

Maxine Weisgrau, Ph.D.
c/o Mehta
23 Dent Magri -- Swaroop Sagar Road
Udaipur 313001
Phone: 52 6219

July 19, 1995

Mr. Kishore Saint
Ubeshwar Vikas Mandal
Old Fatehpura
Udaipur 313 001

Saint Sahib:

I am very pleased, as the result of our discussions about my proposed research on gavri, to enclose the following proposal to you.

Although we have different goals and perspectives I think we both share the understanding that the most important phase of this project is data collection; the way we apply the data respectively and analyze it will of course vary according to our goals. But I am confident that our perspectives are complementary and will enhance our discussions enormously.

I am absolutely delighted that you feel that this research is of value to UVM and its members, as well as of being of interest to you.

Please be assured of my full cooperation in every way during this project. I am very grateful for your cooperation and hope to earn your confidence through my candor, hard work and sharing of all results.

I am attaching the following:

Proposal
Schedule of proposed questions for interviews and focus groups
Bibliography
Several articles that may be of interest to you.

I am also enclosing a second proposal for research that I intend to pursue, probably after gavri, or as Prabhu ji's schedule allows. It concerns the "Sanskritization" process involving the caste panchayat banning of the traditional occupation for Meghwals, and the response of some villages to this ban. This research is also very significant in my opinion because movements such as these are generally written about as being homogeneous and with total, shared consensus among members. I have yet to come across a discussion of Sanskritization that includes resistance and conflict within the movement.

I am therefore extremely pleased that you have an interest in this issue also.

Most sincerely,

Maxine

July 19, 1995

TO: Kishore Saint, UBESHWAR VIKAS MANDAL

FROM: Maxine Weisgrau, Ph.D.

PROJECT PROPOSAL: Gavri Ritual and Community Identity

Project Abstract

The celebration of Gavri is associated in the relevant literature with the Bhils of Udaipur district. These and other anthropological discussions of Bhils generally and gavri particularly are all from the "outsider's" perspective; the category of "Bhil" is assumed as fixed and unchanging, as are cultural characteristics of people so designated. Absent thus far from discussions of Bhils and Gavri is the perspective of individuals in this community and how they view the evolution of own identity and cultural continuity.

This proposed project will examine the Gavri ritual cycle from the multiple perspectives of those participating in it, providing information on its cultural context and role in forging community and individual identity. Aspects of conflict within the participating community will particularly be explored as a means of determining the local perceptions and future outlook of this ritual cycle in the determination of local identity. This information may be strategically relevant to local development activities mobilizing community awareness and identity for the purpose of elevating and improving social and economic conditions.

Project Background and Theoretical Significance

Current literature on ethnic identity suggests that the "Tribal" category, as well as other often-used but ill-defined categories of identity, derives from pluralistic relationships within nation-states, through processes that are duplicated in contemporary interactions between indigenous peoples and the state (Fried 1974; Urban and Sherzer 1991). This model of the constructive process within which ethnic identity arises is potentially a highly productive one for understanding the nature of and uses of the category "Tribal" as well as the multiple cultural groups subsumed under that category.

In the case of the Bhils extensive linguistic, archaeological and anthropometric data, have failed to verify the hypothesis of an ancient origins of the Bhils or their assumed millennia-long separate identity, distinct from other castes and classes of Rajasthan (e.g. Deliege 1985). Despite

extensive scholarship challenging this "ancient origins" assumption it continues to resonate in scholarly and popular discourse.

There is a growing body of literature supporting the hypothesis that tribal categories, reified during the colonial period in census and other official documents to designate marginal population groups, are of a historically much more recent origin, and reflect shifting economic and political relationships between marginalized and dominant groups (e.g. Corbridge 1988, Unnithan 1991).

Ethnographic inquiry in contemporary settings further suggests that the naming process of tribal groups is far more complicated than is implied by census categories: what a group is called does not always correspond with what group members call themselves, nor is a group name always a constant, unchanging one. Group members may use one named designation for itself in a particular period of time, and alter that designation as a response to social, economic and/or political forces. This naming and re-naming process is constant and on-going, with tribal categories continuously being negotiated and re-negotiated over time (e.g. Unnithan-Kumar 1991; Weisgrau 1993a,b).

Data from my fieldwork confirms an observation made as early as 1941 by a census official in Rajasthan (Webb 1941): the use of alternative designations by groups of people who formerly identified themselves as Bhils. The local proliferation of tribal designations provides evidence of the fluidity of the boundaries of these categories and designations, and suggests that shifting conditions of social and political status may be significant variables in this process.

Bhil Identity and Gavri

An examination of "Bhil" identity requires inquiry into alternative terms of localized self-identification within that community. But the identity of the group goes beyond what it is called, and by whom. Practices unique to the group that distinguish them from other tribal groups and from their neighbors of other caste groups may provide further evidence of what Bhil identity signifies. One such practice, the Gavri festival (alternately transcribed in descriptive literature as

Gauri and Gouri) is a complex ritual cycle that expresses a wide range of social, economic, socio-political and religious ideas, and is described by the few scholars who have discussed it as unique to the Bhils of Udaipur District (Tod 1983 (1827), Chauhan 1963, McCurdy 1965, Doshi 1969).

Gavri is a 40-day cycle of enactments of episodes from Bhil epics which takes place during the rainy season of August and September. The performers, all from one village, travel to several other villages where they are hosted and accommodated for a few days while giving the performances, before traveling on to the next host village. The pattern of village-to-village travel and performance reflects both kinship ties and socio-economic patronage. This festival, referred to as an expression of tribal solidarity (Chauhan and Chelawat 1966), therefore enacts many aspects of social and religious life which may be markers of what is locally significant in this religiously and culturally diverse setting.

Because of the extensive expenses and drain on village resources by both the performances and the hosting of performers, the actual performances are rotated amongst villages over a cycle of several years. Chauhan and Chelawat estimate that "in any season there may be three to seven units moving about over a region of twenty or thirty villages" (1966:5). According to Chauhan (1963), each family in the performing village contributes at least one actor to the party of players.

All roles are played by males, even those of rai or female deities. Women are forbidden from participating except as observers. The ritual drama involves re-enactment of stories about Mahadeo, also known as Shankar, Budio or Buria, and his consort Parvati or Gouri. The actual performance consists of eight or ten separate dances, each with its own theme and characters dressed especially for the parts.

These enactments have been known to combine both religious epics and contemporary imagery. McCurdy describes "several sets that show the Bhils as robbers making off with the goods of Mahajans, the latter pretending to be very brave when the robbers are not present, but running with fright when they appear" (1964: 280). Another episode he described is about the "king of Delhi who usually turned out to be dressed like an English administrator" (Ibid. 280).

These performances reinforce inter-village and inter-caste relationships. Chauhan and Chelawat (1966) describe the performances as being in host villages that fall in one of three categories: villages in which the performers are related to the hosts by marriage; by financial relationships (generally debt based relationships in which the performances are hosted by creditors or moneylenders); and villages with which the Bhils have long-standing patron-client relationships. McCurdy states that the Bhils of Ratakote "dance[d] for the Rajputs and Mahajans of Nagar" for a full day (1964: 276).

This brief description touches on the complex religious imagery and socio-economic relationships embedded in the performance of this ritual cycle. The procession of villagers enacts not only a ritual story of deities, but also the movement of women from one village to another during the course of their lifetimes, as well as the cycle of exchange and obligation established through marriage. This procession also re-enacts the structure of social and economic obligation, as well as hierarchy inherent in the relationship between the participants and other socio-economic groups.

In the contemporary setting this ritual cycle also expresses the relationship of Bhils to modern institutions of Udaipur. Hotels and other tourism-related locations are becoming the venue of performance of Gavri episodes, both during and outside of the traditional performance period. The availability of television to Bhil villagers is shaping the content and imagery of the performances; images from the Ramayana, broadcast on television in 1988-89, were prominent in Gavri episodes I observed in the fall of 1989. One only has to observe Buria, the hero of the festival, decked out in traditional garlands and turban but accessorized with sun glasses and a large wristwatch, to note that Gavri is not only a reflection of the past, but also an expression of the present and perhaps the future identity of local participants.

The Proposed Research

This research will encompass two general areas of data collection: documentation of the performances and of the social and economic interactions expressed by the ritual cycle. This is, I believe, a critical period for the recording to this data, as the performance images seem to changing rapidly with the advent of media and other institutional influences. Community opposition to the ritual cycle is also being voiced, with some factions suggesting that it is an unnecessary expenditure of manpower and money. A significant aspect of this research will therefore be to discuss the ritual cycle with older people and try to determine how their memories of the performance in the past coincide with the present images.

I also propose to record and document the specific relationship of individuals within the performance villages and their connections to the hosts. Data on frequency of village performances and costs will be collected, as well as the nature and amount of debt, if any, required to both undertake and host these performances. A discussion of both expenses and "return" on the investment will be undertaken with participants to determine the social as well as economic value of participation in the ritual cycle.

The gender aspect of this ritual cycle will also be explored. During fieldwork I held numerous discussions with women during which they expressed frustration over lack of access to ritual events and ritual participation. As equal participation in local activities has been a particular focus of development strategy by NGO workers in the villagers around Udaipur, women's participation or lack of participation in Gavri may be marker of social change and the reformation of ritual activity to accommodate shifting gender roles.

This research will also examine the concept of local identity, and what role this ritual plays in shaping and reinforcing group identity. I intend to elucidate informants' conceptions on the questions of identity and terminology, and establish the local parameters and appropriateness, from the "emic" perspective, of the term "Bhil" and more locally acceptable alternatives.

Timetable and Proposed Location of Research

I am extremely gratified that this proposed research is of interested to Ubeshwar Vikas Mandal as the Gogunda side of the district and UVM's members are a significant resource in studying Gavri. With the cooperation of UVM and its members, for which I am extremely grateful, I propose the following research schedule:

July 24: Depart for Bagrunda for preliminary field assessment with Prabhu-ji, for a period of two to three days. Establish contact with Gulab-ji and Kesu-ji. Determine additional sources of information among Khera and Patiya residents about Gavri.

After return explore sources of information at Lokala Mandal and Tribal Research Institute. Also generate sources for translation and field assistance.

August 10: Raksha Bandhan.

August 13-14: Decisions to undertake gavri will be made locally.

September 20-21: Conclusion of gavri.

During the period of August 13 and September 21 I hope to maintain a near-constant presence in and around Bagrunda to observe performances and to interview participants.

It is also my intention through contacts in other areas of the study to observe and interview gavri participants. I believe it will be critical to this project to provide some comparative data from other villages around Nal and Morwa in order to take into account local idiosyncrasies and variations in the performance cycles.

Attached is a schedule of research questions that I hope to present to as many people as is possible during the performance period. I also propose to organize and execute several "focus groups" in which these questions will be directed and discussed in a controlled setting to maximize the transmission and recording of information.

Where possible all interviews and discussions will be tape recorded, translated and transcribed. The expenses related to this process will be undertaken solely by the researcher. Access to all this material will be equally shared between Maxine Weisgrau and Ubeshwar Vikas

Mandal. It is also my intention to fully share the results of this research at every stage and request only that any publication of my written work be credited to me according to prevailing standards of citation.

Budget and Expenses

This research is already fully funded by American Institute of Indian Studies. I intend to bear full and total responsibility for any expenses resulting from this study and my presence in the area. Further details of costs and budgets will be presented and assessed as they arise. Full cooperation is assured to Ubeshwar Vikas Mandal in whatever way deemed necessary.

Conclusion

This project reflects the joint interests of the researcher and Ubeshwar Vikas Mandal. This project will collect data on the mechanisms by which performance and ritual can be interpreted as markers of cultural identity, persistence, and change, issues of interest to scholars of anthropology generally. This proposed research will also provide the opportunity of updating an important socio-cultural ritual that has not been addressed in scholarly literature for three decades, a period that has been marked by tremendous change and development in Udaipur district.

Most significantly however this project seeks to further understand the construction of local identity from the perspective of individual and group actors. This information can contribute to the mobilization of local interests, local pride and individual self-worth, to further enhance the on-going efforts towards empowerment and betterment of all members of the local community.

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Attachment

Proposed questions and subjects for interviews

These questions will be asked of both men and women and will be modified accordingly. They will also be used as "starting points" for discussion, and will not all be covered in any one session.

It is probably the best approach to consider setting up "focus groups" of around 5 people and ask them to discuss these questions. They could be held in the office in Bagrunda to assure the best quality of recording. Tapes will also provide a permanent record of the discussion for the archives.

1. Say and if possible write "gavri" for exact spelling and local pronunciation.
2. How long has gavri been performed here?
3. What is your jati?
4. Does it have any other names? When do you use each of these names?
5. What name should I use for your jati?
6. Who else does gavri? Do Mina do gavri? other jati? Other parts of Rajasthan? Other parts of India?
7. What is gavri about?
8. Who are the characters in the performances? What are their names?
9. Why are there no women performers in gavri?
10. Where do the stories come from?
11. Do you make up any of your own? Any of them new?
12. What village or villages are doing gavri now?
13. How did they decide to do it?
14. What villages will they perform in? How do you decide which village to go to, and which village not to go to?
15. Draw a map...
16. How far will they go in one day?

17. How many days is gavri?
18. Each day how long does the performance last?
19. How does each person prepare?
20. How much does it cost for the village to put on gavri? What are some of the expenses? What are the expenses to a village when a gavri group comes to perform?
21. Is gavri a good thing?
22. Do your children like gavri? Do they know any of the parts?
23. Do you perform for people outside your jati? Who?
24. What is your relation to the people you perform for?
25. How has gavri changed? Are there new episodes? New characters?
26. Are there things from television in gavri? Characters?
27. Are there people from NGOs in gavri?
28. How do you know when gavri is over?
29. How do you celebrate the end of gavri?
30. How long will it be before your village does gavri again?
31. Are there people who don't like gavri in the village? People who think it should not be done any more?
32. Why?
33. What do you think will be included in the next gavri that wasn't in this one? How will the next gavri be different?
35. Will there be gavri in 5 years? in 10 years?
36. How do you determine who will play which part in gavri?
37. Are there any special restrictions on the performers during gavri? after?
38. How do you feel when you watch gavri? When you perform in it?
39. Do you think about gavri afterwards?
40. Is gavri important to you? Why is it important? Is it important to people in your village? in other villages?