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Questions of inequality and collective experience. Hinduism from several inner perspectives

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This paper examines the nature of social inequality taking examples from traditional Hinduism still functioning in rural Western India. Comparative research enables us to show the distinct inner divisions of society and different ways of expressing these divisions. Focus on three traditional groups from India – Rajputs, camel shepherds (Rabaris) and Untouchable Dalits (Meghwals), each holding a specific position in society, sheds more light not only on the idosyncracies of their culture, but also on how a specific notion categorizing Hindu values, first creates firm boundaries in society, and then imprints itself on all subgroups, and finally expresses them culturally in myths, symbols, rituals, *etc.* Doing analysis of these cultures, we discover not only what makes all of them Hindu, but also what makes them distinct. We can also observe the different ways in which each subgroup reacts to social divisions, taking them for granted, crossing them, or being forbidden any transgression. This paper emphasizes the advantage of doing ethnological fieldwork; work on several levels, including interviews and personal contact with a living culture, offers extensive data from various sources, enabling a cultural analysis on a deeper level.

KEY-WORDS: inequality, social and cultural boundaries, social networks, collective experience, Indian society

Society is certainly a complex entity characterized by inner divisions and boundaries. Each has its central, top, mainstream, bottom and peripheral subgroups. To study a traditional society we should focus on a number of questions. What lies behind these social divisions? It seems there is a logic to these boundaries, which Tilly (2001b) called a sorting mechanism. The task of identifying and describing this mechanism in a given society is crucial. The next question concerns the values and criteria of sorting which are manifested and why. Which is the dominant subgroup whose perspective prevails in society? What are alternative perspectives and are similar

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values and visions accepted in all parts of society? If not, what distinctions between them can be recognized? The last series of questions is linked with a focus on other points of view – what is the basis of alternative perspectives in society and what idiosyncrasies are formed around it? What part of the whole do they constitute? How long do they convince themselves and feel that they belong to the whole and when do they cut ties with the original society? How do rituals, myths and symbols reflect their cultural response to the sorting mechanism and separating lines? In other words what is their response to the inner boundaries of society?

To answer such questions about tangible and intangible aspects in an anthropological framework, we need to focus on several spheres of local life including collecting myths, understanding symbols, taking part in rituals, *etc.* Contact with people, interviews, direct participation besides material artifacts open a wider view of reality and enable a vast scope of interpretation of local culture. Even if a stage of self-awareness looks low, direct contact during the fieldwork unfolds various spheres of their life.

The specific approach to research, taking into account both: material artifacts and direct contact with a living culture opens the way to conclusions. A fieldworker usually has more data to compare, analyse and consider. This data can be used to avoid imposing the researcher's own views on the object of research, to confront with the views of locals and with expressions of what is meaningful for local people and culture. This cannot be overemphasized in anthropology and the result depends only on how a researcher manages to embrace all factors and to verify each kind of information. This study is an example of such an ethnological approach, taking into account mostly data collected through fieldwork in a social nets of a living society.

It must be stressed that this paper deals with a traditional, rather than contemporary, society. The caste system has now collapsed in India. What does this mean? A network of hundreds of groups and subgroups circling around local centres and living in smaller or wider clusters have loosened or definitely lost their traditional strictness. Most of these groups and subgroups have been preserved as collective entities, but the former connections and dependencies have been cut definitively. In the place of the former networks of dependencies have emerged a new landscape of groups openly competing between themselves for resources, often on the markets previously forbidden to them. Such a change has influenced the economical and cultural area of their welfare and collective life, including myths, symbols, rituals, *etc.* What I mean by a traditional society (the subject of my focus in this paper), mostly concerns this net of social and economical dependencies and their impact on the forms of their cultural area. The question of how a new "open competition" orientation in contemporary social life might shape the symbols and rituals of the groups mentioned below will be the subject of another paper.

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This paper draws on fieldwork done by the author in the western part of India, primarily in Kutch from 1986 onwards, especially on the Rajputs, Rabaris and other communities connected with the traditional rulers of the area, and in a wider perspective, in Gujarat and Rajasthan. This area is on the borderland of Hinduism and Islam. As part of a wider region determined by the type of climate, it features agriculture that is distinct from other parts of India, and consequently it has, to some extent, a distinct economy, history, culture and society.

Pastoralism and animal husbandry set the framework of the economic (social and cultural) universe for the ancient nomads. However, the inclusion of traditional nomads into the circle of Hinduism or Islam resulted in structural and symbolic changes in the former world of the shepherds (obviously, we should keep in mind local cases and not try to generalize).

In Brahmin ideology, the act of killing an animal and eating its meat or blood was considered as ritually polluting. In connection with this, a new division emerged in the roles and obligations ascribed to distinct social groups. Taking up a particular type of work, a group was channeled into and finally given a particular position in society. This type of sorting mechanism, however, was not seen in nomads converted to Islam.

During my fieldwork, my attention was drawn to the Muslim Jats, a pastoral community from Kutch and neighboring Sindh. Unlike in the North, where the Jats, both Hindu and Muslim, belonged to a farming society, here Jats kept up the practice of herding cattle and camels.

Traditional Indian pastoralism relied on milk and dairy produce (butter ghee), as well as the processing of animal fur and flesh. The production of milk is still the main occupation of rural shepherds and there has never been a demand for middlemen. In contrast, processing distinct parts of animals into popular commodities involved a new division of necessary work in a Hindu environment. Activities related to breeding, such as the production of wool or textiles, were given to several castes. Some of these economic activities found a reflection in the myths of the origin of some of the groups.

In Gujarat, including Kutch, connections can be observed among, at least, three local communities, each with a different area of expertise: Rabaris – keepers of ram and goats, Khattris – a Muslim community of dyers, and Vankars – traditional Hindu weavers. Hindu shepherds could not do all the jobs because of ritual pollution. They produced wool, handed it over to weavers who made textiles for sale and then to the Khattris. Weaving and dyeing were viewed as ritually unclean, though to a lesser extent than slaughtering.

The cycle of production and processing of various parts of the animal body have become, for ritual reasons, split into particular acts – sheep shearing and making wool, weaving and coloring. All of these must be done by three separate communities.

We view it as an example of specific splitting in a Hindu environment, but not seen in an Islamic society.

A similar distinction could be made regarding other types of work. Whereas husbandry, producing and selling of milk or making wool were classified as pure, other jobs, including the already mentioned weaving and dyeing, but also slaughtering, castration, tanning and making hides for leather products, making necklaces from bone, *etc.*, were recognized as ritually unclean.

On the one hand, all these jobs are done by Muslim pastoral communities, on the other hand, they have been divided into occupations for specialized castes, ritually clean and unclean. As a result, a division into Rabaris (shepherds) and Meghwals (tanners and weavers) emerged, finding reflection in the rules of traditional exchange in various aspects of social life (service, food, and women).

Such a system was based on a general hierarchy of purity. But at the same time, in every region and sub-region, there was a specific structure of dominant groups, which had a more powerful impact than the general, ideal context. The type of patron or the dominating group (tribe) of landowners in the area was the basis for further social and cultural distinctions reflecting local worldviews. On the left bank of the Indus River, the landowning class consisted of a Rajput aristocracy and Jats. On the right-hand side of the river, this class was formed by the tribal aristocracy of Baluch and Brahui in Baluchistan and Pathan in the North. All these areas had their local dominant community. Broadening the context of this study, we may ask the question what relations are characteristic of the ruler, landowner, shepherd and butcher in various pastoral societies from other cultural environments (Baluches, Pathans, Jats, Gujars and also among Islamized Rajput-like communities in Sind).

Taking into account this background, we will focus on and compare these three distinct communities that coexisted in sphere of Rajput society in the western part of India.

RAJPUTS – RABARIS – MEGHWALS

The fieldwork in Gujarat and Rajasthan led me to recognize the existence of tangible and intangible ties linking these three groups, ties which are stronger than ideological ones. Generally, they belonged to the nomad and pastoral tradition. Each one had its share in animal husbandry, an activity which prevailed in arid regions, whereas agriculture was confined to areas with more suitable soil.

Each community held a distinct position within traditional society, representing a particular level in relations and exchange of a local patron-client system. The Rajputs were the dominant group, ruling or landowning, which gave them the position of a patron.

The pastoral community of Rabaris was classified as the category of servants (*ter tansli* – in Kutch and Saurashtra, *vasi* – in Rajasthan) who were distinguished as taking food from the hands of other members of the circle. In the former circle, they were characterized by the fact that they were dominated by the Rajputs, on the one hand, as well as by giving and taking food from its other members, on the other hand. This would mean that the social distinction between patron and servant was not sharp (as in Rajasthan). They belonged (alongside the Charans) to groups more trusted by the Rajputs.

Elsewhere (Demski 2007), I have shown that Rajputs and Rabaris belonged to the same broad circle of Rajput tradition with a similar worldview, but each group sees it from another position and ascribes various meanings to different elements of the tradition.

The three communities represented followers of Hinduism. The most interesting question for me was how a distinct social position occupied by them in a wider society might influence their culture, including myths, symbols, rituals and forms of religious life. To examine this I had to limit my study to those groups which continued to live according to the old style, mostly in remote areas, and to ignore the more modernized ones. In the case of Rajputs, as protectors of *dhārma*, and Rabaris as shepherds, the conclusions were more evident. The place in society occupied by the Meghwals seemed more ambivalent. Developing this thought, one can answer the question about structures underlying social divisions among Hindu people. Since I have already written about the Rajputs and Rabaris (Demski 2007), more space needs to be dedicated to the Meghwals. The material illustrating aspects of Meghwal life predominates in this study, while the examples from other communities have been signaled only to underline the distinctions between them.

Beyond the traditional categories of "pure" servants, we find other groups with more or less close ties to the Rajputs. Among them, we have the Meghwals,[2] or tanners of dead animals. They lived near the Rajput and Rabari settlements and were ascribed to the category of the ritually impure part of society. Beyond the Rajput circle, there were also tribal people, like the Kolis and the Bhils, traditionally living in specific close ties with the Rajputs.

The circle of Rajput tradition consists of a cultural pattern considered as a segment of the larger Hindu tradition. I see it to be composed of an ideal represented by the Rajputs, on the one hand, and of one of several possible realizations of Hinduism in

[2] Meghwal is the name of clusters of Chamars widely populating North India and divided into many subgroups. Under the name of Meghwal they live in Rajasthan, Gujarat and Sind. In Kutch, they are divided into smaller entities – the Maheshvari, Marmara, Gujara and Charania, each of them coming from a different part of the neighboring states and originating in different periods (*People of Gujarat* 2003: 279).

practice embodied by the Rabaris (Charans, Ahirs, Bharwars, *etc.*), on the other hand. Both the Rabaris and the Meghwals migrated with the Rajputs[3] in the past.

I do not approach them in terms of one collective structure or one culture and one meaning. In contemporary reality, however, rituals, views and self-presentations of rural Gujarat are often strongly linked with the present, the past and the future of a family and lineage. In such a reality, it must not be forgotten that one is a Rabari, and even more so, that one is a Meghwal.[4]

Meghwals are one of many castes classified as untouchable, or nowadays as Dalits, living outside the boundaries of traditional Hindu law (*sanātana dhārma*). It is very likely that the community consisted of several local tribes in this area – Meghwals, Bambhis,[5] Bhangis,[6] Dheds,[7] Vankars, Chamars, *etc.* The Meghwals of Gujarat were responsible for the disposal of the corpses of dead animals, including cows, tanning and processing of hide, the production of shoes and leather items, weaving of blankets and textiles, and apart from that for herding and agriculture. They maintained extensive relations with Muslims, to whom they supplied commodities. They ate meat, including beef, and were prohibited from taking water from common wells reserved for other village communities. They were forbidden to enter Hindu temples and their dead relatives were often buried in special cemeteries.

The social divisions of Hindu society were deepened by the processes of sanskritization, more popular in the second half of the 19th century. As a result of strengthening social boundaries, the pressure on the elimination of violence and bloody rituals of slaughtering animals at the pale, all these segments of society were much influenced by the sanskritizing mainstream. Meghwals can be a good example of such a social process. Before the movement gained popularity, Meghwals functioned in various spheres of life in North and West India. Before that, Meghwals were members of Nath ascetic communities and were even elected as heads of monasteries (*mahant*) (Khan 1997: 52). Older temples of the Rajasthan or Gujarat tradition, such as *bader* or *darga*, were transformed into Hindu *mandir* (Khan 1997: 179).

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[3] The latest examples were the Sodha Rajputs and Meghwals who escaped from Pakistan to Kutch during the war between India and Pakistan in 1970.

[4] From the point of view of the lower castes, the concept of Hindu *dhārma* served more as a tool for oppression and to support traditional relations of inequality. According to statistics (*Census of India* 1991) Dalits have usually made up approximately 17% of the Indian population.

[5] Bambhis or Khalpas are sometimes recognized as part of the biggest group of North Indian Chamars. In the past, they were tanners of the skin of dead animals, and some of them (Mochis) from Kutch were known as producers of leather sandals and boots (*People of Gujarat* 2003: 167).

[6] Bhangis or Rukhis, Mehtars and Halalkhars constitute a community of professional sweepers or diggers. They hold the lowest position in Hindu society (*People of Gujarat* 2003: 181).

[7] Dheds or Dhed Bawas is a community of wandering low-caste ascetics. They eat meat and beef, and drink liquor (*People of Gujarat* 2003: 332).

These social and symbolic orders have remained in an unceasing process of creation and collapse, always forming a new narrative for each group. As Nigel Rapport has written, what is a firm invariable in these "stories", is a propagation of a meaningful sequence through time and space, characteristic of such a narration. These narratives embody the perceived order and support it in their message, in spite of the divergence in time and space, emphasized by their experiences in a world in constant motion (Rapport 2002: 73). Thus the proposals put forward in this paper are not to be taken *a priori*, but rather viewed as an order within Hinduism under constant change.

In this way, a broad picture of local distribution and relations between groups became a particular pattern of social disparity. But I will argue that any peculiar blueprint had its justified cause and its cultural outcome, and that is why we can discuss and keep in mind the specific features of the Rajput tradition.

The problem of social inequality, or asymmetry, is not unknown in anthropology. I would like to mention Tilly's relational theory of social inequality, according to which inequality emerges from asymmetrical social interactions between social positions. Generally, they appear everywhere, but very rarely crystallize into firm hierarchies, despite which they somehow array population into strata (Tilly 2001b: 362). Tilly emphasizes that any hierarchy rests on an extensive social effort and struggles with the constant pressure of change. Categories do not consist of mental constructs, but of socially negotiated boundaries and changing relations across those boundaries (Tilly 2001b: 363). It means that not rigid structures, but changing social interactions have a greater impact on the whole. Older structures find themselves under constant pressure from segments of society, while some of them are still functioning in the changed world, others still exist nominally, but have lost their power and meaning, whereas the rest continually change, adapting to reality under new labels.

Following the relational view, a researcher of inequality aims to find an explanation through focusing on identifying combinations and sequences of causal mechanisms, especially exploitation and opportunity hoarding, and others like emulation and adaptation,[8] within episodes of social interaction (Tilly 2001b: 366–8). Thus interactions between social groups working on different levels constitute the main object of observation and in cultural material they will find their expression in the symbolic sphere (in myths, symbols and rituals), and in patterns of exchange

[8] All terms suggested by Tilly. Exploitation occurs when persons who control resources enlist the effort of others in production, but exclude them from full value added by their effort. Opportunity-hoarding confined use of a value-producing resource to members of a particular in-group as a kind of exclusive right for the group. In both cases, the mechanism linked groups in pairs, dominating and dominated. Emulation is a transfer of existing organizational forms, representations and practices from one setting to another. Adaptation is an invention of procedures that ease everyday interaction (Tilly 2001b: 366).

of services and commodities (relations of domination), and in the spatial sphere (patterns of settlement).

Examples of inequality can be found in every society, each expressing its cultural idiosyncrasies. For some configurations, more or less tangible boundaries between communities are characteristic; for others, like India, the distinctions are clearly underlined. In each case, the question is what is the basis of the exclusion/inclusion process that determines diversification and stratification.

The cause of a constantly changing configuration of power and social divisions lies deeper in economy, politics, competition and access to resources. All of them were reflected in ideology, and then underwent necessary legitimization to form a system of binding social rules, which masked the arbitrary divisions of power. This ideological level functioned as a social practice of exclusion and inclusion. Moving along the network of rules and segments could provide access to the circles of mutual exchange, cooperation and support.

Control over resources forms the basis of local divisions of power. The rulers were responsible for sustaining and supporting the existing order. Holding power, they formed the centre around which a number of dependent circles were created, taking advantage of the exchanges. Beyond that we find units partially or totally excluded from the local network. The centre has the power of control, and the power to define the surrounding reality or to give directions accepted by all the others. The former also had the possibility of using coercive force on others. The latter suggests the existence of something attractive for all and sharing a common symbolic carrier through which a cultural consensus of all segments is repeatedly confirmed. As a result, all of them constitute parts of a wider symbolic system that is shared, to a different extent, by all of them.

Characteristic of such a whole, imposed by the dominating group, are two kinds of relations: control of contacts between the top and bottom of a society, and negotiations or often lack of agreement in contacts between the bottom and top (Tilly 2001a: 303), well expressed in particular narratives.

Coming back to the traditional Indian society, we focus on different relations between groups. When local ideologies look as if they are regional or pan-regional, they become modifications influenced by historical conditions. In order to continue, I have to focus on the basis of the dividing mechanism resulting in the processes of exclusion and inclusion. We have to remember that, on the one hand, exclusion means placing outside social boundaries, but, on the other hand, inclusion may mean subordination of a new group. Moreover, inclusion in economy accompanies exclusion from another sphere, social or cultural.

The idea of purity emerged in the Brahmin social milieu, taken for granted as a specific value, meaning a lack of pollution in the ethical and ritual sense. This idea was developed and penetrated many spheres of social life, from higher and sublime

to everyday habits and also to apparently meaningless behaviour, finding expression in the concepts of pure mind, clean body, *etc*. This way of viewing the world, where the key was the protection of purity (*dhārma*), pemeated rituals. Then it expressed itself through sets of rules that presented abstention from certain acts, prohibitions, *etc.* Consequently, breaking the rules demanded rites of purification.

According to Manu, there are twelve substances (blood, bone-marrow, urine, excrements, fat, sperm, mucus from nose and eyes, earwax, tears, sweat, phlegm – *Manusmṛti*, V. 135) that are ritually impure. From the Brahmin point of view, any contact with such substances made people incapable of genuine communication with a divine principle and forced them to be separated from others. Thus, the socially recognized boundaries were based upon the earlier arbitrary divisions created by the sorting mechanism. To make the ritual more effective, the only person able to conduct it had to be thoroughly prepared (such a person belonged to a proper category, had gone through suitable preliminary purifying rites and had appropriate knowledge). In a reality defined in such a way, the groups in charge of removing impurities from a common social space were regarded as ritually unclean and thus ascribed to a specific social role.

In such a society, it was necessary to take special care of the proper preparation of ritual functionaries since their continuity had such great importance for the coherence of the whole society. Among other things, this goal was reached by such acts as gaining knowledge, forcing separation or avoiding mixing. This Brahmin perspective was imposed to a smaller or larger extent on other parts of society.

In everyday life, such ideas found expression in characteristic Hindu norms – strict rules of eating, distinguishing the kind and ingredients of food, and classifying the kinds of people with whom an individual is allowed to feast and in what way[9] (commensality), choosing a marital partner (*connubium*). Food is a carrier of powerful pollution and is full of social and religious associations. Lower in the social hierarchy these rules lose their obvious meaning. Other rules, of non-Brahmin origin, become of importance.

Brahmin regulations introduced strong boundaries and rigid rules excluding those who were unclean. The Rajput rules seemed less stiff. For example, the traditional rules of eating suggest rather that the principle of inclusion and subordination prevails. The place occupied during the feast expressed the actual state of relations among all the participants.

A similar basic set of exclusion and inclusion principles is behind marital regulations. The practice of excluding partners from lower castes represented the Brahmin point of view. In Rajput tradition, taking a marital partner from lower communities was popular.

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[9] Sitting in a row during a feast shows the equal status of all and contrariwise, eating along different rows demonstrates the distinct ranks of the participants.

Occupation was the most distinguishing sign. The nature of a profession was the basis of stereotyping one's behaviour and personality. All members of society ascribed different meanings to collective symbols, but remained strongly embedded in a social and cultural network.

The differences become clearly apparent when we compare the social and cultural features of three of the above-mentioned communities. Let us first consider myths. They showed the traditional social position, type of occupation and relation to other groups. According to Tilly, they may help in identifying combinations and sequences of causal mechanisms, especially of exploitation within episodes of mutual social interaction between the Rajputs, Rabaris and Meghwals.

If we recognize that the first Rabari, named Sambhal (or Camar), had connections with tanners (Chamars), we discover that splitting had occurred in the milieu of the pastoral people. It might have been a moment of cross-roads, when the sanskritization current pushed groups in various directions. I have no other evidence to prove their common origin.

Maybe a certain confirmation of social division can be found in the myths of the Meghwals. One day, their ancestor was not allowed to take a bath near the temple. At that time, the Brahmin foretold a great pestilence near Junagadh. The ancestor sat on the top of the mountain of Girnar and announced that he was not going to go down until his beard sank in water. After he had spoken these words, a heavy rain began to fall and it continued to rain for a few days, so the waters started to threaten the capital of the princely state. The ruler came to the ancestor and asked him to stop the rain and the rain ended. Then the ancestor asked the ruler to name his offspring Meghwal instead of Dhed. Another myth explained that the ancestor belonged to a Rajput clan of Khod. One day, when there was nobody to help him, he removed the dead body of a calf himself, and as a result was called untouchable (People of Gujarat 2003: 893). Similarly to many other groups (Chamars), we find here a motif of the fall of the group (see also: Briggs 1920: 15; Deliege 1993: 544).

The myths of the Rajputs made reference to Hindu gods and to the creation of kshatriyas on the top of the Abu mountain, where they were appointed to fight against demons. The first Rabari was created by Parvati and Shiva to take care of animals. The contemporary miserable fate of the Meghwals is explained by a curse put upon them. All of them have common symbolic frames characteristic of Hindu narratives (gods, the Rajputs, sacred places), which can be regarded as elements of the "circuit" and "passage points" of myths. Summing up, we may say that the myths of the Rajputs were concerned with the issue of land control and boundaries, the myths of the Rabaris confirmed their belonging to Hindu society, and Meghwal mythology was focused on the causes of their present low position in society.

The views and rituals of each group reflected their specific position in society. Thus, the figures of protectors of *dhārma* and of boundaries were embodiments of

Rajput ideals. During the festival of Dassera, the ruler left the fort and visited places in four cardinal points, anointing the city gates with animal blood. With a view to supporting the higher status of Rajput senior lines, such values were preserved as rules of honor, readiness for self-sacrifice, providing genealogies.

Shepherds living in the shadow of the Rajput tradition referred to Rajput heroes, but recently tended to abandon blood sacrifices. Their views focused on their embeddedness in the world of nature (religiosity) and such features as persistence, as well as belonging to their community and to Hindu society. For other villagers, a Rabari was a representative of wild nature, but he was also a servant of a Rajput, a path-trailer, a messenger subordinate to his rule. Rabari women sometimes became wives of degraded Rajputs. Because of their increased religiosity, Rabaris often joined ascetic orders (including Naths, but also Jains, and less known local sects). A locally well-known *bhopā* enabled direct contact with the minor gods.

Meghwals belonged to Hinduism, but outside the mainstream of society. As a result of this, their life was regulated by the higher social strata, which is viewed as a strong mark of social subordination.

All the three groups had contacts with the divine sphere, so we can trace the differences in viewing it. Because the religious practice of the Meghwals was shaped outside Hindu temples,[10] they formed their own rules and concepts, and appointed their own priests. The most characteristic of them were, the cult of Ramdev Pir (presently very popular), dark Goddesses (Kali and Chamunda) and local heroes (in Kutch, Matang Dev and Matiya Pir). A special type of hero recalling the trickster, a sense of injustice, blood sacrifices, as well as the cathartic or highly emotional character of their rituals, full of cruelty, should also be taken into consideration. Formerly illiterate (similar to the Rabaris), in their rites and symbolic life the Meghwals favoured music, singing, dance, paintings and textiles.

Generally speaking, their traditional rural rituals were accompanied by a fascination with death, violence and a notion of a tragic destiny. This was expressed through the offering of animals for sacrifice (buffalo and goat). In this sense, an element of wildness, much more radical than with the Rabaris, was brought to the village. The Meghwals of Kutch participated both in Hindu ceremonies (pilgrimages to Girnar, Dwarka) and in local Muslim fairs like Hajipir.

The figure of Ramdev Pir connected the Meghwals to the Rajputs (he was a Rajput warrior of the Tanwar clan who lived in Marwar), and the cult of this god is widespread among the Rabaris of Kutch, too. The cults of the Rajputs (Bhairava), the Rabaris (Guga, Kethalpar) and Meghwals showed a recurring motif

[10] The right to enter temples was guaranteed only for the higher castes. Apart from this others were prohibited to use temple tanks, common wells and holy script (Aleaz 2004: 153). Moreover, they are not allowed to enter concerts of classical music (Ghose 2003: 86).

of the guardian of a temple subordinate to a higher main deity. In a sense, the pure deity avoids pollution only thanks to his guardian or servant who takes on himself the necessary acts of violence.

Today, Ramdev Pir has surpassed the previous boundaries of a local or communal deity and is worshipped by the three communities and many others. The tutelary goddesses of the three groups had similar names, but were perceived through the lenses of the distinct experiences of the members, thus shaping the specific cultural idiosyncrasies of their rituals and visions.

The Rajputs primarily preferred Sanskrit rituals conducted by Brahmins, but they also knew other types of religious practice, like a vigilance based upon a more direct contact with a divinity of local origin, which made them closer to other lower communities. Similarly, Rabaris were engaged in local rites of vigilance, singing special songs, aimed at bringing the divine spirit to members of the community through trance. Meghwal priests conducted Hindu rituals, although in most cases they had similar rites like vigilance, but with more radical elements and dancing.

The religion of the untouchables differed from the beliefs of Indian tribal peoples. They represented the perspective from the bottom of Hindu society, and tribes were outside it and isolated from the caste population. The main motifs of the untouchables' variant of Hinduism were: suffering, and struggle and pathos, whereas several groups of aboriginal people preserved myths of their own gods, the first inhabitants on the earth, on their own territory. These motifs, however, were absent from the views of the Dalits. Their myths were deprived of the specific symbols that were a peculiar ingredient of tribal culture. They sensed divine power and presence in the experience of suffering, which became the source of their knowledge.

The iconic representations of their goddesses showed different aspects of social resistance. They placed their idols on the spatial boundaries, and the custom is similar in all Hindu societies. The difference consisted in the specific character of borders perceived differently by various castes. By comparison, the Rajput goddesses used weapons, the deities of Rabaris were concerned with animals (riding on a camel), and the spirits of the untouchables manifested special power, so that they threatened other neighbors. Nowadays there have been considerable changes in the cults of the Meghwals, but this reaches beyond the framework of this paper.[11]

As I mentioned above, the boundaries (social, spatial and symbolic) were meaningful to all of them. From the Brahmin point of view, boundaries were not to be crossed. From the other three perspectives, the question was not whether to transgress them, but rather how to do it. Higher status groups could cross over borders in

[11] The Hinduism of the untouchables is not homogenous. The majority of them practice the Hindu rituals of higher castes. Some of them abandoned tradition and joined various sects or converted to Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity.

some ways without the consequence of losing their rank. Lower castes had no right to transgress them, but did so in practice. What was seen as crossing the border and coming back after purification by the one side, was perceived as a transgression at a serious cost by the other side.

The three groups all had connections with boundaries. Rajputs were their protectors, the Rabaris crossed many of them with their herds. Meghwals thrown outside the border had to break it – as it was their limitation and confinement – to find themselves among other members of society, who tended to see them as unpredictable.

All the three groups were characterized by heroism which linked them with the nomad background and, to some extent, a martial tradition. While the Rajput ideal was a great warrior, brave, powerful, capable on the battlefield, always ready to sacrifice his life (*jauhar*, *sati*), the heroism of the Rabaris was expressed in their endurance, cleverness and ability to survive in the wasteland, wilderness and on the cross-roads, as well as a disposition to take up the ascetic life. The heroism of the Meghwals focused on self-sacrifice (being a victim, martyrdom and *samadhi*[12]). All three groups originally practiced animal sacrifice.

Exclusion from the village society brought an individual closer to the wilderness and the world of animals. Symbolically, wildness emerged in specific rituals, wherever there was a place for anger or resentments, as well as in the spirit of battle and struggle with oppressive forces.

The trickster, as a constant transgressor of norms and laws, belonged to the circle subordinate to the dominating communities. He perceived the world in two ways. As the dominated and excluded, he recognized himself as a trickster violating the norms imposed by Brahmins. As a religious convert (to Islam, Christianity or Buddhism) or a liberated educated individual freed from the limitations of the caste system, he was the centre of his world, establishing his own values, discarding the traditional rules of domination. This means that he could look at himself from both sides of the border.

Rituals mostly served the purpose of sustaining the position that a group of people occupied in the network of social relations, which presupposed unequal social relations. Differences in types of celebration reflect the different social perspectives. Rajput rites were concerned with celebrating power, symbolic inspection of the territory and underlining military competence. Shepherds' rituals echoed their dependence on nature, animal herds, and their ties with Rajput patrons. Untouchables held a specific type of ritual demanding blood offering and despairing expressions of emotion in the form of laments (Mencher 1974: 56), which I see as a consequence of the interiorization of fear.

[12] Dominique Sila-Khan linked Meghwals with the tradition of human sacrifice and with losing life on the battlefield (Khan 1999: 143). Offering human life to the gods was also practiced by the shepherds (Bharwars) of Gujarat.

Table. Various concepts from the viewpoints of the Rajputs, Rabaris and Meghwals.

	Rajputs	Rabaris	Meghwals
Position	domination, rule	subordination, assimilation, inclusion	interiorization of domination, exclusion
Actions	ruling, controlling, fighting, farming	animal breeding, service	removing carrion and utilization of dead animals
Type of *dhārma*	*rājadhārma*	from *adhārma* to *sanātana dhārma*	*adhārma*
Mythical motifs	theme of control, place of protector and guardian in Hinduism, Pabu	theme of belonging, place of shepherd in Hinduism, Harmal Rabari	banishment, the cause of their present low position
Divinity, symbols	under great gods of Hinduism, martial goddess, martial heroes Rama, Bhairava	tutelary goddess, Shiv, local Rajput heroes (Pabuji, Ramdev, Vachchara, Nikalanka)	bloody cruel goddess, local heroes of various origin (Ramdev, Matiya Pir)
Type of priest	higher Brahmins, bhopa	lower Brahmins, bhopa	unclean priest Turi, bhuva
Calendar	Hindu Navaratri, Dassera	Navaratri	Navaratri
Rituals	Sanskrit Hindu, vigilance, direct contact	Hindu, vigilance, singing dhor, trance, more direct contact	Hindu, vigilance, dance, trance, laments, direct contact
Type of sacrifice	animal, death on the battlefield	from animal to vegetarian offering	animal, human (in the past), martyrdom (impact of Islam)
Postmortem rites	cremation	cremation, burying	burying
Boundaries	protecting	circling around	transgressions, trickster

A depiction of the traditional division of work can be seen through common celebrations of the whole local society, with all its roles and figures (Dassera in princely states, village rites). Meghwals play an important role representing the character of a male demon from the myth re-enacted in the temple. During Dassera, the Rajput ruler and a representative of the Meghwals took part in slaughtering of a buffalo, symbolically connecting the two poles of a traditional feudal society. From the untouchable point of view, the most important element there was repeating the pattern of subordination and emphasizing the dependency on what is bigger than the community. That is why the threatening and meat-eating deities placed at the gates and thresholds served the vegetarian deities of the interior of the temples. It also revealed a specific fear characteristic of the higher segments of society, fear of an uncontrolled component of reality. Rites were meant to domesticate, tame and

control all aspects of it. Celebrating of the festival of Navaratri is common to all Hindu communities, but each of them celebrates on a different day of the cycle.

Particular experiences of the group lie at the basis of the cultural differentiation expressed in narratives. We can arrange them into a few groups according to the main themes characteristic of each community. Rajput narratives concentrated on rule, possession of land, military struggle, issues of honour, sacrifice, while the narratives of the Rabaris were concerned with dependency on deities, nature, herding of animals and ties with Rajput patrons. Rajputs not only had the power of controlling the others, but also the power to impose their worldviews on the rest. The narrations of the Meghwals stressed radical coercive oppression, suffering, pathos and a feeling of being dominated. Nothing went according to their will; instead they were forced to do things. During the trance, the body of a Meghwal became a place of struggle between different spirits. A killed member of the community was ascribed a powerful force because he directly encountered death in the most severe form. He symbolically became this force, or the very kind of death he had experienced. Such a force constituted an object of cult which could confront such elements as diseases, catastrophes and even death. This kind of view of death linked the Meghwals with other subgroups.

The three communities symbolized different stages of the abandoning of the main Brahmin values of Hinduism. The further they were from the centre, the bigger the threat they posed and the more powerful potential was ascribed to them. It seemed that the outer circle appeared to be the most dynamic part of the whole. At the same time, different sets of values were emphasized. In higher levels of society, the pattern for behaviour was a martial hero, and in the lower strata, where the idea of honor had little meaning, the ideal hero often became a lover (Flueckiger 1989: 51, 54). This could be applied to the Rajputs as far as their concentration on honor is concerned.

CONCLUSIONS

To come back to Tilly's suggestions, both exploitation and the hoarding of opportunity existed in the reality of the Rajput tradition. Exploitation, such as the exclusion of others from controlling land and people, and inclusion of some of them into the work system was present in Rajput society (*ter tansli*). The Rajputs (simultaneously as agents of a dominant group as well as representatives of mainstream Hinduism influenced by Brahmin views) imposed their worldview and controlled the structure. Rabaris were excluded from access to land and other resources. They had no control and during their cyclical travels with their flocks, they had to negotiate with local landowners, bigger and smaller. The Meghwals were excluded from the right of landowning.

The hoarding of opportunity limited information about specific jobs and work to one's own community to prevent the sharing of resources with rivals. A good example of this mechanism were castes, clusters of economic allies and other types of bounded units. The same tactics of closing the unit against others were adopted by the Rajputs within the circle of landowners, the Rabaris among other shepherds and the Meghwals against rivals in the same profession.

A multicaste village was an area of constant negotiation between the perspectives of all the important constituent communities, a space where visions and multiple hierarchies competed. The view from the bottom revealed that the caste system functioned as a very effective tool of exploitation. The access to resources was restricted to a small cluster of communities. Another function of this system was to prevent the emergence of social classes with common interests and a unity of aims. In this order of work, emulation between members of the society was strongly limited. Different groups could grasp only some aspects of the common concept of Hinduism linking them by their attention to practical actions in particular contexts (Mookherjee 2003: 351). Despite several differences, all three communities are agents of Hinduism.

The narratives of the dominant group based their visions on supporting social categories, which were, often stereotypical, not going into details. They focused on such beliefs and issues that warranted and justified the existing social hierarchy. The opposite point of view, of those who have no power, expressed a more individualistic image (Mahalingam 2003: 736). In the past there were, by and large, two routes for the lower levels of society: the route of sanskritization, in other words the integration of hegemony, and conversion to Islam or other faiths.

The three groups also represented distinct forms of inclusion and exclusion patterns that existed within Hinduism. The Rajputs, as belonging to one of the traditional "twice-born", castes could be regarded as an example of full inclusion. Only blood rituals and contact with death (on the battlefield), rejected in Brahmin narratives, could be considered as an instance of their exclusion. Control over land and power gave them a chance to live according to their own norms. They possessed both power over land and people and the power to impose their own view of reality. The former was opposed by the majority of other groups, but the latter was, to some extent, supported and taken for granted.

The evidence of the inclusion of the shepherds lies in their profession, function, use of Brahmin services and Hindu rites, as well as the fact that they adopted Brahmin and Rajput perspectives together with the basic set of laws and norms. The traits of exclusion can be seen through blood offerings, archaic rites (*adhārma*) and contacts beyond populated areas.

Meghwals functioned on the periphery of Hindu society. Their exclusion from the mainstream was caused by their profession, contact with impurities, blood offer-

ings, transgressions, breaking of norms, a proximity to death. What suggested their inclusion into Hinduism were several sequences of Hindu rituals and the overall Hindu symbols, but especially their subordination to Brahmin narratives in a relative acceptance of their roles.

The last two groups were dominated and deprived of any power. However, the innovations they brought into the whole society constituted elements of the discourse going on within Hindu society. The lower was the position of the group in a hierarchy, the more their status was bargained, and the more they succumbed to the rules of exclusion and inclusion.

Meghwals, whose occupation was removing one sort of impurity, became victims of discrimination and stigmatization. Uncleanness as the basis of excluding practices still operates, but in changed ways. Today, the range of their life is still seriously confined. Despite the efforts of government and local administration, they are excluded from the mainstream social and cultural network, taking part in exchange only on an economic level. A small cluster of Dalits has grown into a middle class. But the majority of them are unskilled workers, city sweepers, stoneworkers, rail workers, servants or serving in the army (Ghose 2003: 93). Some of them work in the enclave of governmental administration.

As many of the contemporary Dalit authors have written, Hindu culture was dominated by religion. That is why, even today, Dalits cannot escape from the intellectual trap of being a Hindu excluded and confined to the margins. They will not be freed of it unless a new re-writing of the sacred books of Hinduism is undertaken on a big scale. But this seems to be impossible today.[13]

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