

A Deccan Village

S C Dube

(Continued from previous issue)

III

WE may now proceed to attempt a brief analysis of the structure of authority in the village. It has been pointed out earlier that no government official of any consequence is actually living in the village; nor does the village have a resident landlord. This leaves the village relatively free from outside pressure and interference. In other villages of this area the landlord and the minor government officials are some of the most powerful and influential figures in village affairs. Each family has a recognized head, who speaks for the whole family, and who is answerable to the village community for all acts of omission and commission by any member of his family. Each caste (and this includes the tribes as well as the Muslim community) in the village has a headman; and so has each guda. These Peddamanshi, literally 'big man', are recognized heads of their respective groups or residential quarters. Village customs define some of their obligations and rights; but their own personality determines the actual degree of their influence. Intra-caste disputes of a minor nature are referred to the headman of the caste in the village who decides them, in consultation with caste elders, according to the conventions of his caste. Inter-caste disputes of a simple nature are, similarly, decided by the head of the guda in consultation with the elders of his ward. The wards as well as the castes, both have their separate councils of elders known as the panchayat. The caste panchayat is presided over by the headman of the caste; and is composed of the elders of that particular caste. The ward council, on the other hand, consists of the elders from the ward and is presided over by the headman of the ward. The larger council for the whole village is composed of all the headmen of the different gudas as well as of the different castes in the village. Other persons of influence and substance also manage to find a place in its deliberations. Local matters, and inter-guda and inter-caste disputes of a slightly more serious type are heard and decided in this council. They may hear appeals from the decisions of the guda and caste councils. Mostly cases pertaining to the division of movable and immovable prop-

erty, disputes regarding non-payment of borrowed money and grain, and household disputes, are brought to this council, in practice, however, the more vocal and assertive members of the village council become the de facto panchayat for the village. At the time of our investigations, the de facto village council consisted of four Raj Gonds, one Golla, two weavers (one being the agent of the landlord) and one Muslim. It may be added that serious intra-caste disputes, and some of the more serious inter-caste disputes may be heard by the larger inter-village panchayat of the caste. Some cases may be heard both by the village panchayat, as well as by the caste panchayat. In Dewara the village panchayat is still vital and influential, and unlike its counterparts in some other parts of Hyderabad it has shown no signs of a gradual loss of hold over the people or of decline. No case of an open defiance of its judgments and decisions came to our notice. It is true that some land disputes from the village were tried in the district-courts, and that among the Raj Gonds in two cases at least notices for divorce proceedings were sent through pleaders, but these could hardly be regarded as indications of the weakening of the panchayat organization. In no case has anyone refused to obey and carry out its decision, nor has anyone taken matters to the State law courts ignoring the verdicts given by the panchayat. Lack of aggressive factionalism in the village will perhaps explain this solidarity and strength of the village council. Public censure and ridicule, fines, and social boycott and excommunication are still very powerful weapons in the hands of the panchayat with the help of which it can enforce its will.

Mention may here be made of three petty government officials who have a position of some influence in the village community. These are the Patel, the Kotwal, and the Hawaldar. The Patel assists in the collection of land revenue, arranges to send reports of breaches of law to the police, and generally looks after the arrangements for touring government officials. He maintains a record of significant events and developments in the village and also records births, marriages and sale of animals. Appointed by the State's

Revenue Department, the Patel gets five per cent of the land revenue of the village for his work. The Kotwal, belonging to the untouchable Madiga caste, works as an assistant to the Patel. He carries weekly reports and information pertaining to serious crime to the police station. He has to patrol the village in the night, to make government and village announcements by the beat of drum, and to look after the arrangements for touring government officials. The Hawaldar too is a sort of general assistant to the Patek. The Korwal and the Hawaldar, both get a salary of three rupees per month in addition to grants of bits of rent-free land. At harvest time, cultivators give them some grain also.

There are no organized voluntary associations in the village. Informal groupings such as men's gossip groups and boys' play gangs occupy a place of importance in village affairs. Elderly women too have some fixed spots for their informal gatherings. It is in these men's and women's gossip groups that day-to-day developments in the village are reviewed, bits of news are exchanged and disseminated, ideas are mooted, and outlines for plans of action are formulated. It has been noted that these groups cut across the boundaries of caste and guda. They are built around one or more influential figures, and have a fixed core of permanent and loyal members. In addition to these, there are other 'occasional' and some 'doubtful' members too. At the time of our investigations there were eight more or less well-marked gossip groups of elderly men in Dewara. Three of these seemed to have had a definite say in the affairs of the village. Although each of these three groups often presses its own point of view in village affairs and functions in some ways as a faction, the leaders always try to remain behind the scenes and never allow their differences to become too public. So far, factionalism within the village community has not shown any tendency towards assuming aggressive proportions so as to put its central mechanism out of action.

IV

The kind of social symbiosis obtaining in the village has led to a distinct type of inter-group adjust-

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ment. The tribal group maintains its distinctive socio-ritual pattern; but has accepted traditional arrangements of co-operative labour in the economic and ritual fields. They do not give a place to the Brahmin in their socio-religious life, but the barber, the washerman, the carpenter, the blacksmith, the goldsmith, and the Madiga feature prominently in their socio-religious rites and ceremonies. In their agricultural system, the occupational castes are integrated on the basis of established village conventions.' The non-Hindu Muslims too share these arrangements. In the worship of village gods and in common village rituals and ceremonies, all the tribes, castes, and even the Muslims participate, follow a definite schedule of precedence, and have prescribed roles. The culture groups or blocks participate in each other's distinctive ceremonies. The Hindus join some of the Raj Gond and tribal ceremonies, as good social form, for a while, but withdraw in good time before the cow-sacrifice. Token participation of the tribes and the Hindus in two important Muslim festivals is regarded as necessary. The Muslims join the Hindus, nominally, in some of their major festivals, but are active and enthusiastic in planning measures to ward off evil spirits, ghosts, and epidemics, in co-operation with their Hindu and tribal neighbours. In difficult and distress tribal Kolam seers and magicians are summoned by the tribes, the Hindus and the Muslims alike. The identity and separateness of the four blocks is recognised, and in deciding disputes the village panchayat takes account of cultural differences and caste customs. As a concession to the needs of the local situation none of the Hindus regards the Raj Gonds (or any other tribe) who sacrifice cows and eat beef, as depressed or untouchable. In fact, with the exception of the Brahmin, and some Padmashalis (weavers), men from the other castes do not hesitate in accepting water at their hands; and the lower castes even accept food from them. Leadership in village affairs is largely with the Raj Gonds, and this fact is freely recognized.

This may be explained by historical and economic factors. Much

For a detailed discussion of the web of inter-caste relations and of such traditional arrangements as well as for the analysis of a slightly different type of social structure, see the author's forthcoming *Indian Village*, London; Routledge and Kegan Paul,

of the territory in the district of Adilabad is recognized as 'tribal territory' and is often described as 'the land of the Gonds' who dominated the scene here in recent past not just by the strength of their numbers but by their political power and influence. Even when the Goud chieftains, who once ruled over this area, accepted the suzerainty of Muslim kings and were later divested of their estates, they maintained many of their feudal privileges. They jealously guarded the distinguishing features of their tribal culture, and resisted caste Hindu influences. In the State of Hyderabad the forces of Hinduization were weak because of its Muslim rule. In fact the caste-Hindus could never effectively protest and apply sanctions against the un-Hindu practices of the Raj Gonds, for had they done so the rulers of the State would have sided with the tribes. Moreover, the numerical strength of the tribes in this region is such that they could easily defy the coercive sanctions of the Hindus. Notwithstanding the fact that in recent years tribal land has been passing into the hands of the cultivating castes of the Hindus (and some others as well), the Raj Gonds still retain a substantial part of the agricultural land in the district. Their partial economic independence has afforded them considerable cultural security. Consequently on the integration of Hyderabad into the Indian Union power equations in the State have also undergone significant changes. The Hindus know that the Muslims are no longer the rulers of the State; in fact they vaguely feel that now they (Hindus) are themselves the rulers. Some verbal protests have been made against the un-Hindu practices

of the tribes, but so far they have not been supported by any sanctions nor could it be said that their sentiments have the backing of a substantial section of the Hindus. For example, in the course of our field-work one night Naganna (a weaver by caste) who is a petty merchant, besides being the landlord's agent and who has been considerably influenced by city-ways, gave a long lecture on Hinduism and attempted by quoting scriptures to prove that the tribes were barbaric and unfit for social contacts with clean caste Hindus. He was particularly critical about the cow sacrifice and some of the marital practices of the Raj Gonds. He did all this under the influence of drink and was shocked to find that no one came forward to support him. Some of the village elders tried to persuade him to go home and said, "Maybe, what you say is true. Religious books say many things, but do we practice all of them? We have lived with the Gonds as brothers so long and we must continue living in the same way. Our true scriptures in the village are our own traditions." Early next morning Naganna was sober and voluntarily made amends for his insulting remarks. He went to Lachchu Patel, the headman of the Raj Gonds and the grand old man of the village, and offered his apologies to him for what he had said the previous night.

The village is a distinct structural entity like the kin-group, caste and tribe. All these entities control the conduct of the individual. Several villages come together both temporarily as well as permanently to form a wider structure. Dewara is the leader of a group consisting of sixteen villages.

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