The Bhils of Ratanmalns
Lineage and Local Community

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Kinship and affinity stretch across clan, lineage and family—the district structures of the Bhil social system—and link up individuals and groups in different villages in an extensive network of mutual rights and obligations.

A normal Bhil village consists of a dominant lineage, powerful and privileged, and one or more subordinate lineages, enjoying only limited rights in theory. In practice, various factors have combined to mitigate the position of the latter and in consequence, the local community possesses a highly developed sense of unity.

The Bhils, who are distributed over the central Indian highlands, reveal marked cultural, structural, and even physical differences among themselves. For instance, recent investigations have shown that the Bhils of Khandesh and Rajpipila (Satpura group) differ from the Bhils of the Mahals and Malva (Aravalli-Malva group), while the Bhils of Madhya Pradesh differ considerably from both. In fact, the available evidence suggests that the Bhils form a congeries of tribes who are superficially similar, rather than a single tribe.*

The present paper has a special reference to those Bhils who live in and around the Ratanmal table land (taluka Limkheda in Panch Mahals district), a region which formerly formed the estate of Ratanrnahal in the Central Indian States Agency. The Bhils constitute the major element in the population of this area, though there are also members of a few other tribes such as the Koli, Patel, Bhilai, Dhanaka and the Naika. Each tribe lives largely by itself, however, and this is even more true of the Bhils than the others. Normally no non-Bhils live in Bhil villages.

THE VILLAGE

Bhil villages are small and dispersed, and each village has between 30-40 homesteads. Each homestead is built in a clearing, wherever fairly even land is available for cultivation. It is separated from its cultivated fields, jungle and occasionally by one or more ridges of a hill which intervene to cut up a village into two or more isolated parts. But no homestead is built normally beyond hailing distance from its nearest neighbours. Sometimes, the several sons of a man build their homesteads in the neighbourhood of their parental homestead. Thus a Bhil village often consists of several clusters of two or three homesteads scattered over a considerable stretch of undulating forested country. It is nearly always located near a perennial stream or spring.

The Bhils are primarily cultivators. But the collection of forest produce forms an important part of their economic activity. For six months in the year, they work for wages with timber and fuel merchants and engage in the operations of felling and logging timber and making charcoal.

The normal residential unit of a Bhil is the elementary family. On marriage, a man leaves his parental homestead, and builds for himself a separate homestead on his portion of the family lands or in the neighbourhood of the parental home itself. From then onwards, he constitutes a separate economic unit, though not entirely. He and his wife and children continue to be an integral part of his joint family.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The Bhil social system may be described as polysegmentary, with successively narrow segments dividing the community into groups of unilineal kindred. Three such distinct structures are clearly visible. There are a large number of patrilineal and exogamous clans (atat) and sub-clans (peta atak). But these are so highly segmented and interspersed, and distributed over such a wide area that except as a principle of descent and exogamy, clanship has but little relevance for the Bhils. There is neither a body of traditions nor a system of social, political or ritual bonds that serve to bring the entire clan together occasionally.

A smaller but more compact structure is the lineage (nal), the depth and extension of which is limited by a definite genealogy and encompasses at most seven or eight generations. The members of a lineage group are able to establish their exact relationship to each other by reference to descent from a common ancestor. When a lineage has an unusual depth or extension and the genealogical links are lost, there will at least be a definite tradition of kinship supported by extensive social and ritual collaboration among the members of such a group. The members of a lineage live close to each other. Even where some of the sections of a lineage are dispersed, they share birth and death pollutions, come together to collaborate at least on certain important ritual occasions. For instance, when the annual sacrifice to Babadco (the principal tuteurary deity and chief ancestral spirit of the village) is to be offered, a man who has migrated to another village recently, goes over to the village of his lineage even if it involves a journey of three days on foot. In fact, a kindred group might be living in a village for two generations, and yet claim membership of a lineage elsewhere.

Inside such a group, inter-personal relations are regulated by reference to sex, age and generation of the person concerned. The members of a lineage co-operate in economic and other activity. The lineage has a corporate character, the male ciders having the power to act for it under certain circumstances. They direct, co-ordinate and

See also my paper "Some Preliminary Observations on the Social Life of the Bhils of Gujarat", J M S Univ Baroda II. I.
control its activities and sit in judgment over disputes among its members. The members respect the powerful spirits of the lineage and regard them as the guardians of the lineage. Such beliefs impart considerable strength to the solidarity of the lineage group.

JOINT FAMILY

A still smaller, but very compact structure, is the joint family. It is actually a minimal lineage and consists of a couple, their children and descendants in the male line. Normally a joint family is three generations deep. But sometimes it extends to four generations. The senior male is the head of the joint family and his word is final on matters concerning the welfare of the joint family as a whole. His decisions, though never autocratic, are binding on all, even on those of his sons who are married and have set themselves up in separate homesteads. He has complete control over the landed and other property. After his death, these rights of ownership and control pass on to his sons who normally divide up the property and separate, becoming the heads of their respective families. But rarely do they continue as one joint family under the leadership of the seniormost among themselves.

A woman is not regarded as an integral part of her joint family, in spite of her living with, working and bearing children for her conjugal family, she has very few lights in it. For instance, the conjugal family has no rights at all in the person of a widow, while if she chooses to live with and work for some other, with a total population of over 2,000, and all the four villages claim descent from the same ancestor, one Kalla of the clan of San­gada. Tradition has it that several generations ago, Kalla migrated with his wife and children from a place called Onjani in Rajasthan, and founded the village Bajarwada. The other three villages were established in even older times by his descendants, as they increased in numbers. Genealogies with a depth of six to eight generations are available and they show that most people in a village are related to each other. But the genealogies do not go back far enough to link up the four villages with each other.

Village and Lineage

A normal Bhil village in these parts consists of one or more lineages of the same or different clans. There are a large number of villages in Dohad and Jhalod talukas where the entire population belongs to a single lineage group. For instance, near Jhalod town, there are four large villages adjacent to each other, with a total population of over 2,000, and all the four villages claim descent from the same ancestor, one Kalla of the clan of Sangada. Tradition has it that several generations ago, Kalla migrated with his wife and children from a place called Onjani in Rajasthan, and founded the village Bajarwada. The other three villages were established in even older times by his descendants, as they increased in numbers. Genealogies with a depth of six to eight generations are available and they show that most people in a village are related to each other. But the genealogies do not go back far enough to link up the four villages with each other.

There are no written genealogies and information has to be collected from old people, whose memories do not go back far enough to link up the four villages with each other.

The Headman

Authority in the village is mostly concentrated in the dominant lineage and is exercised through the headman (tadavi), who is generally the head of the senior section of the bhaibeta lineage. The headman who is also the head of the village assembly (pancha) is assisted by one or two other functionaries who are normally drawn from amongst his kinsmen only. His decisions, taken in consultation with the assembly, are final. He represents the village in all inter-village meetings.

Until recently, whenever a portion of the jungle in the territorial...
limits of his village was cleared for purposes of cultivation, by one of the karhans in his village, he was entitled to be paid as an Ins fee a head-load of fuel and a seer of salt (5 seers = 3 lbs), per plough. When the jungle in his village was leased by the Government to timber or fuel merchants, the latter had to pay him a royalty of Re 1 to Re 1-8 per cartload of timber or fuel removed.

Negotiations for contracting an alliance or settling a dispute with a person living in another village, have to take place through and in the presence of the headman of either village. Agreements arrived at through him are backed up by the entire village community, which is then responsible for seeing that the terms of agreement are complied with by either party. When any agreement is reached without the cognisance or approval of the headman, the parties are liable to be censured by the headman and the assembly, who are in no way bound to respect such agreements. On the other hand refusal by the headman to attend a gathering called for such a purpose, is tantamount to the ostracism of the individual concerned, since nobody else would attend the gathering or co-operate with him in any of his ventures till such time, as the headman lifts the ban on him.

As the spokesman of the bhaibeta and the assembly, his decisions are final. The revenue and police authorities generally find it convenient to support the headman. No person can be settled on the village lands without the headman's approval. He can expel any member of his village, whom he considers an undesirable person.

THE SUBORDINATE LINEAGE

A member of a subordinate lineage (karhan) is subject to certain restrictions. Even in such matters as are of special interest to him only, such as, an exorcism ritual to cure a sick child, the karhan has to inform the headman and request him to be present at the ritual. When a bird or a beast is sacrificed, a part of the carcase has to be given to the headman as his due (lag). Failure to give him the share is deemed an insult and invariably leads to the karhan being harassed and occasionally even beaten up.

When a girl is married, several of her kinsmen are entitled to receive shares (dapa) in the bride price paid for her by the groom's family. Generally, the several recipients of the da pa return it as a gift to the girl herself, in the form of a calf or some ornaments. The claims of the local community on the girl are also recognised by a feast, given to the entire village on the eve of the marriage. Further, in the case of a karhan girl, the headman is entitled to a special share (kuvasi). His claims for the kuvasi are based on the grounds, that he takes care of the welfare of the karhan and talks a leading part in the negotiations for his daughter's marriage. Further, if anything should go wrong later and the girl runs away from her husband or otherwise misbehaves he would again have to
bear the brunt of the negotiations. However, the bhaibeta need not pay him the kavasi, for he is also the head of their lineage group and whatever functions the performs on their behalf. Will be in the latter capacity; It may be noted, however, that the bhaibeta also allow for the kavasi in their calculations of the bride-price to be received. This money is retained by the father of the girl along with his own share and the shares of the mother and brothers of the girl.

Generally the karhans are regarded as mere tenants. In theory at least, they are not given any effective voice in the management of ordinary village affairs. Further, they are largely excluded from participation in the ritual life of the community. For instance, the annual sacrifice to Babadeo is regarded as of exclusive interest to the dominant lineage. The karhans are excluded from actively collaborating in the ritual, as on such occasions they become the 'guests of the village', along with a few other invitees from the neighbouring villages. They are fed sumptuously by their hosts on the previous night, and are formally invited to witness the ritual on the day following. Portions of meat and liquor are given to the karhans after the final sacrifice to take home with them. Contributions towards the expenses on this and similar occasions are collected only from the dominant group. However, all the karhans are expected to be in a state of ritual purity from the day previous to the sacrifice till the end of the ritual, since ritual impurity or pollution resulting from a death, birth or sickness in the village, or from sexual intercourse, in any person of the village, would nullify the very sacred atmosphere needed for a successful outcome of the ritual.

THEORY AND PRACTICE

Thus, we have a picture in the preceding pages, of a community consisting of a dominant lineage, powerful and privileged, and one or more subordinate lineages not even having full ownership rights over the land they have been holding for generations and barred from participation in a large area of social and ritual life of the community. In such a community, one may expect to find deep animosities and frictions between the two groups.

Actually however, the situation in practice is different. An analysis of the circumstances under which the different karhan settlements took place helps us to understand the situation. On inquiry, the karhan settlements in most villages seem to have taken place under three types of circumstances:

(i) An acute shortage of cultivable land available in one village in relation to the size of the kindred group subsisting upon it, resulted in the migration of a segment to other villages.

(ii) Internal dissensions in a lineage group or joint family, occasionally resulted in the weaker section withdrawing from the field.

(iii) Migrations of individuals with other families, occurred to other villages in response to a call for aid from a sibling in distress. Under this category, one may also include the cases of the return of a widow or divorcee to her natal group.* Movements to affinal villages have taken place when any one of the above sets of circumstances were prevalent. Such migrations are evidence of the strength of the affinal bond which always cut across lineage bonds and frequently link up individuals in different villages.

An analysis of the three villages of Ratanmal gives us three dominant lineages as against 13 subordinate lineages. Of the latter, three were established by those who came in search of land; in one case migration resulted from internal dissensions in the joint family of the person who came to Ratanmal. In all the other cases, settlement took place under one or the other of the circumstances referred to in (3) above. Four people came in as ghar jamai (a man, who on marriage becomes a member of his wife's family) unlike the normal marriage in which a girl becomes a member of her husband's family) of the then headman. Two others were the sons of a sister of a bhaibeta. In three other cases, it was the sister's husband himself who was invited by the then headman, to settle in the village. Later genealogies indicate that even where the karhan was not an affine, he became one in course of time, ie, two or three generations, through alliances between karhan girls and bhaibeta boys and vice versa. Thus, in these three villages, the entire community consists of two or more agnatic kindred groups with affinal ties running criss-cross between them. In such a community, any sharp distinction between the dominant and subordinate lineage groups has a tendency to be softened down in practice. In most cases, a karhan is a close kinsman—daughter's son, a sister's husband, or a mother's brother with whom one has an affectionate relationship.

THE ACTUAL POSITION

Further, though the bhaibeta are dominant in theory, they are rarely so in fact. This is specially so in a village of any considerable size with a large karhan population. Due to factors of unequal fertility and industry, often the karhans are economically as stable as the bhaibeta. Very often, the karhans are numerically stronger than the dominant lineage. So the latter are willy-nilly forced to concede them greater prominence and to associate them more and more in the management of the affairs of the community. Since most important matters of common interest are discussed and the decisions arrived at by the pancha comprising of all the adults in the village, the karhans have as effective a voice in practice as the bhaibeta influencing the decision. Because of their links with the dominant lineage most of the privileges and reservations of the latter are open to some extent to them also, not as a matter of right, at least as a matter of courtesy and goodwill. For instance, if a bhaibeta finds his sister's son grazing his cattle on his (the former's) reservations or taking some mango fruits from his tree, he is not likely to object to it.

Nowadays, karhans are found in many a place holding important offices in the community. For instance, the pujara (literally, a worshipper, here an important functionary who controls and co-ordinates the resources available, on important ritual or social occasions,—a Master of Ceremonies) in all the three villages of Ratanmal is a karhan. Often, the headmanship of a ward (phaliya patel) in most villages of the area, is the privilege of karhans who are never the tadav of an entire village.

Another factor that does affect their mutual status is that often a bhaibeta of one village is forced to
migrate to another village, where he becomes a karhan. There are cases, where a man who owns land in two villages, enjoys the double status of being a bhai beta in one village, while being a karhan in the adjoining one where his maternal kinsmen are the bhai beta.

This, however, does not imply a complete absence of disputes and tensions between the dominant and subordinate groups in any village. As the area is being opened up to external economic and political influences, the karhans have come to feel more and more that they are being exploited. In recent times, there has been an increasing opposition to the payment of kuvasi on the ground that it is an unjust extraction. After the merger of these areas with the Bombay State, the karhans have in many places successfully disputed the right of the dominant group over the trees standing in their (karhan's) fields. They point out, with some feeling that the presence of large trees such as the mowhra (maha, basta latis, folia roxb), teak (teckone grandis) and mango (mangifera indica) have an adverse effect on their crops. Why should they be deprived of the products of these trees? In most such cases, the dominant group has adopted a compromising attitude. It is only in a very few villages that clashes between the two groups have occurred over such issues.

POSITION OF HEADMAN

Some of the functions and privileges of the headman have been indicated already. Briefly, he is the head of the senior section of the dominant lineage. The office normally passes on from father to son, but not invariably. Any person of the dominant lineage is in theory entitled to hold it. He is also the revenue and police official in the village. In his former capacity, he is assisted by the talati (village accountant). He holds his lands tax-free and formerly, he was exempt from the levy of free labour (veth) and was entitled to hunt game within his territorial limits. In addition, he was entitled to collect certain dues from the karhans in his village, and from the contractors of timber and other forest produce operating within his jurisdiction. With powers of expelling any undesirable person in his village, he is even today easily the most influential person in the community. If the headman is also an elder, and has a reputation for wisdom and experience, he enjoys great power indeed. Where the village is very big, it is split up into two or more wards and each ward is placed in charge of a phatiya patet who assists the headman (tadavi) in the maintenance of law and order in his ward.

The headman is guided on all important matters by the village assembly which normally consists of all the adult males in the village, except in the case of very large villages where only the heads of different families or lineages, sit on the pancha.

VILLAGE ASSEMBLY

There are no established rules of procedure in a village assembly; Whenever a matter of sufficient importance is under consideration, all the people are assembled and invited to discuss the situation. But actually, it is only the opinions of a few elders which are taken into serious consideration. Each case is decided on its own merits, though precedents and analogies are profusely cited. The function of the
headman is only to execute the decisions of the council. Practically anything of Importance may be discussed in the village assembly. Disputes and persons not actual members, though an essential, a forthcoming important ritual, the ways and means of meeting the ever-increasing tax demands of the State; all these have been discussed in the assembly. Its efforts are always directed towards the mainenance of harmony. What is aimed at is not much as to control the blame on one of the parties to the dispute, but 10 effect a compromise. Once a matter is settled, further references to that are avoided. Anybody who attempts to aggravate minor incidents or to take disputes before an external authority for adjudication is censured, and held in public contempt as a person who has no regard for the honour of the village.

To a Bhil, membership in a village is of great significance. Within the village all the persons are closely bound to each other by bonds of kinship and participation in common activities. Often there are rifts within the community. But, they are more in the nature of family quarrels and are not allowed to assume serious proportions. Death, sickness or misery in any house is regarded as the sorrow of the entire village. Frequent and cordial social relationships are expected and desired with the affines, and are to be reciprocated with hospitality and courtesy by all. Actually as a result of one such alliance between two kindred groups, two villages are brought into close relationship with each other, specially among the younger people. Usually one marriage with a lineage leads to several other marriages with it. A link becomes a chain.

Further, serious insult or injury to a person from an outsider is regarded as an injury to the entire community. For instance, Ramsingh, a Khabad of the village of Nal, was married to Mithudi, a girl of Kotumbi. Gallia, a younger brother of Ram-singh, and a number of other young men from Nal were often visiting their affines in Kotumbi. One day, Galla eloped with Kali, wife of a Paramar of Kotumbi. After the initial furore attendant upon their action had subsided, Galla and Kali, who was subsequently divorced by her husband, went over to Nal, to live there. The people of Kotumbi who felt it very humiliating for one of the daughters of Kotumbi to live in the same village as the offenders who had abused their hospitality to an affine, insisted that Ramsingh and Mithudi should leave Nal. Ultimately Ramsingh had to accept some lands in Kotumbi and settle there, in deference to the wishes of his affines.

Thus kinship and affinity cut across the clan, lineage, and family bonds to link the entire community in bonds of co-operation and participation in common activities. Frequently they bind also two local communities. The local community is of greatest significance to the Bhil, for the sense of unity and solidarity that it inculcates among the several members of a village.

SENSE OF UNITY

This sense of 'oneness', that prevails in the village may be seen in a number of incidents that take place every day in a Bhil village. When scarcity prevails in the village, whosoever has corn shares it freely with the others, he does not normally ' lend ' it to the people of his own village.

But this unity may be seen more clearly in the relations of this village community with its neighbours. In disputes involving a party from another village, the matter soon assumes general importance. More than the person actually involved, the others try to ensure that their man gets a fair deal. When negotiating a marriage, the boy or girl has to be approved not only by the families of lineages directly concerned, but by the entire community. Any member has a right to declare that the proposed alliance is undesirable, since the members of the lineage concerned are not likely to be 'good affines'. Bhils in common with people the world over, desire affinal relations only with such people as are not impoverished, or miserly, but are hospitable and courteous and above all, who are honest. Any person who is aware of any undesirable facts about the group with which alliance is proposed, is expected to state them so that the proposal may be given up. It is not merely the particular family or lineage that is brought into affinal relationship with the other party as a result of the proposed alliance, but the entire village. Frequent and cordial social relationships are expected and desired with the affines, and are to be reciprocated with hospitality and courtesy by all. Actually as a result of one such alliance between two kindred groups, two villages are brought into close relationship with each other, specially among the younger people. Usually one marriage with a lineage leads to several other marriages with it. A link becomes a chain.

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Weakness Persist November 4, 1954

UN T I L Thursday last, Clive Street was quietly steady. Equities prices began to decline after the end of the settlement. Stock markets were absorbing shocks. But events developed so suddenly in the last few days that Clive Street reeled under the impact. For a day, it seemed to gather courage on unconfirmed reports that New Delhi had given its consent to the Birla-British iron and steel proposals at Durgapur. These reports were interpreted to mean that fears of an undue expansion in the public sector at the expense of the private sector were exaggerated.

Then came the news of New Delhi's decision to reject the Birla-British proposals for erecting iron and steel plants at Durgapur, Olive Street came to the conclusion that Government did not want private initiative to own and exploit the future development of key industries. It was hasty of Clive Street to come to any such conclusion.

Rourkella and the study of another site for a steel plant by the visiting Russian team of experts were clear indications of New Delhi's decision to foster future expansion of the iron and steel industry within the public sector.

It may be that the immediate reaction of investors and market operators to Government's decision to reject the Birla-British steel proposals at Durgapur is rather illogical. But New Delhi's decision had a chilling effect on the stock market as the belief spread that Government's action was an indication of the shape of things to come. Investors and stock markets were apprehensive that Government might have decided to expand the public sector at the cost of the private sector. On the day these lines appear in print, Parliament will start a debate on economic affairs. It is expected that Government will clarify its industrial policy during this debate. Stock markets are