Mewar, the *bhopa*, or priest of the shrine, is a very important person, here, among the Bhils he is regarded as a figure of fun, and is little respected. They turn instead to the *devalo*, or village magician, to diagnose all cases of sickness, and to effect his magical remedies. If the *devalo* is esteemed highly, it is partly because of the universal belief in witchcraft. Not only is every adult woman believed to practise this: in addition, every head of a household keeps a *Sikotri*, that is, a demon-goddess with her attendant executive agent, the *Vir*. If appealed to with appropriate *man-tars*, this *Sikotri* will send her *Vir* to strike down your enemy and when this happens, only the skill of a very clever *devalo* can save his life. So prevalent is this magic, that in making a betrothal, the negotiators commonly ask: "Is there a Protector in the house?" and only if the answer is "Yes", do they proceed.

Some households, instead of *Sikotri*, keep a shrine sacred to *Kamria-path*, a fierce and jealous male god, who demands a lot of homage in the form of singing and dancing to strange, exciting traditional Bhil tunes: in turn, he frequently enters into and "possesses" the worshippers as a sign of his goodwill—and he is heartily feared by all who do not adhere to this sect.

Put briefly, then, the Bhils show a dim awareness of some aspects of Hindu worship, but their own old gods and demons still command much greater fear and respect. A similar pattern of lip service to the new and real adherence to the old ways can be seen in their mode of settling disputes.

For as long as the Bhils can remember, they have lived under two different, sometimes contradictory systems, of social discipline—their own tribal customs, and the exactions of the "Raj", by which term they denote all alien authority, whether that of the Rajahs and their

soldiery or the British-officered Mewar Bhil Corps, or the new civilian administration of Tehsildar and Magistrate<sup>1</sup>, and Forest and Revenue Officers, backed by the armed police. This Raj is always there in the background; and at times it is deliberately invoked. For example, in cases of murder or serious theft, it is becoming a recognised form of retaliation to file a complaint and so bring upon the offender's village the scourge of a rustic police investigation, but that is really irrelevant to the serious process of settling the dispute.

So long as a feud exists—and in (very village there are always two or three "ubo", i.e. outstanding the parties to it) break off diplomatic relations "that is, they will not sit nor eat nor smoke together and, again like sovereign powers, they "reserve the right to take appropriate action" with bow and arrow or sword or muzzle-loader. It is this continuing threat of the recourse to violence which stimulates the *Mukhis* and the neighbours of the families concerned, to work for a settlement: and until this has been reached, in the presence of a *panchayat* of responsible caste fellows, and the disputants have eaten opium together, to symbolise the end of their enmity, the dispute will not be over no matter what the official decision has been.

An illustration of this process occurred last year. In the large village of Mandwa, some hundreds of Bhils were assembled to drink and perform the *gher* dance, after Holi. Suddenly a light broke out between the relatives of two parties to a feud, and before it was over, two men of Mandwa and two of Kukawas were killed. The dancers hurriedly dispersed, and the dead were cremated in their respective villages, a crude monument being erected and a goat sacrificed to each one, as is the custom after a violent death. Next day, the police came and carried off a score of villagers to face the magistrates in Udaipur. They were collectively fined and released in due course: and three days later, the *Mukhis* and the elders of each village met together by the<sup>1</sup> village of Ger and came to terms. Mandwa being more at fault, they had to pay over two bullocks and five cows to Kukawas. This done, they all ate opium and the villages were again at peace.

In a previous article (The *Economic Weekly* Jan. 26, 1952) the writer has discussed a Mewar village which was experiencing a rapid

dissolution of many of its former social institutions. This was nowhere more apparent than in the collapse of the social sanctions formerly applied by the various caste *panchayats*. "Nowadays," the old men complained, "no one cares any longer about caste rules; if there is a dispute they run at once to the courts and start cases that go on for years, profiting no one but the *Vakils*." The practice in the *Bhomat* is in strong contrast to this, for there the great majority of minor disputes are still settled in the old way, by the village *Mukhis* concerned.

This conservation of custom is one aspect of a more general process which has kept the Bhils apart from all the other communities in Mewar. On the debit side, it has caused them to remain poor, unlettered and unskilled, although living on the richest soil in the country; to its credit must be put the robust traditions of song and dance, of independence and of exuberant *joie-de-vivre*, of which one would not wish them ever to be deprived.



## United Bank of India Ltd.

**PAID-UP CAPITAL—**  
Over Rs. 2,67,00,000  
**RESERVES—**  
Over Rs. 1,00,00,000

**Branches at all  
important Trade  
Centres of India.**

**Head Office :**  
**4, CLIVE GHAT ST., CALCUTTA**

**Foreign Agents and  
Correspondents all  
over the world.**

**DR. N. N. LAW, PH.D.,**  
Chairman  
**SHRI B. K. DUTT,**  
—General Manager