

The Raika Jati and Its Dharmic Order

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Just as human beings found a hierarchy for themselves, so do they also create one for their animals. The species of animal a caste domesticates, has a bearing on its social status. In Rajasthan, in addition to the pan-Hindu concept of the sacred cow, the camel was placed high in animal hierarchy, although it did not evoke the same sacredness which is associated with the cow. When modern transport did not exist, the camel was the mode of conveyance in the desert (and still is even today). The princely lineages had their camel armies. In almost all the love stories of Rajasthan — Dhola Maru, Mahendra Mumal, Nihalde Sultan, Amala Khimvaji, to name some prominent ones — the camel is eulogized. A religious text called Goraksha Samhita records that Kalakarni, a female deity, has a camel as her mount. Some prefer to call her Ustravahini Devi (the goddess that rides the camel) (V.S. Srivastava, 1981 : 182).

Camel herds were generally owned by royal lineages and rich peasants.¹ Small peasants often aspired to own a couple of camels. Besides serving as a traction and draught animal, its ownership raised the status of a family; however, only rich peasants can afford to buy camels today, as each costs on average not less than five to six thousand rupees.² While other peasant castes (the Jats and Bishnois) do own camels, the tasks of camel-tending and breeding, keeping camel herds and taking them out for grazing, training them for various services, and looking after their health, are the traditional duties of the Raikas, who are also called and call themselves Rebari and Dewasi. They not only manage the camels owned by others, but also have their own herds. There may be individual camel specialists in other castes, but the Raikas have the reputation of being the foremost camel-breeders of Rajasthan, even when they have kept the flocks of sheep from time immemorial, or have switched to sheep in recent years. The love

lyrics of Rajasthan which praise the camel also pay tribute to its traditional rider, the Raika.

Besides being presently concentrated in Rajasthan and Gujarat, the Raikas also inhabit some villages in the states of Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh. In Gujarat, these people call themselves Rebari, although they know that their caste is also known as Raika. According to one estimate, there are at least thirty-two villages in Haryana which have a Raika population; the villages Kaithal of Kurushetra and Birdana of Hisar have around one hundred and fifty Raika households.

In the Bikaner district, my estimate is that there are thirty-six villages with Raika hamlets, the biggest of them - such as Gadhwala and Amarpura in Bikaner *tehsil*, Udasar Raikan in Nokha, Bajju and Charanwala in Kolayat, and Jaitpur in Lunkaransar - have between thirty-five to forty households each. In Jodhpur and Pali-Marwar (henceforth, Pali), there are many big Raika hamlets of more than a hundred houses each. Although no department - government or otherwise - has any knowledge of the total Raika population in Rajasthan or India as a whole, an official of the Social Welfare Department, Bikaner, told me (in May 1989) that the Raikas in all parts of India are not less than four hundred thousand people.

Besides the Raikas, the other pastoral communities of Rajasthan are the Gujars, Ahirs, and Sindhi Muslims. The peasant castes - such as the Jats, Sirvis, Bishnois - keep sheep and goats, but never so many as to constitute a herd. They mainly invest in milch animals. However, camels owned by the peasant castes are grazed by the Raikas on payment in cash. Other castes - martial as well as artisan - also cultivate land, and keep some animals, which are grazed by one of their family members.

INTERNAL DISTINCTIONS

According to the Raj Marwar Census (1891: 571-2), the Raikas are divided into two 'types' (*bhed*): Maru and Chalakya. Let me first summarize the findings of this report which became the basis of several other writings on the Raikas.

The Marus inhabit parts of Marwar, the Chalakya,³ regions of Godwar, that is the southern area of Pali.⁴ The Marus, according to this report, consider themselves superior to the Chalakya, a claim supported by a combination of two factors. First, they do not domesticate sheep; they are true camel-breeders. A Chalakya herd is predominantly composed of sheep though it may have a couple of camels for transporting the camp on migration. Second, the Marus think that the Chalakyas are dirty, do not observe the norms of hygiene and are non-vegetarian.

Further, the Raj Marwar Census distinguished these two groups in terms of certain cultural traits. The Chalakya women wear brass (*pital*) ornaments; that is why this group is also called Pitalya. The married Chalakya women do not wear a head-dress (*ati*) as is customary with their Maru counterparts. The Maru men wear a long loin-cloth (*dhoti*) stretching up to the toe; the Chalakya have a shorter loin-cloth. As the Maru consider themselves superior to the Chalakya, they can accept women from their lower group (hypergamy); the opposite practice (hypogamy), however, is non-existent.

Although the term Chalakya was used later in the entries on Raikas in several compendia on castes and tribes by administrators and ethnologists in the early twentieth century and as recently as 1975 by Westphal-Hellbusch,⁵ I did not come across its popular usage in my fieldwork. In an attempt to clarify certain points, I introduced my key respondents to both words, Chalakya and Pitalya. The genealogists (called the Rav) of the Raikas knew the existence of these terms, but the latter were not a part of the popular vocabulary, I was told. But these genealogists did not rule out that their caste brothers in other parts of Rajasthan might have used these terms in their

description of the Raikas inhabiting south Rajasthan. It may be inferred from this that the source of information for the Raj Marwar Census officials and others, and also of Westphal-Hellbusch, were the genealogists of a particular region.

Contemporary Raikas distinguish between three of their groups according to the region each one of them inhabits. There are, thus, Marus, who are from Marwar, the Godwara Raikas, who live in Godwar, and Kutchis (or Kasias), the Raikas of Kutch in Gujarat. It is true that the Marus regard themselves as superior to the other two groups. Some of them also say that the honorific title of Dewasi should not be used by lower groups. I also heard that the Marus can, in theory, accept women from lower groups, but hardly any cases existed in the people's memory to substantiate this. On the other hand, in my fieldwork in Godwar, I found that the Godwara Raikas also make a similar claim; along with this, they attack the distinction between Maru and Godwara by saying that the latter have dispersed from Marwar. This also implies that the Godwara Raikas accept (if only implicitly and reluctantly) that they are inferior. The differing claims of these territorial groups are supported by their respective genealogists.

Cultural distinctions also exist between the Marus and Godwaras, and the diacritical marks — such as the head-dress, the length of the loin - cloth — taken up in the Raj Marwar Census are not entirely incorrect. That the Marus and Godwaras do not eat from the same plate is also true. But my submission is that the fact of belonging to the same caste — the idea of *jati bhai* ('caste-brother') — transcends these cultural differences, and the Raikas see the others of their caste in different geographical areas as having the same 'essence' (*an-sha*). The Raikas know that the differences in *khana* ('food') and *pani* ('water') bring about differences in *rahna sahna* ('style of living'), and therefore various groups of their caste have adopted different characteristics. Consequently, their marriage ties have also been broken.

There is no substance in the distinction between the Marus and Godwaras in the types of



Fig. 1. The state of Rajasthan

animal each group domesticates. The Marus have flocks of sheep and the Godwaras have camel herds. A distinction between these groups with reference to their respective food habits is also incorrect as both of them regard themselves as vegetarian. But, it is true that the Maru, Godwara, and Kutchi are not intermarrying groups, the spouses being invariably sought from a circle of neighbouring hamlets. It is rarely the case that the Marus of Pali have marital relations with those in Bikaner, or other farther districts. The point to be derived from all this is that there are differences which the Raikas themselves recognize between their different territorial groups. These differences are upheld in relations of commensality and marriage, but they are transcended by the unity of *jati bhais*. Thus, any Raika — from any part of India — can seek shelter in any of his caste hamlets by simply announcing his caste and identity. The local caste council (*panchayat*) has the right to punish its members for denying general hospitality, food, and temporary shelter to any other person from their caste. This is an important factor in the formation of Raika identity.

STORY OF THE RAIKA ORIGIN

Let me begin with the hypothesis that the story of Raika origin not only defines what is central to their popular religion but also forges a unity between the Raikas all over Rajasthan. In present times, when Raika leaders are working towards the unity of their caste, they, in addition to emphasizing the problems faced by all of them, also draw attention to the fact that all Raikas — irrespective of their subcastes, geographical areas, variation in dress patterns and dialects, restrictions on marriage, conviviality, and commensality — are one because of their descent from the first Raika who was created by the Hindu God, Lord Shiva.⁶

Shiva is one of the three principal Hindu deities. Once, the story of Raika origin tells us, he goes into meditation for twelve years near a pond (*nadi*) in Mount Kailash, where he lives with his wife, Parvati. While he meditates, his consort engages herself in various playful ac-

tivities. Using clay, she makes objects in the shape of various bodily parts — torso, legs, eyes, and face. When Shiva emerges from meditation, she requests him to infuse life (*jivit karo*) into the clay objects. One by one, each object awakens, and that is how the animal world is created.

Finally comes the turn of an object that has five legs, the fifth one stuck to its belly. Shiva points out the grave difficulty this animal would have in walking, but, at Parvati's insistence, he says *utha*, meaning 'get up'. From that day, this animal comes to be known as *untha*, or the camel. But, as expected, it has difficulty in moving, so Parvati requests her husband to 'make the fifth leg disappear'. Shiva tries to convince Parvati that once the camel has four legs it would create problems for them, but she is unconvinced and reiterates her request. So Shiva pushes the fifth leg upward — it emerges as a hump (*thumbi*) and its base forms the boss (*aidar*). He also makes some marks (called *chugli*) on the upper part of the posterior side of the camel's hind legs, which the Raikas say are still found. The *thumbi*, *aidar* and *chugli* are, according to this story. Shiva's 'stamps' (*nishan*) on this animal.⁷

Once the camel has only four legs, it starts running swiftly, often disappearing into the wilderness. It is difficult for Parvati to keep it under control, and she once again requests Shiva to create a man to look after the camel. Shiva had already created a man called Nando Charan of the Kachela subcaste, to look after his bull (*nandiya*); and he had also created a Suthar (the Carpenter), of the Vishkarma subcaste, to take care of the 'renouncer's fire' (*dhuni*) and to bring in water from the pond. For grazing the camel, he creates a man from the 'dirt' (*mail*) of his thighs (*pinda*); the camel-grazier is named Pinda and is assigned to the Samar subcaste.

Pinda's duty is to take the camel out to graze. Once, on his way home from the forest, he runs astray into a cremation ground. It is already dark, so he decides to spend the night there. After a while, he feels hungry, and looks around for a vessel in which he could collect the camel's milk and drink. He finds an earth-

en vessel — chipped on the rim (*khanda*) — lying near a burning corpse. Pinda picks it up and begins milking the camel using the vessel to catch the milk. A drop of that milk falls on the ground. As a result, the ghost of a Maheshwari Brahmin awakens, whose corpse is also burning there. This happens because the divine camel's milk is sacred and its touch has a life-giving quality. The ghost manifests its desire to pay obeisance to Lord Shiva. So Pinda, in a state of fright, brings him to Mount Kailash. The ghost falls at the feet of Shiva and requests him to release it from ghosthood (*bhut juni*) as its last rites are yet to be completed. Shiva 'showers compassion' and the ghost is transformed into a human being (*manushya*). He is called Jamra and the divine couple keep him with them as an errand-boy.

In contrast to the other 'sons' of Shiva, Jamra is from the mortal world (*mṛtyu lok*). He has passed through the different vocations of life, and knows the importance of conjugal relations. He advises his three brothers — Pinda Samar, Kachela Charan, and Vishkarma Suthar — to approach the divine couple to ask for matrimony, so that they might be blessed with progeny. Parvati requests Shiva to find suitable spouses for them.

At this point the story provides a detailed account of how Shiva begins his search for his sons' prospective spouses, and finally finds the pond where the sixty-four celestial nymphs (*pariyan*, *joganian*, *saktan*) come to bathe. He asks Kachela Charan to collect their clothes, which they usually leave under a tree near the pond, and bring some of them back to him. On the way, he is advised to drop a couple of them after every step or two; those *pariyan* who get their clothes back return to the pond, whereas the rest keep on chasing the thief. When Kachela Charan reaches Mount Kailash, he has the clothes of five nymphs, but by the time he arrives at Shiva's hermitage, one of the nymphs called Kinka succumbs to death. The clothes are handed over to Siva who promises to return them to the nymphs on the condition that they marry his four 'sons'. The nymphs consent to marry provided the name of their dead friend Kinka is made immortal. Shiva transforms the dead nymph into a god-

dess (called Gaur) and his 'sons' and the entire world are advised to worship her.

Pinda is married to the celestial nymph named Rai, and their progeny, one son and twelve daughters, come to be called Raika (meaning, of Rai's). The second nymph, Sanwari, marries Vishkarma Suthar. They have eight daughters. Chanwri becomes the wife of Kachela Charan, and they are blessed with five daughters. The children of Sanwari constitute the Suthar caste, whereas those of Chanwri are the Charans. The 'ghost' Jamra marries Rambha, and sixteen daughters are born to them. The Ravas of Maru Raikas say that the descendants of Jamra and Rambha are called Rebaris.

Thus, for these Ravas, Raika and Rebari are two different castes. To quote from the narration of the Lambiyan Rav: "The Rebaris are the people who live in Godwar and Kutch; they are the children of the ghost. The Marus have no relations with them, except for the similarity in occupation." This, however, is not the view of the Ravas of Godwara Raikas. The story of the ghost, they say, is not in their texts, and they think that it is an addition made by the Ravas of Maru Raikas not only to give an erroneous and derogatory explanation to the origin of Godwara Raikas, but also to provide a textual support to the self-acclaimed superiority of the Marus. According to them, Shiva's camel-grazier is married to two *pariyan*, Avri and Gavri, and the purported distinction between the Raikas and Rebaris, as held by the Ravas of Maru Raikas, is wrong and misleading.

Now, the story of origin enters into the realm of segmentation within the Raika caste. The problem of marriage surfaces again when the children of Pinda and Rai are of marriageable age. Since there exists no other Raika family in the entire universe, the premise of caste endogamy is ruled out. Pinda, once again, seeks the help of the divine couple in finding spouses for his children. Consequently, Shiva appears in the dream of Sesna Arjun, the mythical king of Patangarh, and asks him to spare twelve of his warriors (of Rajput caste) for Pinda's daughters. The king complies and the Raika girls are married to twelve different Rajput subcastes. But what happens

to Pinda's son? In which caste group is his marriage arranged? The Ravs of both the Raika groups (as well as the published account in the Raj Marwar Census) do not have an answer to this question. When I posed it before the Lambiyan Rav, he said that perhaps Pinda's son was also married into the Rajputs, most probably its high-ranking Solankhi subcaste.

The twelve Rajput families agree to marry their sons to Raika women under the imperial command. As these marriages are against the principle of caste endogamy, the Rajput bridegrooms are excommunicated from their caste. Now, they merge into the Raika identity. However, their Rajput caste names continue to exist and for these, the Raikas as well as their geneologists use the term *nakh*. Furthermore, different Raika subcastes (Bar, Ulva, Khatana, etc.) are believed to be named after the sons born to Rajput fathers and Raika mothers. There is a common belief in Rajasthan that all the 'thirty-six castes' (*chattris quam*) have emerged from Rajputs; this, however, does not imply that they all have an equal status. It is relevant here to remember Tambiah's (1985) demonstration of the relationship between *varna* and *jati*. According to him, the numerous castes found in India "arose from the unions of males of different *varnas* with women belonging to *varnas* differing from their own" (ibid: 214).

Central to the segmentation of the Raika caste is the distinction between *nakh* and *jat*. The Raikas know the term *gotra* (*got*), meaning 'exogamous particlan'. Some of them remember their *gotra* names they learnt from their ancestors⁴. But *gotra* has no functional relevance in the local perception of their organization, marriage ties, corporate and inter-group relations. In contrast, *nakh* and *jat* are crucial for understanding their organization.

As other observers of Indian Society (such as Beteille 1964, Davis 1983) have noted, the term *jat* (or *jati*) is used for many levels of segmentation; in other words, there is no separate indigenous term for subcaste. However, this does not mean that people lack the idea of segmentation, fission and fusion. For a Raika, his Raika identity is in relation to other structurally equivalent identities, such as the Gujars,

Nayaks, Sunars, etc. Moving downward on the model of segmentation, his *jat* is Maru in relation to the Godwara or Kutchi.

Thus, the term *jat* is used for the Raika (the encompassing group) as well as Maru or Godwara (the encompassed group). But at the following level of segmentation, a terminological distinction occurs, and the word *nakh* is introduced. The Maru Raikas have twelve *nakhs* because the first Raika's daughters marry twelve Rajput men of different subcastes. As mentioned earlier, each *nakh* is the name of Rajput subcaste, and after the sons born to each of these twelve marriages, the Raika subcastes came into existence, for which again, the term *jat* is used. According to the Ravs, in total thirty six subcastes resulted. If closely inspected, it means that the sons of these daughters did not acquire any subcaste, either of their father or mother; on the contrary, they founded the subcastes.

Let us now take up the case of Pinda's son. Pinda's subcaste, to recapitulate, is Samar, assigned to him by Shiva. His son also acquires his father's subcaste, which is not the case with his sisters. He marries a Rajput woman (?), and as the system is patrilineal, his sons continue to remain within the Samar subcaste. The Ravs say that the Samars do not have *nakh*. Including him, the Raikas have thirty-seven subcastes, thirty-six from Pinda's daughters and one from his son (see Fig.2).

In light of the above, let me examine the concept of *nakh*. It may be difficult to find a word in the English language which properly conveys its meaning. The Raikas say that *nakh* refers to the 'seed' (*bij*), and it is an implicit indication of the male procreative function. In the case of Pinda's son, it is the Samar 'seed' which procreates the group, hence there is no separate *nakh*; in other words, *nakh* merges with *jat*. So, the fact as to whether or not he marries a Rajput woman is inconsequential. But in the case of his sisters, the 'seeds' come from the Rajputs; the descent however, is not traced in the father's line (or, the sons born to Raika sisters do not become Rajputs) because the role of these Rajput warriors, who are excommunicated from their caste, is only to procreate the Raika progeny. Thus, the sons of

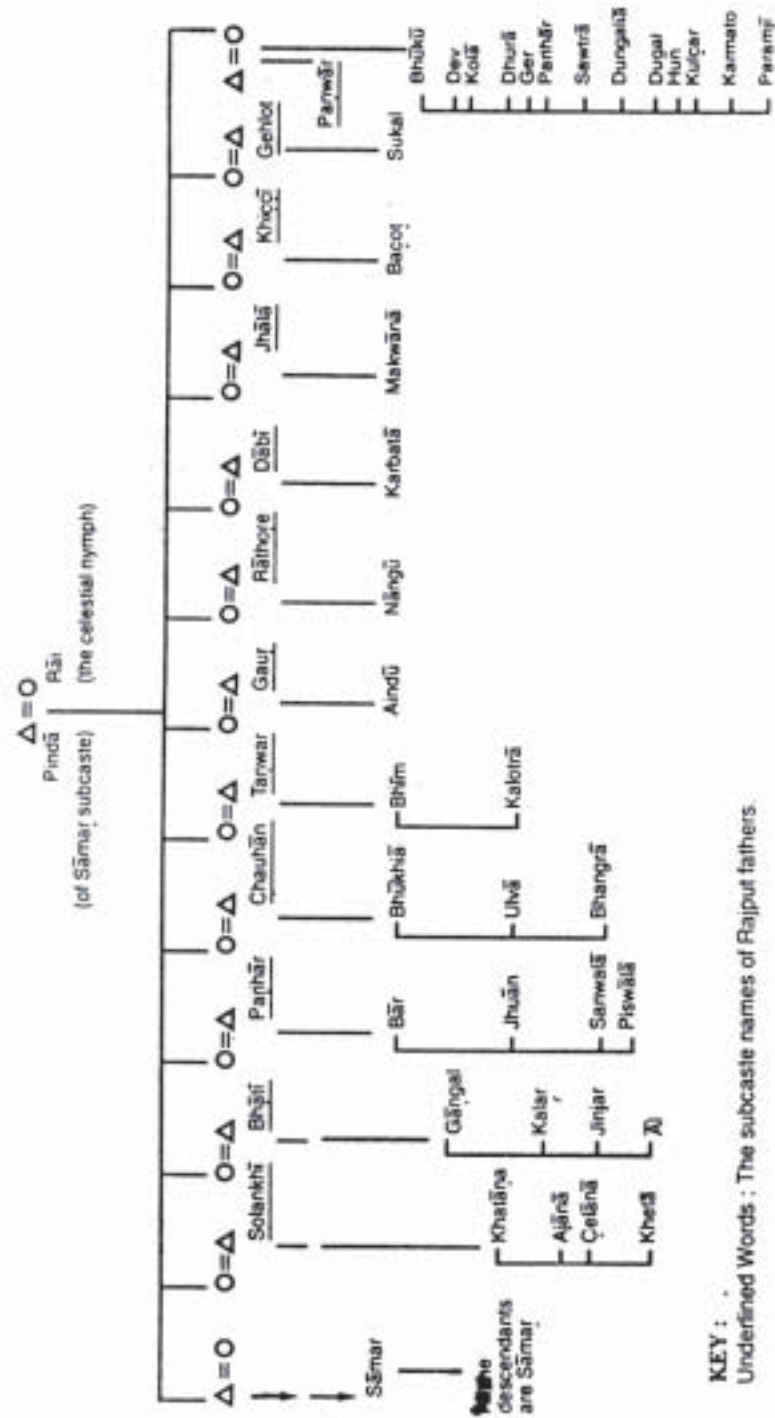


Fig. 2. The Raika subcastes

Raika sisters and Rajput warriors, are neither Samar, their maternal grandfather's subcaste, nor do they inherit their father's subcaste. They found their own Raika subcastes; but, since the system is patrilineal, they remember their respective father's subcaste, which comes to be conceptualized as *nakh*.

Like *got*, *nakh* is not the basis of any corporate function. But unlike *got*, it is remembered and the Raikas talk about it while exploring their relations with the Rajputs. A few of the educated Raikas who now live in cities have started using the *nakh* names, instead of their caste (Raika or Dewasi) or subcaste (such as Bar, Jhuan, Sukel, etc.) names, as their surnames. This may be because using Rajput surnames is still a source of respect in the cultural tradition of Rajasthan.

Finally, these thirty-seven subcastes are not arranged in any hierarchy. No norms of separation or exclusion operate on them. Observing the prohibition on subcaste endogamy, marriage is permissible between all. It may be relevant here to quote Ellis (1991:87): "the greater the degree of segmentation, the less the stress upon hierarchy as a principle of social interaction." However, the Samars are 'respected' (and distinguished from the others) because, in the patrilineal line, they are the descendants of the first Raika, and also their subcaste name was coined by Shiva⁹. A Raika teacher told me that if you meet a Samar, you must immediately fold your palms before him, because he has the 'essence' (dirt of the skin, or locks of hair, or sweat) of Lord Shiva in him. The local kinship concepts — such as who contributes the 'seed', proximity to or the progeny of the creator, the system of descent, etc. — are used to generate and explain differences. Thus, the Samars are respected because they represent the pure patrilineal line. But, this 'respect' (or, 'pure extraction') does not entitle them to any special favours — they are neither the most sought after for marital alliances nor allocated any religious role. Even in the past, they did not have precedence in any of the social roles. As is the case with other castes (and subcastes) in India, stereotypes are attached to some of the Raika subcastes; for instance, Piswala are known for their affec-

tion. Bar are praised for being the most reliable, and so on.

DUTIES FOR THE RAIKAS

This section gives an account of the duties (*dharma*) prescribed for the Raikas by their creator. As the Ravs of Maru Raikas narrate, when the primeval founders of the four castes married the celestial nymphs, Shiva announced twenty moral maxims for them. Of these, ten were ordained upon the Raikas, six on the Suthars, and four on the Charans. No moral maxims were set aside for the Rebaris; and this perhaps was because their ancestor was not created from Shiva's body. These rules were essential for the *devaputra* ('sons of the god') as each one of them was destined to live after his marriage in the mortal world rather than Mount Kailash, and thus needed to be apprised of how he should lead his life. Shiva advised his 'sons' to live according to their respective maxims if they wanted a happy and glorious life, and prosperous posterity.

As we saw in the case of *jati*, the term *dharma* is used for the whole as well as its parts. Each of these twenty maxims is called *dharma* and following this connotation, the Ravs say that the Raikas have 'ten *dharma*s'. The set of these individual *dharma*s is also referred to by the same term; thus the twenty *dharma*s constitute *bisotri dharma*. In addition, *dharma* also designates the broad religious category, in this case Hinduism, in which the Raikas classify themselves. It seems to me that of all the Indological concepts, *dharma* is perhaps the most multivalent and polysemic. It is constituted of three meanings — religion, duty, and morally correct, righteous, danger-thwarting, and merit-accumulating behaviour. Further, the occupation pursued by a caste is also termed *dharma*.

All these meanings of *dharma* are couched broadly in a religious idiom. The pivotal meaning given to it depends on the context of its usage. Distribution of gifts (*dan*) to serving castes (*kamin*) at the time of a solar or lunar eclipse is a dharmic action to avert any ensuing danger; feeding beggars is for gaining merit; wearing bracelets on both arms is

the morally correct behaviour of a *suhagan* ('married woman'); keeping camels is a duty of the caste; and classifying one's group as Hindu is to adhere to the broad religious category, and in this context, *dharma* refers to religion.

The Raikas' ten *dharma*s are supposed to be original. Since then, the Ravens tell us, many more *dharma*s, the commands of other gods and goddesses, have been added to this list. The people, however, keep a distinction between the maxims assigned to them by Shiva and those which have the legitimacy of other divine powers. The distinction is also kept while performing rituals and thanking the deities for help. For instance, when a she-camel delivers a calf, it is imperative that sugar-wafers (*batasha*) and coconut (*naryal*), and, if possible, some money, are offered to the caste- and area-specific god, Balinath-ji, because he is believed (in Bikaner) to have issued a set of commands regarding the use of camel products. Moreover, on this occasion, the transcendental and supreme deities — of whom Shiva is one — can always be approached for any help. But it will not happen that Balinath is ignored and only Shiva is approached for a she-camel's safe delivery. The Raikas remember the god (or goddess) who has assigned a particular *dharma* for them, and he (or she) must be remembered while adhering to (*palan*, 'nurturing') it. The Ravens also point out that because of the ten *dharma*s (*das dharma*s) that the Raikas follow, their caste is also known as Dewasi.

Let us have a look at the ten *dharma*s and their explanation by the Ravens as well as the Raikas.

1. *Pehlo dharma Dewasiyan ra Shiva saugandha nahin khaye*¹⁰.

The first *dharma* of the Dewasis is that they should never swear upon Lord Shiva, irrespective of whether the oath is true or false (*sachchi*, or *jhuti saugandha*).

The Ravens explain that sometimes the people have to swear upon the names of the deities in order to prove their innocence or to make others accept the truth of what they say. Swearing adds a tremendous moral force to the claim, along with exposing the oath-taker

to unknown dangers. In the council meetings, it is quite common for the contending parties to swear upon the deities and also upon their close kin — children, parents, and the spouse — in urging their claim (*hak*) or version (*bat*). All know that whosoever swears falsely, might either be a victim of divine wrath or that his kin — particularly the one sworn upon — may succumb to grave illness or even death. Although swearing is not as serious a matter among the Raikas as it is in some other communities,¹¹ they are always afraid of taking an oath on false matters. But, irrespective of the truth of the matter, the first Raika *dharma* is not to implicate their creator in the business of oath-taking.

2. *Duja dharma Dewasiyan ra sham dharma rakhaya*

The second *dharma* of the Dewasis is to be honest and truthful, and this has reference to the relations of Raika men with women in general.

In explaining this *dharma*, the Lambiyan Rav emphasized that a Raika is famous in Rajasthan for never 'casting a dirty (passionate) eye' (*buri nazar dalna*) on any women. Except for his own wife, he regards all the other women as mothers, sisters, and daughters. He is (and was) employed by dominant castes and princely lineages for accompanying their women to their husbands' or natal villages because he represses his passions and has tremendous control over his senses. This is not only what the Raikas say about themselves; the other neighbouring castes also have the same opinion about the Raikas.

A common belief in Rajasthan is that a lonely woman should have no fear of the Raika. He will not only be nice to her, but if she has lost her way, he will accompany her to her destination. It is imperative for the Raikas, as I see it, to uphold this image. Otherwise, in a sexually segregated society where both pre-marital and extra-marital sex are completely prohibited, and strangers, whether from towns or villages, are suspected as threats to local women, the Raika grazing expedition, in which they have to depend on the help of people in other villages, would get into serious difficulty. Perhaps this is one of the reasons

why the Raika *panchayat* deals very strictly with any laxity in sexual norms. The offenders are not only levied enormous fines, but also punished corporally, particularly in matters of serious sexual crimes.

3. *Tijo dharma Dewasiyan ra badlo katan naye*

The third *dharma* of the Dewasis is not to axe (or fell) the banyan-tree (*Ficus bengalensis*). Although the term used in this verse is *badlo*, meaning banyan tree, the people interpret it to mean all trees. In contemporary situation, this *dharma* is also used for external consumption, to defend their own claim.

Throughout my fieldwork, the Raikas (inhabiting different hamlets) confided in me that they have been wrongly accused by the Panchayat Samitis (statutory councils) of different villages for cutting down trees. In Sadri (Pali), they held the Grasia responsible for felling trees in collusion with forest guards. According to them, the Grasia men fell trees for fire-wood, and their women sell it in nearby towns. The income from this is divided equally between the Grasia and the forest guards. Though they are not the culprits, the Raikas are blamed and penalized by the forest department.

The Raikas say that they (meaning, their animals) depend on green leaves and grasses rather than wood. Animal droppings are used as fuel, and supplemented with dry branches obtained from shrubs (*jhar*). If trees disappear, how would we feed our animals? In these words perhaps one may summarize the Raika view.

4. *Chautho dharma Dewasiyan ra Pipal puja jaye*

The fourth *dharma* of the Dewasis is to worship (*puja*) the Pipal (*Ficus religiosa*) tree. The day of worship is not stated in the verse but the Raikas say that it can be performed in the morning hours of any day in the week. However, the most auspicious day for this worship is Monday, because Pipal is regarded as the abode of Lord Shiva in local folklore, and Monday happens to be his day¹². One of the funeral rituals, performed on the ninth day after the day of death, is called *Pipal chokha karan*, on which this tree is worshipped.

The Pipal *puja* consists of the following ritual acts:

- a. Offering plain water, or if one can afford it, water mixed with a pinch of sugar and grains of rice.
- b. Standing with folded palms before the tree and then, touching (or pressing) its stem (or the base of its stem), the fingers (and the palm) which have touched the tree are brought to caress one's forehead. Here, the stem stands for the legs of the god and its base symbolizes his feet. This ritual action is central to all *pujas* whether for local deities, or renunciators, or deities without a stone platform dedicated to them. In the latter case, the right hand is just waved in air and then brought back to touch the forehead.
- c. Circumambulating the tree, sometimes, as happens in the case of *Pipal chokha karan*, a cotton thread is wrapped all around its stem, an act symbolizing offering of clothes to the deity.

There are no gender distinctions on the worship of Pipal; this *dharma* is for all.

The sacredness of Pipal multiplies because temples and platforms dedicated to deities are founded in its neighbourhood or shade. However, the absence of a religious place in its vicinity does not reduce its holiness. Any attempt to defile the place where Pipal stands (by urinating or defecating), even if done inadvertently, infuriates the divine force.

In the absence of a Pipal tree in the vicinity of a hamlet, the people offer *puja* to the Khejri tree. The switch from Pipal to Khejri does not pose any conceptual problem because both these trees are sacred. However, Khejri is not believed to be the abode of Lord Shiva. More properly, it is the 'Tulsi (Basil) of the Thar desert'¹³. Both Pipal and Khejri are gendered; the former is male, the latter, female. As we noticed for Pipal, there is no gender restriction on the worship of Khejri.

Although the worship of Pipal also embraces the worship of Shiva, how does one explain its substitution by Khejri which is not believed to be Shiva's abode. It puzzled me in October 1989 when I observed the last rites of an old Raika. The tree chosen for the ninth-day pu-

rificatory ritual, *Pipal chokha karana*, was Khejri (and not Pipal as the name of the ritual suggests) because that particular hamlet did not have a Pipal tree. Perhaps, more important among the Raikas is their attitude towards trees in general. In this light, the third and the fourth *dharma*s can be seen as related — the former prohibits them from cutting trees, the latter, advises the converse, that is, worshipping the idea of trees. The third *dharma* prohibits them from cutting any trees; however, the fourth does not advise worship of every tree. Why Pipal and Khejri are worshipped may be understood in terms of the general proposition: the idea of sacred is crucial for ritual expression. The sacredness of Pipal is a pan-Indic idea, while that of Khejri is mostly confined to Rajasthan. In the Raika case, I think, the worship of these two trees guides us to their attitude to vegetation in general.

5. *Panchva dharma padman tano parde jiman jaye*

The fifth and the sixth *dharma*s of the Dewasis are for their women. The fifth one proclaims that in ritual feasts, the Raika women should eat 'behind the curtain'.¹⁴

Let me note here a few observations on ritual feasts. On such occasions, the place where the guests eat is always the backyard of the host's house, and it is close to where the temporary kitchen (*bhatti*) is set up. In front of the main entrance to the house, canopies are erected for the guests. On being invited by the hosts to partake of the feasts, the guests from each hamlet—men, women, and children—go together in a procession, led by men. The women sing, and are seen carrying blankets to the dining space.

An imaginary line halves the dining place: women, along with their children, occupy one side; and men sit on the other. Then those given the duty to distribute the food place the brass-plates (*thali*) before the people. Five people are expected to eat from one plate,¹⁵ but in the case of women, a couple of children may also join in. After food has been served, the hosts, who stand there to supervise the distribution, request the guests to eat well. At this time, the women spread the blanket on their heads; one blanket covers five women (and

children, if any) and one of them holds it up with her left hand to create space within the cocoon.

Though enough food is served in the first instance, if the women want some more, one of them stretches out her right arm, and the food server has to bend considerably to place more food on the plate. Once they have eaten, they take off the blanket, fold it, and leave singing in praise of both the food and the hosts.

It is not easy to explain how this practice came into existence. My respondents said that women are shy of eating in the presence of others, and on ritual feasts, since they have to eat with a gathering, they hide behind a curtain so that no one, except the co-sharers, can see who is eating and how much. This may be related to a belief in Raika society that on normal days, one should eat alone or in the presence of near relatives. If you have to eat with outsiders and strangers, eat as little as possible. If you eat more, it indicates you have a good appetite, a sign of good health, which means you can become an intentional or unintentional victim of evil eye, and married women in comparison to widows and men are more vulnerable to this. At ritual feasts, members of other castes, with whom the Raikas have economic, social, or putative kin relations, are also invited, and they are the first to eat. After they have left, and only the Raikas are home, except for the cooks (of the Barber caste), the actual feast begins.

6. *Chato dharma sakti tano ati di baksaya*

The sixth *dharma* of the Dewasis is that their married women should always wear the head-dress called *ati*. Like *choti*, which is specific to Raika men, *ati* is a diacritical feature of married Raika women.

A Raika woman never keeps her hair unbraided, not even when she mourns the death of her husband. For the Raikas, the unbounded states of a female body — like unbraided hair, 'naked arms, legs, and neck' (meaning arms without necklaces), uncovered head and chest [meaning, not wearing the wrap (*odhni*) and blouse (*kanchli*)] and long nails — are identified with the inauspicious state of liminality, and more specifically, with the state of a

female ghost (*bhuini*). One of the objects that binds a female body is *ati*.

Woven out of sheep hair and covered with cotton thread, an *ati* is a pen-like structure, of six to seven inches of length and one to one and a half inches in diameter, with a tapering conical end. On its base are stitched three or four cotton strings. These strings are tied to the upper end of the plait, and thus the *ati* stands on the occiput as a pole.¹⁶ A girl wears it for the first time when she leaves for her husband's house. Like *chura*, *ati* is also never taken off, except when washing hair, and Raika women are quite accustomed to sleeping with it. It is discarded, like *chura*, by a widow on her husband's twelfth-day of the funeral ritual.

According to the Raiks, of all the Hindu goddesses, Parvati is the only one adorned with *ati*. Citing the myth of Raika origin, the Raiks say that the celestial nymphs were advised by Shiva, after they married his 'sons', to live like Parvati, a woman devoted to her husband. Of all Parvati's attire, Shiva asked Rai, the wife of the first Raika, to keep *ati*, and since then, the Raika women have been wearing it. For this reason, some Raikas hold that Rai was the daughter of the jewel-bearing serpent king, and *ati*, which is like a snake, stands for her primordial status as a snake-daughter (*nag kanya*).

7. *Satwan dharma Dewasiyan ra dudh bechan nahin jaye*

The seventh *dharma* of the Dewasis is that they should never sell the milk of their animals.¹⁷

Both camels and sheep are milked twice a day, which is an exclusively male duty.¹⁸ The sheep milk is for domestic use, and the surplus is processed into clarified butter (*ghi*) by women. When on migration, if the migratory group does not have women, it is the men's duty to make *ghi*. Like milk, *ghi* is also for household consumption. Though there is no sanction on its sale, hardly any surplus is left for marketing.¹⁹ This is primarily because of the value placed on *ghi*. Not only considered as the source of instantaneous energy and good health, its generous distribution is also tied to status consideration. A man who gen-

erously distributes *ghi* on ritual occasions,²⁰ or offers a couple of its *adulis* to guests gains respect and prestige.²¹ One of the major expenses in *mausar* (marriage/cum-death feast) is on *ghi*, this is the reason why these feasts are also called *kharcha* (meaning, expenses).

Sheep milk is processed to make curd and *ghi*. But there are taboos against processing camel milk (which have recently been challenged by a voluntary organization). In this context, the Raikas of Bikaner say that Balinath-ji Maharaj, an ascetic, ordained upon them certain *dharma*s regarding the utilization of camel products. In some areas these prohibitions are said to have been imposed by Pabu-ji, another Raika deity.

Camel milk should never be sold; in this context, Kohler-Rollefson (1992: 78) writes: 'Selling milk is sometimes equated with selling children'. The milk must be used for domestic consumption, for drinking or making rice pudding. To the needy ones, it should be freely given. 'Camels help you to sail through the times of famine,' and there are stories of Raikas helping people with milk in years of extreme drought.

Camel milk should not be processed into curd, butter or *ghi*. This *dharma* is taken so seriously that even a suggestion to the Raikas to try churning the milk is viewed with suspicion. Two additional reasons are offered for following this *dharma*: a) Howsoever hard one tries, camel milk would never curdle; on the contrary, it will putrefy;²² and b) its medicinal properties remain if consumed fresh, or with minimum boiling. The Raika ethnoveterinarians claim that many deadly and incurable diseases are cured by consuming fresh camel milk.

Camel hair should not be sold. There is some ambiguity regarding this *dharma*. Some believe that it was pronounced by Balinath-ji, others say that it was a later addition, mainly because of the inferior quality of camel wool (Kohler-Rollefson 1992: 78). It is coarse and hard, and is used mainly for making rugs and carpets (*bhagal*), ropes (*damna*), strings for charpoys (*khar*), and blankets (*kambal*). Sometimes it is mixed with other wool if the latter is in short supply. Like camel milk, cam-

el wool is given freely to anyone asking for it.

Of these three aforementioned restrictions, the first two are faithfully observed in many areas where the Raikas live. There is no taboo on the sale of camel-dung and camels as work animals. Camel-dung is usually collected by the herdsmen when the herd rests for the night. It is mostly used as fuel for domestic purposes. There are certain elements of subsistence economy in camel pastoralism: for instance, camel-milk, hair, and dung are all used for domestic consumption. As the Raikas are vegetarians, there is no question of killing their animals for food. The main source of earning of Raika camel-breeders is either from the wages they get by grazing the animals of other owners (Raikas included) or selling their own camels.²⁴ A few Raikas have also bought camel-carts and work as transporters of goods.

8. *Athwan dharma Dewasiyan ra Shiva ri dhuni sajaye*

The eighth *dharma* of the Dewasis is that they should 'keep', tend, arrange, decorate (*sajaye*), Shiva's *dhuni* ('renouncer's fire'). As I have discussed elsewhere (1993), *dhuni* is associated with the ascetics, and not with householders. Shiva, himself being an ascetic *par excellence*, is believed to tend *dhuni*, and to recapitulate, he created Vishkarma Suthar to look after it. The Ravens' interpretation of this *dharma* is that a Raika should keep faith in the renouncers who look after the *dhunis*. He should take some fuel, or offerings of food (like coconut and sugar-wafers) for the *dhuni*. A *dhuni* must not be defiled by spitting or approaching it in an impure state.

9. *Nauvan dharma Dewasiyan ra bhagvi jhandi lagaye*

The ninth *dharma* of the Dewasis is that they should always put up a flag/banner (*jhandi*) of ocher colour (*bhagva*). But where? The aforementioned verse does not specify it, however, the Ravens say that it should be fixed on top of the hut (*jhunpa*), or in its animal enclosure (*bara*) and in the case of a migratory herd, wherever it rests for the evening, or for a few days.

The ocher colour is identified with Shiva, and, by implication, with Saivite renouncers. A flag of this colour, the Ravens submit, con-

stantly reminds the people of Shiva and the *dharma*s he has pronounced for them. In addition, *bhagvi jhandi* is a sign of auspiciousness.

Except for some, the Raikas generally do not erect *bhagvi jhandi* on their huts. But this *dharma* is punctiliously followed by the leaders of migratory herds who carry not one but many such flags which are fixed all around the camp. Being a sign of auspiciousness, it portends the welfare of both the animals and their herdsmen. The other reason for putting them up is that they become the emblems of a Raika herd. Other herdsmen or travelers passing through the same area can ascertain the identity of the resting herd from distance.

As with migratory herds, the *dhunis* tended by Raika renouncers always display a *bhagvi jhandi* on the roof of their hermitage and near the fire altar.

10. *Daswan dharma Dewasiyan ra som akta rakhaye*

The tenth *dharma* of the Dewasis is that they should observe Monday as the most sacred day of the week. It was noted earlier that Monday is Lord Shiva's day, and the Ravens strengthen this *dharma* with an additional piece of information: the first Raika was created on a Monday (*utpatti ro din*, the day of the origin). Therefore, on this day, the Raikas should keep fast, visit the Shiva temple and offer water, flowers, and, if nothing else is available, *aka* (*Calotropis procera*) leaves,²⁵ to the deity. If possible, they should organise devotional singing and give alms (*bhiksha*) to beggars and donations (*dan*) to poor. Also the Raikas have been asked to observe some taboos on Monday, such as

- a) do not kill a black snake;
- b) do not go to search a lost camel;
- c) do not give the cauterization treatment (*dam dena*) to sick animals (oral medicines may however be administered); and
- d) do not visit the house where a death has occurred (*kan mein jana*).

Although a full and complete account of the Raika *dharma*s - the sequence in which they are presented - is available from the Ravens, the Raikas know about all of them. In fact, I came

to know of their existence in the initial phases of my fieldwork with the Raikas, before I collected their systematic account, and the exact verses in which they are presented, from the Ravens. However, my respondents often faltered in remembering the verses and their correct order. The people often refer to these *dharma*s in their daily life, and explain the rationale of their practices in their terms. The Raika *dharma*, as a whole, draws the boundaries between its followers and the outsiders, the neighbouring groups. As we shall see later, the caste council plays a significant role in reinforcing these religious precepts, and regulating the daily life according to them.

THE RAIKA DHARMA AND THE HINDU DHARMA

The Raikas see themselves as adhering to their own *dharma* as laid down for their caste by Shiva, as well as the Hindu *dharma*. The pigtail (*choti*) the Raika men keep is a reminder of their Hindu *dharma*. But Raika *dharma* is not separate and independent from Hindu *dharma*; on the contrary, it is contained within Hinduism. Being caste-specific, it does not conflict with the *dharma*s of other castes.

The Ravens also reinforce the Hindu identity of the Raikas. Giving a condensed account of the Raika 'history', they say that the first Raika couple moved to the 'mortal world' from Mount Kailash and started living in Kutch. Many generations passed before the new rulers of Kutch, the Muslim kings, began forcibly converting the local communities to their faith. Some Raikas did embrace Islam, but most of them fled to Jaisalmer where they founded three villages, Brahmsara, Kodumba and Ladarva. Although Jaisalmer, the Ravens say, was also ruled by Muslim kings, they were more benign than those in Kutch, and did not impose their religion on their Hindu subjects.

A Raika family of Aal subcaste lived in the village of Ladarva. One of its daughters named Hira was a bosom friend of the Muslim King's daughter. When the latter was going to her husband's house (the ceremony called *gauna*), she requested her parents to

send her Raika friend as part of her dowry. The king called Hira's father and ordered him to bring his daughter to the fort the following morning.

Hira's father pleaded before the king to have mercy on his daughter and his status, but his plea fell on the deaf ear. Back in the village, he called the elders for advice, who unanimously resolved that sending a Raika girl as a wedding gift would not only lower their caste status, but also mean disposing of one's daughter to the life of a slave-girl (*dasi*). Hira's father was in a state of consternation; if he failed to comply with the king's order, he would be in great difficulty. And, if he carried out the imperial command, the caste council would excommunicate him.

Hira understood her father's dilemma and thought that by committing suicide, she would succeed in saving her own honour as well as that of her family and caste. Seeking pardon from Bayan sa, the goddess she worshipped every day, she jumped into a well. The news of her death spread, and as the entire area became accursed for the Raikas, all of them from different villages, left (*gada rop diya*) Jaisalmer before the crack of dawn.²⁶ According to the Ravens, this event took place in 678 A.D. (Vikram Samvat 735), and since then the Raikas have been living in Marwar.²⁷

This story of deserting Jaisalmer and finding an almost permanent abode in Marwar is an important aspect of the Raikas' construction of their own community and religious identity. Instead of relating their migration to the search of fertile grazing grounds,²⁸ they see it as a result of the oppression unleashed by Muslim kings. But they could retain and further their primordial religious identity once they were in a Hindu Kingdom.

THE CASTE COUNCIL AND THE OBSERVANCE OF THE TEN DHARMAS

Of these ten *dharma*s, the first, the fourth, and the last three deal in one way or another with the worship of Lord Shiva. Two — the fifth and sixth — are for Raika women. The third *dharma* brings the Raikas closer to the

Bishnois, a sectarian group in Rajasthan and Haryana, whose love for plants and animals is unequalled. Sexuality is restrained by the second *dharma*, which, as we saw, gives Raikas the image of trustworthy and chaste people. The seventh *dharma* defines the Raika occupation, which is not to make their livelihood by selling milk; it, thus, helps in the retention of several pastoral products for domestic use; for generating cash, they have to depend on the sale of animals, sheep wool, and dung (if possible). The dead animals of the Raikas are left to be removed by an ex-untouchable caste called the Sansi.

The *dharma*s concerning Lord Shiva (henceforth, Shiva *dharma*) are devotedly followed. A few deviations may occur (such as the placing of the ocher flag on their huts) but they do not lessen their faith in the principal deity. All the taboos enshrined in the tenth *dharma* are observed, even by the migratory group. On Mondays, the number of Raikas visiting the Shiva temple is the largest. If there happens to be an ancient Shiva temple in their area, rich with a folklore of miracles and the stories of famous renouncers who practiced austerities, the Raikas spend the entire Monday there.

Shiva *dharma*s have an inbuilt sanction. The idea is not that if these *dharma*s are defiled, divine displeasure will follow, because Shiva is not classed as a punitive deity. He is the progenitor of the Raikas, the guardian of their long term welfare, and his commands must be followed.

Deviating from them amounts to expressing doubt in one's welfare. It is not fear, but respect, which constitutes the core of these in-built sanctions. If unknowingly, a taboo is broken, and the mistake is realized, one must throw oneself at the deity's feet for pardon. The norms of purity and pollution are strictly followed with regard to divine places (*devasthan*). In other words, the caste council has no role in enforcing the Shiva *dharma*s. It is for the individual to see that he (and his family) adhere to them. However, with regard to other *dharma*s, the *panchayat* takes a decisive role in their enforcement.

Of the ten *dharma*s, the caste council strict-

ly enforces the second, the third, and the sixth. If a Raika violates the norm of restraint on sexuality, he is severely punished, although such cases are quite rare. Attempts to fell trees are equally uncommon, and the *panchayat* takes a serious note of any such actions. Similarly, a woman refusing to wear the traditional dress and *ati* invites the elders' displeasure. In one case, a prominent Raika, who had set his eyes on a political position, decided to start reforming women's traditional costumes. He sent his sister to her husband's house without the *chura* and *ati*. Her in-laws refused to keep her in their house; not only did they send her back, but also reported the matter to the *panchayat*. The Raika was fined, and escaped from the humiliation of being excommunicated when he promised never again to interfere with the *dharma*s laid down for women. Concerning women, the only *dharma* on which the *panchayat* of some areas has taken a lenient view is eating behind the curtain. I was told that the elders realize the terrible problem women have while eating with one hand and holding up the blanket with the other, and thus have softened their view.

To sum up: on the whole, the ten *dharma*s, as well as the others which supplement them, are faithfully followed by the Raikas. Their caste council reinforces those *dharma*s, whose violation threatens the caste identity. However, in those areas where Raika population is sparse, some of these *dharma*s have started changing, or are not adhered to so strictly. In much of north Rajasthan and Haryana, for example, Raika women have excluded *ati* from their day-to-day costume, and wear it on ritual and festive occasions only. Eating behind a blanket is also rarely seen. Those households which have acquired milch animals are not reluctant to sell milk. In such areas, caste council is also weak, and here, the sort of discipline it imposes in western Rajasthan, where the Raikas are in large number, is relatively unknown.

CONCLUDING NOTE

This article provides an introduction to the community of the Raikas of Rajasthan in terms of the ideological factors which give it a sense of unity. The Raikas are facing tremen-

dous problems because their primordial occupation is threatened by ecological despoliation, and the changing relations between pastoralists and peasants. Many programmes of development do not lay emphasis on pastoralism. The agricultural bias of these programmes has been pointed out by many studies. Against such a background, the identity of the Raikas is acquiring a greater importance. The primordial elements of their identity — such as the story of their origin, the mythical history, and the duties for their community — are being reinforced. This would explain why at one of the meetings of all the caste councils of Marwar held in Balganga (Bilara, Jodhpur) on 10 October 1991, the elements of Raika identity were made mandatory. Anyone defying the codes of conduct laid down by the caste council was liable to be heavily fined and even excommunicated from caste membership. Cultural traditions, instead of dying out, adapt to new situations; and are extremely potent in all the movements of social identity.

NOTES

1. According to one estimate of 1982 (Khanna et al. 1988: 31), there were 116,000 camels in Sri Ganganagar district which is dominated by peasant castes (such as the Jats, Bishnois).
2. Male camels fetch more money than the females (Kohler-Rollefson 1992: 78).
3. Literally, the word *Chalakyas* means 'one who grazes goats'.
4. The term *god* means foothills, and thus the area at the foothills of Aravali range in south Pali is called Godwar. The Maru Raikas use this term not only for their counterparts in south Pali, but also the neighbouring districts of Jalore and Sirohi (see Fig. 1).
5. See Plate -1, facing page 128, in her 1975 article.
6. For the first detailed version of this story, see Raj Marwar Census (1891: 567-8); this version, as well as the Raikas' interpretation, are analyzed elsewhere (V.K. Srivastava 1991). Structurally, this story as recorded in the 1890s from the Ravens of the village Bijapur by the Marwar census officials, and as it was relayed to me in 1990 and 1991 by the Ravens in Lambiyan, Sadri, and Mundara, remains the same, although some important differences exist in details, as we shall see. The version in the Raj Marwar Census was collected from the Ravens of Godwara Raikas. Here, I present the version recorded from a Rav of the Maru Raikas, who lives in Lambiyan. The Ravens of this village are said to be the most authentic.
7. The camel created by the divine couple is of the female sex.
8. For instance, the Aal are divided into four *gotas* - Me-waria, Siyadia, Rampa, and Alaut. Apart from a few of my respondents, most of the Raikas do not know their *got* names. Their Ravens also do not talk about these. At ritual occasions, the Brahmin priest is supposed to use the *got* name of his clients, but instead of using any separate names, he uses what I am calling here subcaste names. Thus, Bar which for the Raikas is a *got* name, is used by the Brahmin priest as a *got* name. The Raikas do not object to such a usage. For the *gotra* names of the Parihar subcaste, see report on the Census of 1891 (1894: 157).
9. The Report on the Census 1891 (1894: 157) notes: 'the descendants of Samar alone claim a pure extraction, while the others comprise a combination of several Rajput tribes.'
10. These ten *dharma*s are presented in the form of a verse. The exact verse of each *dharma* is quoted here.
11. For example, the Angami Nagas (Hutton 1969 [1921]: 144-8).
12. Also refer to the tenth *dharma*.
13. Powlett (1894: 94) writes, "In Rajputana, the 'Khejri' has a certain sanctity, owing to its figuring in the history of Ramachandra, and it is worshipped at the Dasahra festival." Khejri has a special meaning for the Bishnois. Three centuries ago in 1731 A.D., in a Jodhpur village (now called Khejarli after the name of this tree), more than 350 Bishnoi men and women sacrificed their lives saving Khejri trees from being felled by the then Emperor's axemen (Weber 1988: 91-4). Khejri leaves are extremely nutritious for animals, but its wood is of inferior quality (Powlett 1874: 94 also notes this). This tree can withstand extreme aridity, although its growth may remain stunted. The Government of India issued a postal stamp in 1988-89 to honour Khejri and the communities which have a ritual relationship with it.
14. This practice has died out in those areas of Rajasthan where the Raika are fewer in number. Also see note 29.
15. First of all, each Raika man feeds a morsel of the food to all the others who have joined him in the same plate.
16. Educated and urban Raika women have given up this costume.
17. Rao (1988: 198-9) observed the same practice amongst the Bakkarwal of the western Himalayas.
18. Similar taboos have been reported from other societies (Wilson 1984). For instance, the Gabbra of Kenya believe that camels should be milked by uncircumcised boys or men in a state of sexual abstinence (Torry 1971).
19. The Rebaris of Gujarat, on the other hand, process a lot of *ghi*, because they keep milch animals as well. One can see Rebari women in Bhuj (the capital town of Kutch) moving from house to house selling *ghi* (Elson 1979: 91). In Sadri, it is mainly processed for the market by the Sirvis.
20. One who has organized a *mausar* (marriage-cum-death feast) has the right to distribute *ghi* on ritual occasions, a practice called *chari ghumana*. A *chari* is like a kettle; *chari ghumana* means 'distributing clarified butter with this kettle'.
21. An *aduli* is a small brass vessel with a long handle used for measuring quantity of *ghi*. Its capacity var-

- ies, starting from 10 gms. Individual Raika families buy this measuring equipment, generally of the lowest capacity, and when guests (or council members) arrive, two or sometimes three *adulis* of *ghi* are offered to each of them. Some prefer to drink it raw; others may mix *khand* (powdered sugar of brown colour) with it. The Raikas have a tremendous capacity to consume *ghi*.
22. For *mausar* feasts, the Raikas buy *ghi* from the market. For one feast, they need, on average, at least two to three hundred kilograms.
 23. Kohler-Rollefson (1992: 78) reports the case from a Jaisalmer village where around the time of 1937 drought, people tried to curdle camel milk without success. However, a Raika woman in Pali told me that once she inadvertently processed camel milk thinking that it was goat's. When she realized her mistake, she rushed to throw it away. To her utter surprise, it had coagulated. But, as she was extremely upset for breaking the taboo, she immediately went to the Shiva temple in her area and apologized for her mistake.
 24. The Raika caste council has prohibited the sale of female animals but without success. In all cattle-fairs, female camels are brought for sale. It also prohibits the gift of female animals to the traditional singers (called *dhadhhi*) because of the fear that the latter might kill or sell them.
 25. This shrub is supposed to be Shiva's favourite. Its leaves are used by Raikas for drinking camel milk directly from the animal (V.K. Srivastava 1987). The Raika observation is that the camel eats the leaves of every plant and tree except those of the *aka*, and this further strengthens their belief in its sacredness.
 26. When the members of a caste decide to leave a village permanently, they erect a stone-tablet (with the figure of a donkey [*gadha*] embossed on it) at some public place. Their caste name (and sometimes the reason for deserting the village) is engraved at the base of this tablet. This practice is called *gadha ropna*. No members of that caste, present or future, will ever settle down in a village divorced in this manner. In recent years, however, some Raika families have settled down on the borders of Jaisalmer contiguous with the other districts.
 27. This date given by the genealogists roughly coincides with the entry of Islam in India. Although Islam came to India with the first Muslim invasion of Sind in 711 A.D., there were earlier several small pockets in this part under the rule of the Arab tribal chiefs (Allan et al. 1934:203; Rizvi 1975: 245-6; Madan 1991: 18). Spear (1967: 31-2) notes that the 'first Muslims appeared in India within a few years of the Prophet's death in 632 A.D.
 28. On this point and the probable route of migration, the Raikas took before reaching Kutch, see Mankad (1939), Westphal-Hellbusch (1975; and Westphal 1976: 223-5), Elson (1979).
 29. But, in the October 1991 meeting of all the caste councils of Marwar, this principle (*niyam*) of eating behind the curtain has been strictly reinforced by the elders.

KEY WORDS Caste, Raika, *Dharma*, Religion.

ABSTRACT Caste and religion are interconnected. A caste often defines itself in religious terms. This paper offers an example of a caste in Rajasthan, the Raika, which believes to have originated from one of the Hindu trinitarian deities, Lord Shiva. The latter also assigned a set of duties (*dharma*) for the Raikas. Today, the Raikas define themselves in terms of these *dharma*s.

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