

THE KALBELIAS OF RAJASTHAN: JOGI NATH SNAKE CHARMERS

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF INDIAN NON-PASTORAL NOMADS

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Thesis submitted for Ph.D

London School of Economics and Political Science

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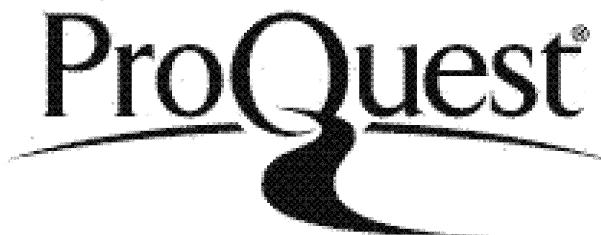
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## THE KALBELIAS: JOGI NATH SNAKE CHARMERS.

### AN ETHNOGRAPHY

#### ABSTRACT

The Kalbelias, known also as Jogi Naths, live in Rajasthan, North India. Their traditional occupation is snake charming and until about forty years ago they were nomadic. Nowadays nearly all have permanent homes but continue to utilise their tents for economic and social purposes.

This thesis describes their present way of life, their adaptation from nomadism to semi-sedentarism, their traditional work as snake charmers and their economic strategies of begging and other subsidiary occupations. The Kalbelias' religious orientation as Naths and life events such as marriage, death, inheritance and their system of dispute settlement which serves as a cohesive force for the sub-caste, are described.

Pastoral and non-pastoral nomads are found in most parts of the world, and are capable of infinite adaptation according to the circumstances in which they find themselves. As snake charmers, the Kalbelias have a symbiotic relationship with the other peoples around them and also form a continuing link through time.

THE KALBELIAS OF RAJASTHAN: JOGI NATH SNAKE CHARMERS:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF INDIAN NON-PASTORAL NOMADS

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## CHAPTER ONE

### THE KALBELIAS: JOGI NATH SNAKE CHARMERS

#### 1:1: INTRODUCTION

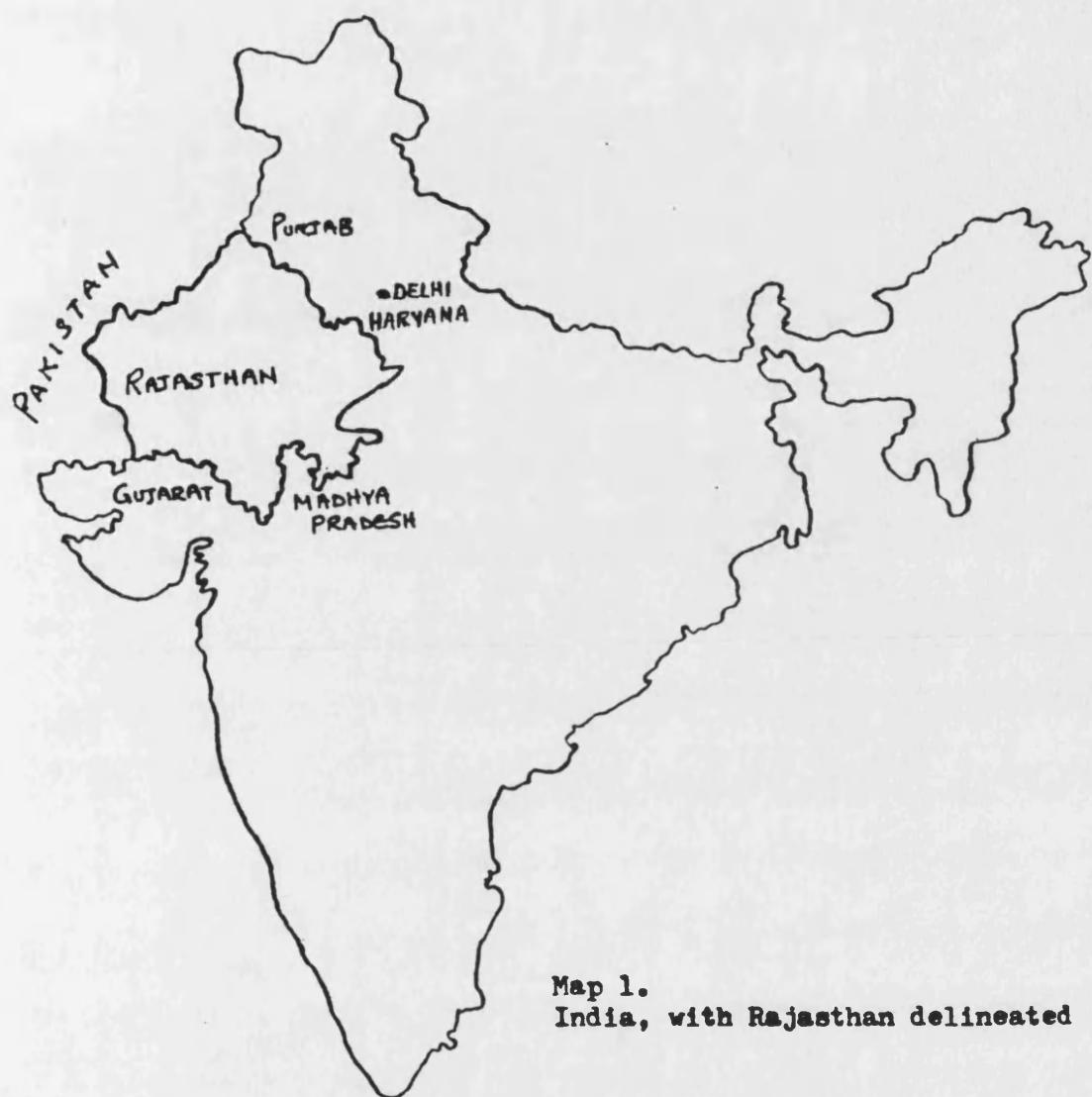
This thesis is an ethnography of the Kalbelias, or as they are also known, Jogi Nath *sanperas*, of Rajasthan, North India, (see footnote). Their traditional occupation is snake charming, and until about forty years ago they were nomadic, moving from place to place with tents and donkeys. Nowadays nearly all have permanent homes, but continue to utilise tents for economic and social purposes.

This thesis deals with the main strands of the lives of the Kalbelias: their occupation as snake charmers, beggars, and healers, their religious orientation as Jogi Naths, marriage, death and inheritance, and their system of dispute settlement.

The Kalbelias' change of lifestyle from nomadism to semi-sedentarism, and the subsidiary occupations they have adopted, show that they are capable of infinite adaptation according to the circumstances in which they find themselves. They form a useful, symbiotic relationship with the other peoples around them, but it is their traditional work as snake charmers (*sanperas*) which informs their identity as far as outsiders to the sub-caste are concerned.

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Footnote: 'Kalbelia' is a name used only in Rajasthan and refers only to this specific sub-caste of Jegis. 'Jogi' is N. Indian vernacular for *yogi*. '*sanpera*' means snake charmer in Hindi and can refer to any snakecharmer, Muslim or Hindu.



Map 1.  
India, with Rajasthan delineated

Snake-charmers formed an ubiquitous part of the Indian scene in the past. By circa 100 - 700 BC the Rg Veda refers to '... musicians, bards, acrobats, jugglers, conjurers and snake charmers,' and they were "popular then as now." (Basham, 1954:210). In 1938, Briggs wrote:

'They are... householders, keeping their families with them in camp... this particular group had evidently earned a good reputation; for although they had many notes from officials showing that they had been under observation in the past, they were then free to go where they pleased. It is claimed that these Jogis do not thieve. Their papers showed that they are great travellers and that they had been over many parts of India... These Jogis are... feared and dreaded by many. Sepalas... (sanperas) '... are sometimes known as 'Kanipaos' reckoned as 'half-panth' of the Gorakhnathis', (Briggs (1982:60-1).

A snake charmer usually features somewhere in modern accounts of India. The wailing of a snake pipe almost rivals the sitar in providing atmosphere for films or radio plays, and photographs of snake charmers and anecdotes appear in books together with musings on whether or not the captive cobras are poisonous, and how they are trained to perform. So I was surprised not to find any detailed account of their way of life. Few lengthy scholarly accounts have been written of their lifestyle, and none, so far as I could discover, about the Kalbelias of Rajasthan, (but see Ray, 1986, A. Bhattacharyya, 1958; Katiyar, 1964; Mohanty, 1982; Sharma, 1981; Singh, 1980). Most information has been of a popular nature, the product of superstition and snake charmers' showmanship, or information gleaned at second hand.

Perhaps this is because cobras with their lethal bite, and their keepers' unsavoury reputation as beggars, tantriks, or charlatans have put them beyond any but the most fleeting contact or superficial enquiry. And the nomadism of the snake charmers' would have compounded

difficulties facing anyone who wanted to do an in-depth study.

Nomads comprise about seven per cent of the Indian population. Of these, between one and two per cent are non-pastoral or service nomads, who comprise between three to five hundred endogamous groups, with occupations such as map-sellers, embroidery needle makers and sellers, epic narrators, medicine sellers, fortune tellers, artisans, genealogists, dancers, singers, hunter-gatherers etc. (Malhotra and Gadgil, 1982: 2-4; Misra et al, 1971).

There has been little systematic study of non-pastoral, non-hunting and gathering nomads, and the published material available has often proved disappointingly lacking in detail, although there are exceptions, for example, Berland (1982), Birch (1971), Rao (1975; 1987) and Ruheia (1968). This lack of information about non-pastoral nomads means there is no clear concept of what this type of nomadism is, despite many groups so designated. Galaty criticizes the assumption that the conceptual "ideal" types of nomadism and pastoralism characterize any specific society, for both constructs represent dimensions along which societies, groups or even individuals may range, (1981: 19). I would extend that continuum to include non-pastoral nomadism right through to sedentarism because, as Galaty says,

'The contrasts of nomadic/sedentary, or pastoral/hunting/wage labour rarely characterize states, but rather processes of interchange and contextualized variation. But this realisation should lead not to a dismissal of these categories but to a revised interpretation of their nature... if subsistence activities represent forms of response to variable conditions and opportunities, they are also inflected by value hierarchies, preferences and processual trajectories. For Africa, pastoralists; in the Middle East, tribesmen - such "types" represent not simply markers for empirical reality but value clusters which motivate opportunity and codify the

directions of change and social transformation.' (1981: 19-20).

The gross differences between pastoral and non-pastoral nomads are summed up by Berland: non-pastoral nomads rely upon human social resources, whilst pastoral nomads have a greater and more direct control over subsistence resources and tend to be found in areas where the human populations are small. Non-pastoral nomads, of course, need to be where human populations, preferably large, are found. The nature of herd and group interaction with sedentarists, limits individual or economic activities among pastoralists, whereas non-pastoral nomads frequently exhibit a range of individual skills. Peripatetic artisans and entertainers have comparatively, a greater spatial flexibility in decision making than pastoralists, whose patterns of movement are decided by herd requirements, (1982: 57).

As against this, Ruhela writes that movements of the Gaduliya Lohars (travelling blacksmiths) are dictated by the agricultural seasons, because they manufacture agricultural implements and travel with bullock carts. When the rains come, the hooves of the bullocks sink into the muddy ground, and force them to cease travelling, (1968: 145-6). But the rainy season can be the busiest time of the year for Kalbelias, when snakes are highly visible and snake charmers are needed to remove them from people's homes, or requested to carry out treatment for snake bite. So, although not to the same extent as pastoralists, the movements and wage-earning activities of the Kalbelias and Gaduliya Lohars are also somewhat regulated by the seasons of the year, which affects the animals they work with. This makes Berland's dichotomy between pastoralists and non-pastoral nomads less clear-cut.

In Pakistan, sedentarists tend to lump together all non-pastoral itinerant groups under the designation '*khanabadosh*', literally meaning 'house on shoulder', a term also applied to a snail or individual tramp. Itinerants rarely use it as a term of reference for themselves. They have elaborate classification schemes, not merely pointing to the mode of life as nomadic, but which actually differentiate nomadic activities. Berland found a clear distinction is made between pastoralists, caravaneers, nomadic artisans, entertainers, pedlars, professional thieves and smugglers. And apart from occupation, other distinguishing features such as the preferred type of make-up, ornaments and tattoos are well known to other nomads, (1982: 60). The Kalbelias think of themselves as a sub-caste of Jogi Nathis, followers of their Nath *guru*, Kanipa (see Chapter Two), and do not differentiate themselves from other people primarily on the grounds of their being traditionally nomadic and other people sedentary.

The integrative role of itinerant peoples within, for the most part, an immobile society is little understood, but some South Asian peripatetic groups specialize in services to the encompassing population, 'articulating key cultural values and themes of the sedentary majority cultures as genealogists, theatre troupes, musicians, fortune-tellers etc,' (Barth, 1987: XI). Singer sees them as travelling specialists, providing various services in villages where such specialists are lacking, (1971: 75). Itinerants carry the culture of the Greater Tradition in a style, dialect and medium which easily catches the imagination of the local people: in Andhra and Mysore State the Ganireddulu perform the Rama-Sita marriage with two sacred cattle to the accompaniment of local music, (Menon, 1981).

Barth queries 'How can... persons of so distinctive experience serve as interpreters and evokers of the understandings, longings and dreams of ordinary villagers

and townsmen? How can their cultural products so successfully enter the mainstream of another culture and another life experience?" (Barth, 1987: XI).

In India, for example, Hindus share a knowledge of the Ramayana. Hinduism embraces everything, and even those people who are Muslims or of other religions nonetheless live in a Hindu ambience, although the variety of occupations associated with Indian non-pastoral nomads make it somewhat difficult to slot them definitively into the caste hierarchy:

"When not in their camps or otherwise engaged in selling their wares or entertaining, Kanjar (itinerant toy-sellers and owners of children's roundabouts) are non-descript in appearance and seldom distinguishable from members of poor or service castes in each community. Especially in metropolitan areas, assumption of an ordinary status provides them a kind of "invisible social status" allowing Kanjars to observe community activities while working as beggars. Consequently, Kanjars know a great deal about the human resources they exploit, whereas members of sedentary communities know almost nothing about Kanjar society and culture - their experience limited to passive audience roles in contrived performance settings." (Berland, 1987: 249).

This is also true for the Kalbelias, when not actually dressed as snake charmers. Indeed, everyone finds a degree of anonymity in the city, but it is over-stating the case to suggest that Kanjars, or indeed anyone else, really has much insight into the doings and beliefs of other castes. All castes are to some degree outsiders to each other and few people are very knowledgeable or even interested in the customs of other castes. Goods and services are exchanged between castes, and some friendly individuals from sedentary castes pay social visits to Kalbelias in their hamlets, but visits by outsiders to tented camps or squatter settlements are rare. And few Gypsy-like people either providing a service, or begging, are allowed to penetrate beyond the front gate of the homes of people from other castes,

whatever the position of the peripatetic in the caste hierarchy. It is usually considered to be low. Enquiries are not usually made!

Moffat comments that the village Untouchables of Endavur might have avoided being relegated to the bottom of the local caste hierarchy by pointing out they were superior to the Kurivikarans, ostensibly nomadic catchers and suppliers of small birds, but who mainly seem to subsist by begging. Such a strategy was never utilised, (1979: 144-5). But the Kurivikarans are not only *not* comparable to the rest of the castes in the village where Moffat did his field work because they do not live there permanently, but they are also treated by the villagers of Endavur as though they do not have homes anywhere, and therefore represent an inversion of the established order. Probably in the Kurivikaran's home base village, which Moffat says they have, they have their place in that particular local hierarchy, where possibly they are not even thought of as nomads or wanderers.

This is the case with the Kalbelias. Village children from other castes and Kalbelia children go to school together. Women from other castes occasionally work side by side with Kalbelia women in the fields, and there is considerable cross-caste social interaction. In their home villages, Kalbelias are known to be a clean caste of Shudras, not Untouchables, and as friendly and helpful people, or at least harmless. But away from their home-base villages, in the city for example, the Kalbelias sometimes attract accusations of being scoundrels, thieves or even black magicians. Some say the Kalbelias wander perpetually, constantly looking for opportunities to steal or to cause trouble by practising black magic.

Peripatetics have long been perceived by outsiders and governments too, to be problematic if not actually criminal. Europe has seen various strategies of dealing with them, from hanging in Elizabethan England, gassing in Hitler's Germany, and more recently in Switzerland, the taking away of Gypsy children from their parents when babies, (Liegeois, 1987; Hancock, 1987; Puxon, 1980:9).

The Indian Government has adopted a more positive and accepting attitude. The Scheduled Tribes and Castes together comprise about 21% of the Indian population, (Beteille, 1981:9) and are considered to be 'backward'. The Kalbelias are categorised as a Scheduled Caste.

'In India... "backwardness" is viewed as an attribute not of individuals, but of communities which are, by their nature, self-perpetuating. In ordinary sociological discourse a class is a set of individuals - or, at best, families - sharing certain life chances in common that they may or may not owe to their ancestors, and that they may or may not transmit to their descendants. By the terms of that discourse, the Backward Classes are not classes at all, but groups of communities,' (Beteille, 1981:8).

These Backward Classes have had legislation enacted in their favour to remove various social, economic and educational disabilities previously suffered. The Kalbelias have benefited from these measures, especially the allocation of plots of land, which have enabled most of them now to have permanent homes. However, they have added to, rather than abandoned, their economic strategies which depend upon a nomadic lifestyle.

Barth suggests that nomadism entails the dispersal and weakening of community ties within the peripatetic group, leading to problems in maintaining the shared social and cultural identity of such a group, (1987:viii). But Kalbelias constantly visit each other and travel to other

villages, squatter settlements and camps in the course of their economic and social activities. They keep up to date with news, arrange marriages and convene *panchayats* (caste councils). Their mobility brings them into contact with many more of their caste-mates than if they were entirely sedentary, and their *panchayat* is a cohesive force in maintaining community ties and norms, (see Chapter Eight).

Many groups of non-pastoral nomads perceive themselves as set apart from sedentarists because of their itinerant lifestyle, and also as delineated groups set apart from other nomadic groups by virtue of their method(s) of earning a living, their customs, kinship and possibly territorial boundaries. Many of these groups do not merely favour intramarriage, but prescribe it, often displaying a "siege" mentality to outsiders, another mechanism which preserves their social and cultural identity. Many Indian people, not just non-pastoral nomads, agree on the desirability of marriage and socialisation solely within one's own caste. In England, Gypsies are often desirous to keep outsiders at bay, and feel threatened by attempts on the part of the encompassing society to sweep away barriers, often perceived by outsiders to be disadvantageous, that surround apparently discrete groups of people, (Okely, 1983: 77ff).

Kalbelias guard their women against sexual exploitation, by the women veiling themselves before male outsiders and Kalbelia men who are not their fathers, brothers, husbands or close relatives. In public places they are escorted by a male family member. If a Kalbelia woman works in the fields or on road works, her husband or a male family member is there too. Those Kalbelia girls who attend school rarely continue with their education after ten years old, because of the danger they will 'lose their (good) name in society.'

'(Ethnic) boundaries... persist despite a flow of personnel across them... but... entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained *despite* changing participation and membership... ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves and thus have the characteristic of organizing interaction between people...' (Barth 1970: 9-10).

The Kalbelias are successful in maintaining their social and cultural identities as a discrete community. They allow few persons into their caste, and none, except for outcasting (usually a temporary state), out of it. They are very aware of their own ethnic identity and validating myths (see Appendix I).

'Barth says "Ethnic groups only persist as significant units if they imply marked differences in behaviour,"' (Epstein, 1978: 96).

In India, caste groups are ascribed a certain type of behaviour, vegetarianism, or the eating of rats, or the following of a particular occupation, such as snake charming. Another way of dealing with possible problems of dispersal and weakened identity is for populations to be internally divided, and perhaps stratified according to some unifying criteria, such as occupation. This is the traditional system of division and unification in India, and the Kalbelias are but one of a number of sub-castes hierarchically arranged which together make up the Jogi Nath caste.

Below the Kalbelias in the Jogi Nath hierarchy are Chabdiyale (basket makers) and Chakkiyale (grinding-stone makers) who, the Kalbelias say, are inferior to them "because of their doings and occupations." The founding gurus of all three sub-castes were Naths, of the legendary Nine Naths, (see Chapter Two). The guru of the Chabdiyale (basket makers) and Chakkiyale (grinding-stone makers) sub-

castes is the famous Gorakh Nath, a well known figure in North Indian religion and mythology, while the Kalbelias' own *guru* is Kanipa.

Although I have no direct knowledge of the sentiments of the Chakkiyale and the Chabdiyale, the Kalbelias certainly do not suffer from any feeling of 'weakened identity'. Apart from these two sub-castes, the Kalbelias do not have ritual or social relations with other *jogis* or *panths* (ways) of the Nath sect, and are vague about information concerning them.

Childers claims that Banjaras (nomadic transporters and traders) 'recruited, kidnapped and adopted outsiders,' (1975: 249). My research did not support the supposition that vast numbers of outcastes have banded together to form their own caste, (but see Jha, 1979; Chaudhuri, 1987; Bhatia, 1945), or that outcastes from other castes have been automatically incorporated into the Kalbelia sub-caste. An individual cannot be down-casted, only outcasted, according to Barth, (1970: 27). But from time to time, outsiders are incorporated into the Kalbelia sub-caste. A few Kalbelia men have taken brides from the Chabdiyale (basket makers) and Chakkiyale (grinding-stone makers) sub-castes, (see Chapter Six), and two generations or so ago, a young boy was adopted and incorporated into the Kalbelia sub-caste. No one knows which caste he came from originally. Recently there has been only one case of a man being incorporated into the Kalbelia sub-caste. He left his own Carpenter caste and after much deliberation by the Kalbelias' *panchayat*, was accepted into the Kalbelia sub-caste so that he could marry a Kalbelia woman, (See Chapter Eight).

Whether it is even meaningful or useful to classify bards, minstrels, tinkers, mendicants, traders and the like together with the shared attribute of mobility, is

questioned by Leshnik. For over-riding this shared attribute is the distinction that pastoral nomads are food producers, while the apparent total dependency of wandering artisans and entertainers upon farmers marks them out as a special feature of complex society, (1975: XV), where they are often seen as parasitical in their dependence upon the settled population, (Action, 1982). (Barth also mentions non-pastoral nomads dependent upon pastoral nomads: 1964, 91-2). SP

Leshnik suggests that migratory pastoralists should be designated 'nomads' whilst other groups are designated 'wanderers' (1975: XV). But the dictionary definition of 'wander' is 'to rove without purpose or planned route, ramble', and this would be no more helpful than 'nomad', and does not describe the purposeful peregrinations of non-pastoral nomads.

In addition, there are considerable differences, both between the socio-economic lifestyles of different groups of non-pastoral nomads, and 'self-sufficient' pastoral nomads, (1975: XV). Actually, pastoral nomads are typically much involved with neighbouring agricultural peoples and usually exchange herd products for agricultural products. In some settings, pastoral nomads might be described as having a predatory economy in relation to the settled population, (Irons, 1974: 654-5). In fact, pastoral nomadism does not imply distance from, and independence of, the sedentary community. What peripatetics have in common with most hunter-gatherers and pastoral nomads, is the characteristically patchy distribution of resources, and the seasonality of resource-extracting possibilities. (Rao, 1987: 33).

Weissleder suggests that there is a symbiotic interaction between fixed and mobile populations (1978: XVII). In India, non-pastoral nomads function as

useful adjuncts to sedentary societies. This can be shown by the traditionally mobile occupational groups of hunters, trappers, fishermen, blacksmiths, basket-weavers, and the entertainers such as acrobats, magicians, snake-charmers, puppeteers, monkey trainers, singers and dancers, as well as philosophers, teachers, fortune-tellers and palmists, whose major resources are their various customers and patrons,

The Kalbelias are not totally dependent upon any one section of the sedentary population. They have dual roles or identities, both nomadic and sedentary, according to their differing contexts in Hindu society. They exemplify Weissleder's hypothesis of a symbiotic interaction between fixed and mobile populations, with non-pastoral nomads being an advantageous adjunct to sedentary society (1978: XVII), as I shall show in this thesis.

#### 1:2. CONDITIONS OF FIELD WORK

I first met Kalbelias begging near the Railway level crossing in Jaipur during a visit to Rajasthan in 1984. They invited me to visit them in their nearby village, where they made me welcome and tape-recorded messages urging other Kalbelias to help with my research. In February 1987 I returned and stayed until March 1988 with my two children, then fourteen years and ten years old. Kalbelias I met on my previous visit spread the word that I was there to 'write

the story of our people,' and many Kalbelias offered help, information and hospitality.

I rented a flat in the house of a Brahmin university lecturer but he detested our low-caste visitors, and pretended we were out, or lay in wait as Kalbelias left and forbade them to come to the house again. The landlord threatened my son with prison if he continued to socialise with Kalbelia teenagers in our flat. He even went to the local police station to complain, but the police said I was doing nothing wrong and the landlord should maintain friendly relations with us.

But he would not. He and his family monopolised the water supply, only available for short periods early morning and evening, by filling vast water tanks in their downstairs flat and watering the garden with extreme thoroughness. This left us with scarcely enough time to fill up a few buckets for cooking and washing. They said I was a prostitute, and claimed neighbours were complaining about thefts my Kalbelia visitors were supposed to have committed and the poisonous cobras they might release in the colony, although after we'd moved away, the landlord admitted that none of the neighbours had really complained about me or my children, or our Kalbelia visitors.

I employed a woman to shop, cook and clean, but found she was telling Kalbelias not to call at the flat. She was afraid she would be outcasted if members of her (Rajput) caste suspected her of washing the plates and cups of the Kalbelias. Then the washerwoman claimed I was forcing her to wash *sanperas'* clothing as well as ours! I dispensed with domestic help and searched for other accommodation.

I hoped the Kalbelias would offer me a hut in one of their home-base villages or even in a *kachchi basti*

(squatter settlement), but this was not possible. The *kachchi bastis* were (usually) illegal settlements shared with other castes who would object if a foreign woman plus two children lived there. I would be certain to attract the attention of passers-by and the police, and possibly the city authorities. The home-base villages did not have any spare huts in the Kalbelia settlements, so I was pleased when Manasi Nath found a two-roomed detached bungalow with a kitchen and bathroom and garden available to rent on the outskirts of Jaipur.

This time I emphasized to the landlord that I was in India only to research snake-charmers and they would be frequent visitors. I even took a Kalbelia - Dari Nath, with me to the interview, and luckily the new landlord accepted the situation. The Kalbelias arranged to clean the bungalow and fill in the rat-holes in the garden. They hired a bus from the local bus station, helped us pack and clean the flat we were leaving, lowered the refrigerator over the balcony with ropes and loaded our belongings. Finally we all piled into the bus, cheering as we left the colony.

I was initially disappointed that I was not able to live in a squatter settlement or home base village, but there were advantages in living in the bungalow. The Kalbelias, being snake charmers were popularly viewed with trepidation because of their cobras and reputation as black magicians and had attracted curiosity from neighbours at my first flat. But once in the detached bungalow, I had more privacy, and avoided the previous interference. Through visits to Jaipur squatter settlements, I met and later visited many Kalbelias in their camps and home-base villages, even as far away as Marwar, a ten-hour bus journey. Because of the Kalbelias' own nomadic habits, this research strategy proved to be appropriate.



Map 2.  
Modern administrative  
divisions of Rajasthan



Map 3.  
Rajasthan: showing the old  
regions referred to by the  
Kalbelias

The Kalbelias divide themselves according to the area of Rajasthan in which they live or originally came from. The three regional divisions they frequently mention are the Delhiyale area, stretching from Delhi and embracing Jaipur, the Marwaryale area, embracing the region of Marwar, and the Mewaryale area. These areas are said by the Kalbelias to be the ancient princely kingdoms of Rajasthan, (see Map 3). Most of my contact was with Delhiyale Kalbelias, based as I was in Jaipur, but I also had good contact with Marwaryale, and was able to distinguish some regional differences in customs. I had visited Bijainagar in Mewar in 1984, and met many Kalbelias there, but a subsequent foray found only one still Kalbelia family living there, so I confined my investigations to Delhiyale Kalbelias and Marwaryale Kalbelias with whom I had good rapport. This entailed much travelling by bus and train and camel and buffalo cart, and I could not efficiently further widen my area of research.

I made visits to rural villages, sometimes with my interpreter, or when he was studying for university exams, accompanied only by my children and escorted by the Kalbelias who had invited me to be their guest. My interpreter was a Brahmin, and at first he was apprehensive that the Kalbelias would be violent and threatening. After meeting them he was happy to find them polite and helpful. Although I can carry on long conversations with Kalbelias I know well, sometimes I could not fully understand details of certain topics without the help of a native speaker.

A member of the Bhopa caste (who traditionally travel around rural villages displaying pictures depicting religious and mythological events and singing and acting out the story) helped with translating, once or twice. This man was a journalist, and nephew of the leader of a Government-sponsored folk-song and dance troupe in which several Kalbelias were employed. Another man, from the Bhat

#### VILLAGES, SQUATTER SETTLEMENTS AND CAMPS VISITED\*

##### Villages (permanent home-bases)

Harjipura (near Jaipur)  
Ramaipura (near Jaipur)  
Kanoda (near Jaipur. Two settlements)  
Manoli (near Jaipur)  
Jhakari (near Jaipur)  
Chandiwar (near Agra)  
Shivapuri (Marwar)  
Tisra village (Marwar)  
Devghar (Marwar)  
Bagwar (Mewar, near Chittorgarh; 1984)  
Bijainagar (Mewar. In 1984 there was a large group of Kalbelias. Revisited in 1987, only one family remained).

##### Kachchi basti (squatter settlements)

Railway *kachchi basti* (Jaipur. On Railway property)  
Sabzi *kachchi basti* (Jaipur)  
Gulab Marg *kachchi basti* (Jaipur)  
Krishnapura Marg *kachchi basti* (outskirts of Jaipur. Tents: some families were being allocated government house plots).

##### Camps (tents)

Railway crossing (outskirts of Jaipur)  
Sanganir (near Jaipur. Camp for *panchayat*)  
Galta (near Jaipur. Camp at shrine)  
Kejigar camp (near Kejigar village outside Jaipur)  
Chandiwar camp (near Chandiwar village near Ajmer. Working on road works)  
Pushkar (near Ajmer. Camel fair. Some Kalbelia entertainers working in Tourist village).  
Ajmer (Tents in streets of town).  
Bijainagar (Mewar. Camp in town because of *Nagpanchmi*).

Most of my visits, apart from the squatter settlements in Jaipur, were to villages in the vicinity of Jaipur and Ajmer. I also visited three villages in the Marwar region, a ten-hour bus journey from Jaipur. Kalbelias from these villages have relatives in rural villages in the Jaipur area and they also stay in the Jaipur squatter settlements. Most of my information however, concerns Kalbelias in the area near and around Jaipur and Ajmer.

\* Names of villages, squatter settlements and camps have been changed (as have the names of individual Kalbelias). Large towns remain unchanged.

puppeteer caste, who worked for All India Radio also translated for me on a few occasions. The Kalbelias introduced them to me, after meeting them when they visited relatives living in the Railway *kachchi basti*. Both men kindly offered help when their normal work permitted, but the Kalbelias decided they would not accept them in this role. "These two men will know all about us and tell each and everything to their own castes." The Kalbelias found my Brahmin interpreter acceptable precisely because he had no other close contacts but them among the lower castes. Thus their privacy and secrets were safe from those who might conceivably be able to derive some advantage from knowing them, although sometimes Kalbelias gave me information, usually of a personal nature, which they said even my Brahmin interpreter was not to hear.

When returning to Jaipur from visiting a rural village or camp, usually several Kalbelias accompanied me and stayed at my house. In the villages I gathered information, and back in Jaipur I checked over the notes I had made and asked follow-up questions about particular topics. Kalbelias said they felt more relaxed telling me of personal or confidential matters in my bungalow, rather than in their hamlet where everyone, including sometimes curious bystanders from other castes, could hear. They regarded it as fair that after enjoying their hospitality, I should make them welcome in my home. I was very willingly to do this, for they are agreeable company, but sometimes I was exhausted after interviewing all day, and then cooking dinner for nine or ten people in the evening.

My house was used as a resource. Kalbelias arranged to meet there, and sometimes stayed for a few days. Anyone going to hospital would first have a thorough bath in my bathroom. It was also a stopping-off point for one of the hotels where some Kalbelias entertained. One 'shift'

exchanged their ochre-coloured uniform shirts and turbans with the next shift, and handed over the cobra and *bin* (snake pipes). Bicycles could safely be left in my garden (actually a sandy desert filled with rat-holes), and collected later. I had very many Kalbelia visitors, especially during the hottest time of the year. I suspect this was because I had an electric fan! It was preferable to sit under that, rather than in the blazing sun. None of the Kalbelias have electric fans in their huts, and temperatures rise to forty-four degrees centigrade in Jaipur. It is even hotter out in the desert villages. The slightest movement is an ordeal.

The police kept an eye on me. One day they pursued my *rikshaw* in a commandeered taxi as I returned from Harjipura, a Kalbelia hamlet near Jaipur airport. Another time I was sitting in Anand Nath's hut in Jhakari after a sandstorm, and eating an evening meal when three men burst in and announced they were policemen. They fired a barrage of questions at me concerning my visa. Once satisfied on that score, they were incredulous that I intended to accept the hospitality of the Kalbelias, which they made clear, was meagre by their own standards. They offered to put me up in their house, saying they were Rajput by caste. "Are you eating with them?" they asked significantly. I had been gnawing a chicken leg when they first entered, so I was able to reassure them that I would be fed. "The police are in the habit of asking questions. They are like dogs, they will never leave a thing alone!" said Bhadra Nath once the policemen had left.

It seemed that wherever I went with Kalbelias the police would appear sooner or later. On a night journey to Marwar, the Kalbelias with me were dragged off the train at Ajmer and questioned at the police station. Then they were beaten with sticks and questioned again. I was frightened,

and so were my children. When I tried to intervene the police just laughed. After some time the senior police officer, clad only in striped underpants and vest and lolling on a cot, decided we were innocent. One of his men escorted us back to the train but then threatened to prevent us boarding unless we paid him a ten rupees bribe. I grumpily handed over the money for fear of what might happen if I refused. We came into contact with the police on many occasions and I found myself apologising time and again to the Kalbelias for the trouble I was bringing to them. The police did not bother them normally, and most said it was the first time in their whole lives they had ever been questioned by the police.

With the Kalbelias going about with me and my two children, we all attracted much curiosity. In many small villages Europeans had never been seen before, especially by children and women. People from other castes invaded the sanperas' hamlets to stare at us for hours on end. Sometimes on public transport other passengers were initially fascinated by the spectacle of Europeans accompanied by snakecharmers (with their attributes of black magic and their unusual occupation), but then became aggressive. On one occasion the bus was stopped for a fight between Kalbelias and some passengers who were insulting us.

The Kalbelias continued to be protective towards us, and we in turn felt loyalty and identity with them. It seemed there was no middle way where I could have much contact with other castes without putting the Kalbelias in the humiliating situation where higher-caste onlookers ordered them to sit on the floor at my feet, expecting me to bark peremptory questions at them. I felt I had to identify fully with them and let them know I did. And anyway I liked them. They became my friends and were like an extension of my family.

### 1. 3. THE KALBELIAS

The rest of this chapter gives a general overview of the lifestyle of the Kalbelias. Topics are dealt with in greater depth in subsequent chapters.

Until about forty years ago, the Kalbelias were nomadic. They lived in tents made then, as now, of quilts and rags stretched over a wooden framework, like the English Gypsy bender tents. They transported their belongings on donkeys, the bedding and tents loaded on up-ended string cots. Nowadays the Kalbelias use polythene, plastic or canvas on their tents when the rains come, which in the desert state of Rajasthan is rarely.

The Kalbelias realised it was necessary for them to change their lifestyle after the time of India's Independence in 1947. The abolition of the princely states meant the loss of economic benefits such as money, clothes, salt and other provisions which they had formerly gained by frequent visits to princely courts.

"Previously we moved around, living in tents on the outskirts of villages. We did snake-charming, and those males who were good acrobats, dancers, musicians or conjurers camped near the palaces of Rajas and Maharajas, entertaining and earning money from them. All Kalbelias were earning lots of money, lots of wheat and clothes. Everything was provided, even salt. But after Independence, all Maharajas and Rajas gave their property to the Government and were poor. It was this factor which decided Kalbelias to change," (Manendra Nath).

Land, in the form of house-plots, was distributed by the State Government to many non-pastoral nomads to encourage them to abandon their nomadic lifestyle. This

helped the Kalbelias to incorporate house ownership into their risk-spreading economic strategies, rather than concentrate solely on their traditional occupation of snake charming. Some members of the sub-caste now work on local agricultural land or take up building or some other kind of work. Others continue with snake-charming, travelling when required and use their homes in rural villages as permanent home bases. Nowadays, the Kalbelias have dual relationships with the sedentary community: as nomads, with those people they meet and work with when they travel away from their home villages, and a further set of social and economic relationships with the other castes in their home village, where they are integrated as new settlers.

Ruhela, writing about the Gaduliya Lohars (nomadic blacksmiths) sees the main thrust of the Rajasthan State Government's nomads' rehabilitation programme to be sedentarisation. He criticizes the notion that provision of free housing plots, subsidies and loans for house building and agriculture, a co-operative credit society and production-cum-workshop can be the common means of 'rehabilitation' for all backward communities, whether tribe or caste, nomadic or sedentary, without reference to the socio-economic background or wishes and desires of the group concerned. He claims too, that the notion of 'rehabilitation' seems to be hazy in the planners' minds, (1968: 214; 242-3).

As far as I could ascertain, the Rajasthan State Government, apart from supplying some house-plots and loans, has done nothing specifically for the Kalbelias. I did not hear of any special workshops as had been provided for the nomadic Gaduliya Lohars, (Ruhela, 1968: 219-221), probably because snake-charming is not amenable to training in a government workshop setting. Besides, the Kalbelias already

practise a wide spread of occupations, whilst the Gaduliya Lohars practised the more restricted economic strategies of blacksmithing and bullock trading. Although Ruhela judged government interventions in the case of the Gaduliya Lohars to be unsatisfactory and detrimental, the Kalbelias are pleased with their Government help of allocations of land and loans to build houses.

According to the Ethnographic Atlas there are 12,690 Kalbelias, in Rajasthan, constituting 0.38% of its Scheduled Caste population. In 1969 only one Kalbelia male out of forty was literate, and among women, only one out of 2882. Nine people had attained the educational level of Primary or Junior basic, with only four going on to Matriculation or Higher Secondary, but none of them female, (Mathur, 1969: 52). Now the educational level has improved. All young men can read and write, many have attended secondary school, some are at College, and there are a few mature College students in their twenties and early thirties. Some girls now attend school, although usually only up to the age of ten or eleven and most Kalbelia parents are determined their children will have a better education than they had.

The Kalbelias' occupations, apart from snake-charming are: curers of snake bite, sellers of herbal medicines, agriculturalists, beggars, truck drivers, factory workers, building workers, *rikshawale*, gurus, magicians or army personnel. There is a Kalbelia man who holds a M.A. degree and works in a government department, another who is a sub-inspector in the police force. Several men and women from the sub-caste have travelled abroad with Government sponsored music programmes. Sharma mentions the Kalbelias as sellers of bamboo, hunters of snakes and sellers of snake skins (1981:201-2), but the Kalbelias of my research say they never deliberately kill a snake, and do not sell skins.

There is no central political authority among the Kalbelias, and despite claims that there was a leader, an outsider who married into the caste and 'rose to govern the entire tribe' (Singh, 1980), I found no indication of any supreme leader, although respected men sit as *panchs* - adjudicators and judges - in regional caste councils, examining cases that cannot be settled at local level.

Other castes refer to the sub-caste as Kalbelias, sometimes as Jogis, or Naths, or descriptively as *sanpera* and *sanperin* (male snake-charmer and female snake-charmer). Kalbelia men use 'Nath' (Lord, Master) after their given name, which refers to their religious orientation (see Chapter Two). Some also add 'sanpera' (snake-charmer) after Nath, denoting the traditional occupation of the sub-caste, for example, Raju Nath Sanpera. Usually males refer to each other and address each other as (first name) Nath, eg. Bhadra Nath, Dari Nath. If they are showing respect to an elder, they add "ji" - Mukunda Nathji. Others use their first name, then Nath and then the name of their *gotra* (family name), for example, Panita Nath Barmanya, Kulya Nath Manani, to differentiate men of otherwise similar name within the sub-caste. A few men do not use Nath or Sanpera, but instead add "Lal" after their given name, to "make the name very beautiful". It is a matter of choice. Kalbelia women call themselves by their first name and can add "Devi" (goddess) if they wish, but most go through life known only by their first name. They are never given the title 'Nath'.

The Kalbelias have their own *sanpera bhasha* (language). This is more in the nature of an argot than a fully-fledged separate language. School children in Rajasthan are taught to read and write Hindi, one of the official languages of India. But at home, people of all castes usually speak a regional or even village dialect. The Kalbelias are no exception to this, but in addition they have their *sanpera*

language. It is not used between them very much, but to ensure secrecy before outsiders. For example, if a Kalbelia enquires of another Kalbelia how many cobras he has with him, he would substitute the *sanpera* word '*michala*' for cobra, if he thought outsiders would be alarmed if they realized cobras were in the vicinity.

Mehrotra describes secret modes of communication between silk merchants, *pandas* (Hindu priestly agents), and criminals, used as a way of communicating privately before outsiders and/or as a marker of group identity, (Mehrotra, 1977). Bollig points out that a secret language can be of the utmost importance in establishing group identity (1987:214). English Gypsies use the Romany language for this purpose, but Kalbelias merely ask a few questions about regional affiliation and *gotra* (family) name, and that is enough to establish the newcomer as a member of the sub-caste, where he comes from, and to whom he is related. There is usually some relationship even of a distant nature, through marriage. If a stranger Kalbelia visits a Kalbelia camp or hamlet, it is their duty to be hospitable even although they do not know him or her personally. It is enough for that individual to be a member of the sub-caste to have a right to their hospitality.

The Kalbelias eat meat, usually goat or chicken, albeit very occasionally, but there are individuals within the sub-caste who are strict vegetarians and do not even eat eggs. Kalbelias smoke tobacco in *biris*, *chillum* or *huqqa*, especially early in the morning, but alcohol is frowned upon. Drunkenness is more in the nature of an isolated teenage escapade, rather than forming part of the every-day behaviour of any individual. The consumption or non-consumption of certain foods, tobacco, alcohol and drugs are considered to be markers of a caste or sub-caste's place in the over-all Hindu caste hierarchy, or of their efforts to

improve their status within the system. Vegetarianism is regarded within Hinduism as being characteristic of the highest caste, the Brahmins. A whole caste or at least sub-caste has to be accepted as being or not being involved in certain types of behaviour or consumption for it to be such a marker. Kalbelias say they would not accept food from Dhobi (washermen), Harijan (sweepers, sewer workers), Chamar or Reger (leather workers, makers and menders of shoes), or Bulaiye (preparer of cotton for mattresses), whom they consider to be ritually inferior to themselves, and therefore polluting.

Kalbelia men help with child-care and cooking, and when they go on a trip without women, they do their own housekeeping, or rather tent-keeping. Men are also the main money-earners. Kalbelia women work if the opportunity arises, but it is considered to be the man's duty to go out and earn, the woman's primary role is to care for children and attend to domestic chores.

Because of the nature of their small houses, and with few people owning much land or many animals, Kalbelia women are not terribly busy most of the time, although in 1987 there had already been a drought for the last three years, and the monsoon did not come that year either. Wells ran dry in some villages and the women had to walk up to one kilometre in the early morning or evening to a well still yielding water, and then carry it back to camp or hamlet in large earthenware pots. At the beginning of the year there was water to drink and for washing, but as the year progressed and the monsoon did not arrive, water became very precious and there was little water that could be spared for anything other than drinking. So for some Kalbelia women, fetching water from wells or pumps some distance away from their house or tent was an arduous and time-consuming task under the hot desert sun.

Kalbelia women, in common with most other women from the lower echelons of the Hindu caste hierarchy in Rajasthan wear a *ghaghra* (long skirt), *choli* (bodice) with a *kurti* (low-necked, sleeveless over-tunic) and an *odhani* (short veil). They use this to cover their faces before unrelated males. They wear make-up, henna on their hands and nail varnish. Most Kalbelia women have heavy silver jewellery given them by their families when they marry and by their husbands when they can afford it, and wear silver necklaces, bangles, anklets and nose-rings.

Some women have tattoos on their face, arms and top of their chest. Both Kalbelia women and men may be tattooed, which they say is "Just for pleasure," although Joshi was told by a Jogi Nath that these permanent marks on his body would enable him after his death, to present these floral designs and other symbols to God, (1976: 47).

Kalbelia men usually wear a white *dhoti*, a length of cloth wound round the body with the ends drawn up between the legs, or a coloured *lungi*, a length of cotton cloth wrapped around the waist and overlapped at the front, covering the legs down to about mid-calf, and a *kurta* (shirt worn outside with vents either side). Sometimes they wear western trousers and shirt. When traditionally garbed as snakecharmers or *sadhus*, they wear a white *dhoti*, ochre *pagri* (turban), and ochre-coloured or orange *kurta*. Ochre is the traditional colour worn by holy men and *sadhus* in India. As members of the Nath *panth*, Kalbelias claim the right to wear it. Men often have their ears-lobes pierced for earrings, others wear earrings made of Kashmiri stone which go through a hole made in the cartilage in the centre of the ear. This is in memory of the mountain which Gorakh Nath, one of the Nine Naths (perfected ones), turned first into gold and then into stone (see Appendix I). Many Kalbelias, especially adult men, have their front teeth decorated with

gold or small coloured spots. Some teenage boys decorate their left hand with henna or varnish one or more finger nails on the left hand. Only the left hand is treated in this way, because according to Hindu mythology the left side of the body of a man is female and therefore the appropriate side to decorate.

Apart from the cobra particularly associated with Kalbelias, they keep pythons and other snakes, and a mongoose, in connection with their traditional occupation as snake charmers. Kalbelia families may also keep chickens, sheep, goats, cows, buffalos, donkeys, camels, rabbits, and dogs (nowadays used as guards, previously for hunting), and pet parrots, which are taught to speak. Many families who normally keep a cow or goats sold them because the drought had caused a shortage of fodder. When animals die, Kalbelias request Harijans to remove the corpse. "We give them something to take away the dead animal. The way we pay depends on our convenience. We give some crop, wheat for instance, or ten or eleven rupees. If it is a big animal such as a cow or a bullock and a cart has to be hired then we might have to pay twenty or thirty rupees," (Manendra Nath).

Meat is a rare treat, perhaps to be eaten at the festival of Divali in microscopic quantities. Most days, Kalbelias keep to a spartan diet of *dal* (lentils), *chapati* and one vegetable. *Chapatis* are patted back and forth between the hands until flattened, then cooked on a piece of earthenware pot. In most hamlets, Kalbelias eat only twice a day: early morning when they eat left-overs from the previous night's meal, and a frugal meal in the evening. They brew tea only in the early morning and in the evening. Each household has a few bell-metal cooking pots, and forceps to lift them on and off the fire, which is fuelled by thorn bushes. They also have a few earthenware water

pots, some plates, one or two metal drinking vessels, and a lidded wooden spice box with compartments. Cutlery is not used, and there might be one pair of scissors in the whole hamlet. A home-made lamp made from a bottle containing kerosine with a dangling wick provides light.

Some families have padlocked metal trunks or bins in which best clothes and jewellery are stored. They take clothes to the washerman to be pressed for important occasions. They carefully wrap their few photographs and books in cloth and keep them in metal boxes to protect them against the sun, which fades anything exposed. Other items are kept in bags hanging from the wall or from a beam.

One or two families possess ancient guns which they say they use for hunting, although no-one ever seems to hunt, except for cobras to display, and then guns are never used. Some Kalbelias own bicycles, battery cassette players and loudspeakers, but generally material possessions are sparse. A young man may buy a new article or garment but he does not enjoy sole use of it; his brothers or friends will borrow it. An obligation to share is part of Kalbelia life, and possessions openly displayed are considered to be available for anyone to use. Consequently, some Kalbelias have secret hiding places for items they wish to keep for themselves. Favourite recreations are singing folk songs or *bhajans* (devotional songs) to the accompaniment of *bin* (snake pipes), harmonium, drum and finger cymbals, and watching films at the cinema.

Gell's discussion of the Muria Gonds, a tribal group living in Madhya Pradesh can be contrasted with the Kalbelias. Due to various Indian Government interventions over the last fifty or so years, the Muria now enjoy a modest security, and one or two families have become wealthy. Nonetheless, the consumption behaviour of the Muria

Gonds in general, and rich families in particular, is marked by 'an exaggerated conservatism':

'...traditional consumption ethos and mode of assigning goods to symbolic categories lags behind objective changes in production techniques, which has resulted in enhanced productivity... production adheres to the premises of one kind of economy, whereas consumption continues to be based on the premise of a quite different economy.' The net effect of this lag is that rich Muria accumulate wealth they dare not spend, and would have no real idea how to spend had they the inclination, (Gell, 1986: 110-111).

The Kalbelias, too, have gone through major changes in the last forty years in response to Indian Government intervention. Formerly they were nomadic, now they are semi-nomadic, with some families veering decidedly toward the sedentary end of the continuum. Uneven patterns of economic opportunity have emerged, some due to the location of the settlements. The Kalbelia hamlet of Chandiwar is within an easy bus ride of Ajmer, and most of the young men work in the building trade there. The inhabitants of this hamlet enjoy three meals each day, good clothes, bicycles, toys for their children, all signs that they are doing better economically than other sub-caste-mates, whose settlements can best be described as being in the back of beyond.

The family operating a hotel snake charming monopoly maintains homes both in a rural village and a city squatter settlement. They too, have access to greater money-making opportunities than many other Kalbelias (see Chapters Three, Four and Five), yet this wealth is far from ostentatiously displayed. Like the Muria, inequalities of wealth are played down among the Kalbelias, and interhousehold economic differences are minimised. Inside the stone-built houses of better-off families there are no more material possessions on show than in the homes of less wealthy families. When I took photographs I was often asked to wait while they put on

clothes kept for special occasions such as weddings. Yet the garments are all much of a muchness: traditional styles, similar materials, and cost. Gell reports,

'The Muria consumption bottleneck reflects an intense sensitivity to social pressures, within the family, the village, and the wider society. Acts of conspicuous consumption not falling within the framework of traditionally sanctioned public feasting and display are seen as socially threatening, hubristic, and disruptive,' (1986: 111).

Kalbelias show a similar concern to minimise differences between caste-mates and to preserve their ideology of equality. This is reinforced by the way the Kalbelias operate their *panchayat* system, (see Chapter Eight).

The Muria, even the poor ones, think nothing of drinking away their last rupee, springing from, Gell suggests, the assumption that there is more where that came from, reflecting the essentially unlimited resource base (the forest) on which traditional Muria society rested, and that prior to modernised agricultural techniques, wealth was not accumulated for lack of suitable stores of value (currency or cattle), (1986: 118).

But the Kalbelias exhibit a parsimonious attitude and considerable anxiety about future resources. "We are in the habit of saving, not spending!" they say, and discourage what they perceive to be profligate expenditure. Bora Nath advised me not to give his son any wages should he do any work for me for, "He will only spend it on food." Kalbelias say wasteful habits should be discouraged. Thrift is only sensible, for who knows what expenses may unexpectedly arise? They reflect the common perception in Rajasthani society, that *everything*, food, money, jobs, certainly

opportunities and good luck are in short supply and may be suddenly curtailed.

But logically, Kalbelias can, like the Muria, expect 'more' to be forthcoming, although they depend not upon an abundant forest, but upon an abundance of people who give alms in the form of money, clothes and foodstuffs. Their nomadism means that if one area or group of donors prove to be impoverished, the Kalbelias can quite easily move to where conditions are more favourable. Grains and pulses can be stored, clothes worn or converted to other uses, for example, winter quilts, thus obviating the need for expenditure in the market. Kalbelias are frequently given money which can be hoarded until it amounts to a sizeable sum, and/or exchanged for a variety of goods or services. Unlike the Muria Gonds, who had no way to store and thus delay consumption of forest items until some future date, most items donated to Kalbelias can be stored before consumption or conversion.

Where the Muria feast and drink alcohol together in a spirit of commitment to the village and Muria values (Gell, 1986: 119), the Kalbelias, assert commitment to their sub-caste and its egalitarian values by adhering to their norm of refraining from drinking alcohol and not eating more meals than other families in their hamlet, and by sub-caste-mates wearing similar clothes of a like quality. Even those families who can afford to wear better clothes and eat more frequently, do not, unless outside Kalbelia society. While abroad, Biman Nath leads a sophisticated life (he works with a foreign businessman), yet when he returns to his hamlet he lives in a mud hut and stores his foreign goods out of sight in tin trunks. And when Bhadra Nath returned from a few weeks performing with an entertainment group at hotels outside Jaipur, distinctly more chubby than when he went away, he was embarrassed when teased that he must have been

eating well. He is normally thin, as indeed are all the Kalbelias except for one or two notable exceptions. Far from plumpness or fleshiness being a desired attribute, Kalbelias appear to find it faintly scandalous, evidence of lack of self control or greed, at least the occasion for amazed comment.

As yet no Kalbelia is so far ahead in worldly terms that he has little in common with subcaste-mates, but inequalities of income are beginning to emerge. A few larger, stone houses have been built, while other Kalbelias continue to live in small mud or stone huts or even tents. Nonetheless, all adult Kalbelia males are considered equal, whether they live in a tent or a stone house of several rooms. But the particular types of conspicuous consumption common to all Muria Gonds (coupled with the exaggerated conservatism of rich families) serves the same purpose as the Kalbelias' obligation to both share, and exercise restraint from conspicuous consumption: an assertion of equality, a retreat from internal competitiveness, a demonstration of solidarity and the importance of the collectivity.

#### 1: 4 VILLAGES

Kalbelias are relative newcomers to their home villages, compared to local castes who have never been nomadic and have occupied their land for countless generations. Although tents, camps and squatter settlements are still utilised, these are regarded by the Kalbelias as tools, a way of extending a family's earning capacity, and not as an ideological necessity or an identity marker. They regard the house or hut in the village as their primary base, their home.

"We have settled in villages and taken the habits of village dwellers like agriculture. We are making progress in

society. Our status is now better than in former times, but economically we are not so wealthy. Those times before Independence were good because all facilities were provided by Rajas and Maharajas. Now we are settled in villages and want to progress towards cities, but all the time we find difficulties. Prices go higher, but we want to roam, visit places like Jaipur, that's why economically we are down," (Manendra Nath).

But older Kalbelias say, "These days are better. When I was a child we were roaming around with no permanent houses. At that time in society we had very little value, little prestige. Now we have houses and some of us have bought agricultural land. Now we have prestige, and we are able to take out loans for agricultural improvements. A person can lend some money to us and we can also lend to others. And our children are going to school, (Giri Nath; Robertson, 1990: 3-8).

Kalbelias have chosen to build their permanent settlements close to villages where they had pre-existing economic and social ties and are well known. Perhaps because of this, wherever they have settled, they have friendly relations with other castes in the main village. Where a group of Kalbelia families has been settled for some time, their houses are often alongside those of other castes. In two Marwar villages, the nearest neighbours whose houses are only yards away, are Rajputs, a high caste.

Kalbelias are fully accepted members of their village communities, although in line with caste restrictions. They may be given refreshment when visiting a neighbour from a higher caste, but wash their glass before leaving and may be expected to sit on the floor during the visit. But there is some illegal discrimination: Kalbelias are expected to wash their own glasses at public tea-stalls. The Kalbelias react



Kalbelias stay in one of the Jaipur squatter settlements to work



and then return to their homes in the village



to such incidents with stoic indifference. However, they are not excluded from temples and use the services of Brahmin priests at marriages and other ritual occasions.

Kalbelia hamlets consist of six to thirty nuclear families, composed of extended families, descended from groups of brothers. Their hamlets are usually near to, but separate from the main villages, which are considerably larger than their own small gatherings. Kalbelias usually build one-room huts from mud with a thatched roof. Some have constructed huts from stone with flat roofs. In Ramalpura village there is one stone house of three large rooms, and stairs leading up to the flat roof, used as sleeping accommodation. All other huts in the hamlet are mud, and one family still lives in a tent.

In Shivapuri village (Marwar), Dharendra Nath was constructing two stone houses of two rooms each, on land given to his wife Kadru by other castes in the village, because she works as midwife and healer. Because of this gift, she, her husband and young children have moved from their previous village three miles away, and plan to live in one house, and one of her adult sons and his family in the other. Houses in the Marwar area are often two-roomed, made from stone or mud. In the villages near Jaipur, they are usually one room mud huts.

"When we are constructing a new house we call the Brahmin priest. My wife sits at my left side as at the marriage ceremony, and the *pandit* performs the rituals with a coconut and sweet things. He is given a feast of uncooked grains which he can take away with him. Later, when the house is ready for occupation, another ceremony is performed by the *pandit*, and he is given another feast. The owner of the house also provides a big meal at the time of moving into the new house, and the chief builder of the house is

given clothes - not all the builders, just the one in charge. When my uncle's *pakka* stone house was built in Ramalpura (see above), he gave the builder one thousand and one hundred rupees and one *tola* (ten grams) of gold in addition to the builder's wages. My uncle's house was built by Beawar caste," (Manendra Nath). Beawar is another name for Chamar, traditionally a leather-working caste.

These houses, built entirely by outside labour are uncommon. Most Kalbelias live in small houses constructed partially by themselves and builders. "At the time of preparing the *kachcha* house made from mud or straw, the owner gives eleven rupees to the *pandit* and five rupees and twenty-five paise to the builder. The situation of the house is chosen according to authorised plans - all should be in line, according to local authority guidelines. But squatter settlements are not authorised by the Government so people build wherever they get a place to build," (Manendra Nath). A few Kalbelias have only tents in which to live, even in their home village, but this is rare. Tents are now mostly used for temporary shelter when Kalbelias are travelling and working away from their home-base village.

Rajasthan is largely a desert state. Tap water is only available for a few hours a day, and in some towns, Bijainagar in Mewar, for example, for a few hours only every third day. It is extremely hot, over 100 degrees fahrenheit for most of the year, and a hot wind blows from the desert and adds to the general misery of the hot season. Out in the desert villages and camps, the constant wind blows sand and grit into eyes, tents and huts, and occasionally degenerates into a sandstorm.

Because of the high temperatures prevalent in Rajasthan and the small size of their huts, Kalbelias use them almost solely as storage facilities. Inside there might be a

movable cooking place, either on a metal tray, or made from clay, to be used if it rains. but permanent clay cooking places are outside the hut. There is always a cot piled high with home-made quilts for use during the winter nights, which as a complete contrast to the broiling hot season, are bitterly cold. But hot season or winter, everyone sleeps outside the huts on string cots or on the ground, and only shelter inside their huts when it rains. The interior of a house or hut is usually uncomfortably humid, even at night. The floors of mud huts are of the sand on which they are built, and in hot weather the hut can be cooled by watering the sand floor.

Along with other castes in the village, the Kalbelia community has full access to well or pump facilities. In Devghar village, a neighbouring farmer allows Kalbelia families to use water on his land for clothes washing and bathing. Only men and boys make use of this latter facility. Women wash privately, using bowls of water.

Although the houses of other castes in the main village might have electricity, only one of the two Kalbelia hamlets at Kanoda has electricity. This is not used to light the huts - Kalbelias use home-made lamps in their huts, and some hamlets use a Tilley lamp when communal activities are in progress such as a marriage ceremony, or *bhajan* singing (devotional songs), - but to operate the electric tube well which irrigates their agricultural land.

This hamlet comprises four brothers and their families who bought thirty-five *bighas* of land between them (a *bigha* is equivalent to five eighths of an acre), and obtained a government grant for the tube well. There are only two settlements within my area of study where Kalbelias own agricultural land - Kanoda and Ramalpura. Because of the drought, the Kanoda hamlet, even with water from their

electric tube well, was only able to grow food on their twenty acres for their own consumption. In non-drought years they have a surplus to sell to local shop-keepers. In Ramalpura, with ten and a half *bighas* (about six and a half acres) of agricultural land, a canal usually supplies water for irrigation. This was dried up, and no crops have been grown for several years.

#### 1:5 PRESENT-DAY MOBILITY PATTERNS

Kalbelias tend to frequent towns or villages where they have relatives, caste-mates or friends and contacts. They also travel further afield to visit relatives or their wife's family if she came from another area. They do not usually beg if they are out of their normal working area. Kalbelia members of Government-sponsored music and dance groups made up of people from various castes have bookings all over Rajasthan and sometimes other places in India. Some groups have been abroad. There are also a few Kalbelias who, while not belonging to official government groups, work as folk entertainers at hotels, dancing and playing instruments. These hotels are usually in Rajasthan but some have been as far away as Bombay.

Few Kalbelias are able to earn a living solely in the vicinity of their rural village, but those who can, find work locally, such as building, or agriculture. Others take the bus to a town or city or walk to surrounding villages on a daily basis, and beg with pipes and cobras. Kalbelias also go to towns and live in squatter settlements or tents, sometimes for extended periods of time, in order to earn or to beg for money and goods.

At times of drought, rural areas suffer not only from a shortage of water, but from a shortage of money too, because the majority of villagers derive their income directly or indirectly, from agriculture. Therefore they have less money

or goods to donate to beggars and less need of Kalbelias to work as agricultural labourers. It is especially at times like this that the ability of Kalbelias to move to towns, if necessary taking the whole household to stay in squatter settlements where they have customary rights or relatives with whom they can stay, or even camp in tents in city streets, stands them in good stead. They have an advantage over sedentary people who lack a nomadic network and a spread of economic strategies.

#### 1:6 SQUATTER SETTLEMENTS

Squatters settle on patches of wasteland inside the city or near an industrial development, anywhere people hope to earn a living. Squatter settlements are inhabited by many castes who cluster together on their own portion of the site. People are eager to gain customary rights to stay in these places because there are more chances to earn money in or near Jaipur (or in other cities). In the four squatter settlements in Jaipur I often encountered Kalbelias first met many miles away in their rural home village or a camp where they were visiting friends or relatives.

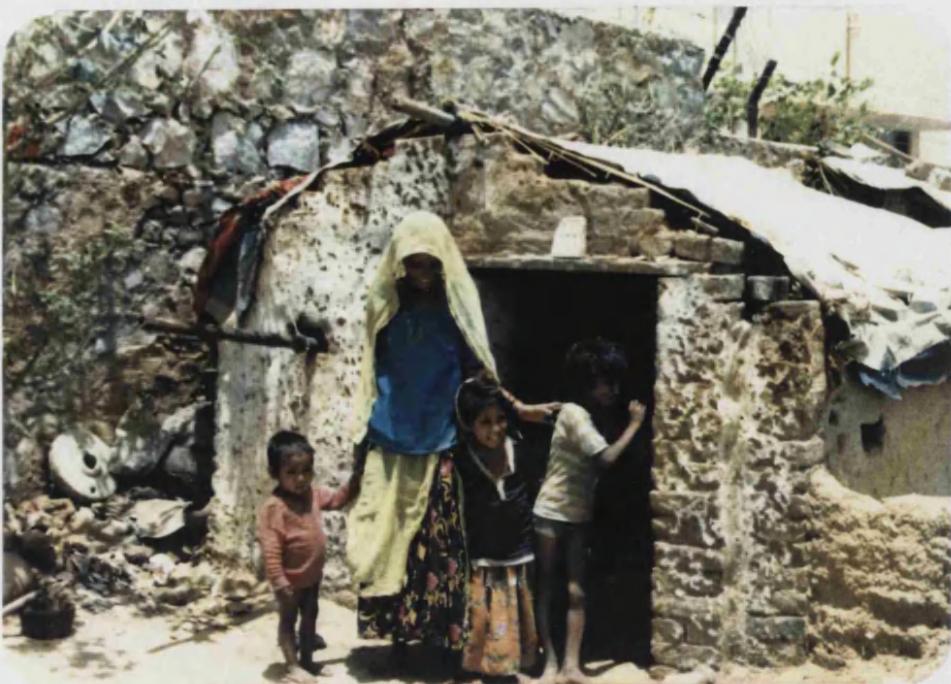
The Railway *kachchi basti* in Jaipur is a squatter settlement illegally sited on railway property. Mud huts belonging to the Kalbelias, even smaller than those in the villages, and a few tents brought by visitors face the railway line, about thirty feet away. Alongside is a private school for the children of the *kachchi basti* run by a Brahmin woman teacher. Steam trains frequently pass and there is no fence to prevent children wandering on to the railway line or adults crossing to the nearest 'hotel' which serves tea, coffee and fizzy drinks.

Although the Railway *kachchi basti* looks to be a higgledy-piggledy collection of mud huts, once inside, its

neat winding lanes are cleaner than the streets of Jaipur, which sometimes run with streams of urine. The huts cluster together because of lack of space, and consist of mud walls and thatched roofs, and last about five years. They cost between three and five hundred rupees to build (approximately fifteen to twenty-five pounds) which is considered expensive, but in Jaipur materials and labour costs are high. Huts constructed entirely of sticks last no longer than two years. There is no electricity, but water is available. Although the City authorities have destroyed the settlement twice, the squatters rebuilt their huts and eventually the City authorities capitulated and provided water pumps. (see below).

Fifteen huts in the settlement belong to Kalbelia families, mainly from the villages of Ramalpura and Kanoda, although people come from other villages or even from Marwar if they have relations among the core families who own huts. Other castes in the squatter settlement are Bhopa, who traditionally sing religious songs and display pictures depicting characters and events from the scriptures and mythology, Gujar, traditionally pastoral nomads, Berua, who are house builders, Chamar, leather workers, Mena, one of the tribal groups of Rajasthan, many of whom now work as policemen or make home-made alcohol which they sell to other castes, Bhat puppeteers, Rajputs, the warrior caste, and Daroga, whom the Kalbelias say used to be the guards of the Rajput royal family. "We all live peacefully together in this place. There is no objection to members of any caste living here providing there is enough space," the Kalbelias say.

The Railway *kachchi basti* has an informal joint *panchayat* (council) which decides on important matters affecting everyone living there, for example petitioning the city authorities for water pumps to be installed.



A house in a squatter settlement



Kalbelia women often stay in a tent in one of Jaipur's squatter settlements in order to give birth in one of the City's hospitals.

Kalbelias who regularly stay in Jaipur, at the Railway *kachchi basti*, work at luxury hotels showing cobras, python and mongoose. Other Kalbelias come to Jaipur to work and stay in the *kachchi basti* for a few weeks, if they have the right to do so by virtue of custom or kinship ties, or for a few days, on sufferance. Sometimes a Kalbelia family stay there in a tent so the woman can give birth in the City hospital. Some Kalbelias came to Jaipur from Marwar when water in their area was in such short supply that it was sold in the streets of the nearby city, and cattle were dying for lack of water.

Teenage boys spend school holidays in the squatter settlement, or go there after leaving their school in their home base village, and live under the tolerant care of relatives. They beg with snake-pipes and cobras at a tourist spot, or work as *rikshawales*, and spend their earnings on visits to the cinema. Manendra Nath said, "Living in cities in places like these *kachchi bastis*, teenage boys are mending their ways and moving in society with modern people. They should try to teach their older parents about modern society and then progress will be made in our caste."

But the general rule is that visitors may stay only a few days. It is not in the interests of people already living there for the settlement to become so cramped and overcrowded that disagreements break out, perhaps leading to fights or behaviour attracting the attention of the police or the Railway or the City authorities. People therefore acquire informal rights (not enforceable in State courts), to a place in these settlements by virtue of custom and kinship ties. The squatters hope the illegal settlement is but a precursor to an eventual legitimated and allocated settlement, as at Krishnapura Marg.

The Sabzi *kachchi basti* by the side of a main road in Jaipur, is another settlement of huts. It had formerly been much used by Kalbelias - Nanda Nath mentioned his marriage took place there, but this squatter settlement is now inhabited almost solely by Bhat puppet-makers. Most of the Kalbelias have moved from there to Krishnapura Marg, a tented *kachchi basti* in the process of being divided into Government-allocated house-plots. Although Nanda Nath's family have been allocated a plot in Krishnapura Marg on the outskirts of Jaipur, and plan to build a hut, other squatters are merely taking advantage of a temporary encampment in Jaipur close to a large population among whom they hope to earn more money than in their own rural village. They will not be allocated a house-plot, because they already have one in a rural village, although one or two people were hoping to somehow gain a second plot.

Krishnapura Marg is wasteland at present, with a large tented encampment. I visited it in the cold season when the tents were reinforced with plastic. Beside Kalbelias, Chabdivale (basket makers) were camping there. There were also large numbers of Gaduliya Lohars (nomadic blacksmiths) living there, recognisable by their distinctively carved and decorated bullock carts.

Gulab Marg is a large tented squatter settlement near to the busy commercial centre of Jaipur. It is inhabited by many castes whose tents are set out in neat lines, each caste in its own section. The same rules of residence apply as at the Railway *kachchi basti*: families have customary rights to stay and other people are admitted temporarily on sufferance if they have relatives or good friends there. Herds of donkeys wander around, and packs of wild dogs, normally timid of humans, are uncharacteristically aggressive. This camp has a reputation for being rough and

under frequent police surveillance. Reputedly lots of alcohol is consumed there, even by women.

If material possessions in Kalbelia hamlets are sparse, then their huts or tents in the squatter settlements of Jaipur are virtually empty. A string cot, quilts, a tin trunk and cooking utensils, the *bin* (snake pipes) and *jholi* (bag to carry snake basket and donations) stowed away in the eaves of the thatched roof, and the basket containing the cobra, is all most Kalbelias have. Yet Panita Nath's family tent in Gulab Marg is piled high with bulging suitcases. They contain costumes, because Panita Nath is a full-time entertainer at luxury hotels, and leader of a government-sponsored entertainment group. His group has travelled abroad and he has photographs of himself posing with Jacqueline Kennedy and Ronald and Nancy Reagan, taken when he went to Washington as part of the Festival of India. Closer to home, Panita Nath and his group were booked that year to entertain at the 'Tourist Village' at the Pushkar Camel Fair.

Many Kalbelia families staying at the Gulab Marg encampment own houses built on land they purchased twenty-five years ago, in the centre of the village of Manoli, which I had visited. Knowing Panita Nath had a house in this village, I asked his wife whether she preferred living in a cramped tent at Gulab Marg or in her own comparatively spacious house in Manoli. To my surprise she said, "I prefer the tent. Here there is less housework and always something to see."

The Gulab Marg encampment is a "permanent" squatter settlement, in that it has been in use for many years, although it is tented, and huts have not been built. The camps proper are temporary stopping places.

## 1: 7 CAMPS

Kalbelia tents are usually make-shift structures of rags and quilts on a framework of long sticks bent over into a 'Gypsy Bender' shape. Because Rajasthan is hot most of the year even at night-time, camping is scarcely more of a hardship than sleeping outside a mud or stone hut in the village. They adjust the coverings of the tent throughout the day so the interior is shaded, and a breeze can blow through. The tent can easily be made larger or smaller by substituting longer or shorter sticks for the framework and by adding or taking away coverings. In the rare event of rain, the Kalbelias tie a canvas cover or plastic sheet over the quilts that make up the tent covering.

Camps include tents pitched on patches of wasteland, building sites and even on the pavements of city streets if there is no squatter settlement in which Kalbelias can stay for a few days or weeks while they earn money or attend to a specific purpose, such as a *panchayat*. The authorities do not usually object to the erection of tents, even on a city pavement, and tiny fires are lit and food cooked whilst pedestrians gingerly walk round the encampments. Kalbelias do not need to camp in the streets of Jaipur because they have squatter settlements to which most of them are able to go, but in Ajmer, some Kalbelias camp in the main streets of the town.

There is nearly always a group of Kalbelias camped by a railway crossing on the outskirts of Jaipur. They beg from vehicles forced to stop and wait while trains go across the level crossing. These Kalbelias come from Harjipura village, a short bus or bicycle ride away, but to save the daily cycle-ride or bus-fare, they pitch tents behind the row of trees by the side of the road. While the men beg, the women hang their babies' cradles in the trees and watch the world go by, or sew winter quilts.



Moving camp



Camping near road-works.

Kalbelia families camped in tents by a shrine one kilometre away from their houses in their hamlet near to the village of Chandiwar, in order to work on a road under construction. This section of the road was being built mainly by women of various castes, from nearby Chandiwar. A few Kalbelia men also worked on the road, while others continued with their normal jobs, returning to the tents each night, instead of to their one-room stone houses in the Kalbelia hamlet. But some men are always left to guard the encampment. "There are bad men in the world. That is why some of us men must always be near, to protect the women." As well as the donkeys which transported the tents, they brought along their goats and buffalos from the hamlet to take advantage of the grazing, although it was sparse.

When I went to the small town of Bijainagar in Mewar in 1984, there was an encampment of Kalbelias outside the town on an unofficial colony growing up near a new factory. Some Kalbelias came by train or bus from outlying villages, to join other Kalbelias living in Bijainagar and beg from the townsfolk on the festival of *Nagpanchmi*. I visited again in 1987 when there was only one family remaining, living in a hut they had built themselves.

People from many castes camp in tents at the time of the annual Camel Fair, held in Pushkar, but because of the drought people were unable to provide animals with food and water, so few camels were bought or sold in 1987. But the tourist hotels were full, and Pushkar is a holy town, so crowds of people made a pilgrimage there and bathed in the sacred lake and visited the Brahma and other temples.

There were fewer Kalbelias than usual at Pushkar. The previous year tourists were frightened by the cobras and Kalbelias were instructed by the State Minister for Tourism



Making a new cot in camp.



Camping in the streets of Ajmer

to leave their cobras at home unless they had special permission. So most Kalbelias were from villages just a short bus-ride away from Pushkar, and only there to enjoy the Fair, although Panita Nath's folk-song and dance group was entertaining at the Tourist Village. They stayed in large tents supplied by the Tourist Board. During the day, other Kalbelias who had official permission, showed their cobras and python in the grounds of the tented (but luxury) Tourist Village alongside Qalandars with their dancing bear and monkeys. The Qalandars are Muslim non-pastoral nomads (Berland, 1982:74) and some live in tents next to the Kalbelias' hamlet at Harjipura.

The Kalbelias also camp at Galta, a conglomeration of temples, a short bus journey from Jaipur. Here for just a few days each year, they pitch tents on the paths leading to the temples, and beg and worship. It is also a sociable occasion when Kalbelia families meet and exchange news and gossip. Some do not even bother to bring tents, just spread out a few quilts by the side of the path and light cooking fires.

At Sanganir, outside Jaipur, the camp was small. The Kalbelias were there to attend a *panchayat*. There were three or four tents and a couple of donkeys. A formal *panchayat* held to settle disagreements is always held on neutral ground, not in the villages of the main protagonists to the case. Although core members of the *panchayat* intended to stay several days, others made their points then went home, or visited the nearby tea-stall. Some Kalbelias left to go begging and returned from a day in near-by Jaipur or the local village burdened with bags of donations and provisions purchased at the shops or in the vegetable market.

At Kejigar there was an encampment of Kalbelias and *Chakkivale* (grinding-stone makers), travelling and camping together because there were marriage alliances between them. Grinding-stones are transported on the backs of donkeys which can only travel one or one and half kilometres each day with such heavy loads. Then a camp is made and for a few days the grinding stone-makers fan out to sell to nearby village households. While they have grinding-stones to sell, they travel on, make camp, and follow the same procedure until all their grinding-stones are sold. The Kalbelias found it convenient to travel with these *Chakkivale* relatives-by-marriage because they too, wanted to visit the same places where they hoped they would receive donations of food, money or clothes in return for showing their cobras.

Kalbelias usually follow familiar routes which are decided by money-making opportunities, grazing for the animals and the distance to a well or other source of water. If they need to leave a message for absent caste-mates they tell a friendly villager where they are going, or leave a pattern of stones in the ashes of the cooking fire indicating the direction of the next camp.

'These traditional Gypsy coded messages can be composed of twigs, cloth, or iron scraps combined with stones or other material blending in with the specific setting; in them Gypsies can code most elaborate information like arrest, death, tabor size and camping place,' (Kaminski, 1987:344 in Rao (ed) 1987).

Compared to Gypsies in other countries, Kalbelias live a relatively unmolested existence. They never mentioned any use for the patrin other than to indicate the direction in which they are to travel.

#### 1:8 SOCIALIZATION

Kalbelias say there is no difference in the

socialisation of boys and girls under the age of about ten years, or even up to marriage. But girls are not so often sent to school and when they are, rarely stay on after they are ten years old, (see Robertson, 1990:3-8). Boys have considerably more freedom, with opportunities to ramble around the village and beyond, and to go to the cinema with male friends. Girls usually stay with their mother and other women, who do not venture very far beyond their house. Although the women say, "Girls have nothing to do until they are married," I saw them helping with housework and even building work. One girl was helping her aged parents build their stone house. She mixed cement and carried it up the hill in a container on her head, while her slightly older brother lounged about and refused to do anything. She also carried water up to the house from the village pump some distance away. Boys, although encouraged to help, are able to escape household chores without much scolding.

"After ten years old, girls are taught to sweep and fetch water and to look after the cattle, sheep and goats. A boy goes to school and is taught how to be a labourer. The main reason girls are not educated is because then her parents must find an educated boy for her to marry which is difficult. That is why it is thought to be wasteful to spend money on her education," (Tejini).

Girls receive much love and affection from their fathers, brothers and other male relatives, but boys are considered more important. Many married men when I asked about their children, proudly reeled off names and ages of sons but did not mention daughters unless I particularly asked, which I did after first being puzzled by large numbers of families apparently with vast numbers of sons but no daughters.

Affection is shown to all family members and friends by smiles, eye contact and friendly voices, but public physical contact is displayed mainly between fathers, sons, brothers and male friends. By the time they are ten years old, girls have learned to avoid unrelated males and begin to immerse themselves in domestic duties. Later on, marriage marks the beginning of a period of service and respect to her husband and his family. Husband and wife relations are difficult to observe, for they do not usually sit or talk together in public, and it is difficult to know who is married to whom without specifically enquiring.

Female status in Kalbelia society is inferior to male, in line with women's position in Hindu India generally, even though some couples appear idyllically happy together and treat each other as equals in private. But Bhadra Nath commented, "Women in my family cannot even wear sandals in front of us men. They have to go barefoot! And a boy should have a *guru*. This is essential, otherwise he has no chance of going to heaven. But a girl should serve only her husband, because he is like God. If she is a good wife, her heavenly future is assured, although she can have a *guru* if she chooses."

Women veil themselves in front of unrelated males from within the caste or from other castes who may be visiting the camp or village. Some women are so accustomed to showing respect by sitting on the floor or ground in the presence of their own menfolk, they automatically do this even if a casual male caller arrives who is not of their caste. A male journalist, a member of the Bhopa caste, called when I was entertaining a group of Kalbelia women and there was a mass slide to the floor on their part. Although he entreated them to sit on the chairs, they would not do so until he departed. When I took a party of children to a local motel for fizzy drinks and bananas, the only girl present was

ordered by one of the boys to vacate her seat so he could sit in it. Young boys are indulged by everyone and girls appear to accept boys as superior beings. Even quite young boys order teenage girls and women around and expect to be obeyed. In some villages women are virtually ignored, or treated like servants. An old woman commented, "Usually women understand very little and speak very little, even in their own homes."

Girls and young women rarely go outside the village without a male escort. "Some men from other castes are not good," explained one of the Kalbelia men. Women from many other castes are similarly restricted, but because some Gypsy castes such as Qalandar, and Kanjar collude in the prostituting of their womenfolk (Berland, 1982: 82; 126), the Kalbelias, until recently nomadic themselves, and even now still resorting to tents from time to time, wish to seclude and protect their females as much as is practicable and to distance themselves from any notion that others may make free with their women.

A few enterprising older women have carved out important roles for themselves as healers to members of other castes, or as emergency removers of snakes from people's houses. They initially depended on their parents' or husband's encouragement in order to "Carry out these services in society." These women are treated as equals by their husbands at least in private, although this may have almost as much to do with their age as their ability to occasionally earn money. Most older women content themselves with light domestic work and helping with the rearing of their grandchildren.

It is unusual to find younger women who have the opportunity or desire to do more than care for their husband and children and do the housework, but Lokavya, a woman of

child bearing age learned all about snakes and how to catch them because she was interested. But she never works as a snake-charmer. Her outside occupations are road construction work when available and sporadic agricultural labour on other people's land.

Kalbelia women and girls were spoken of by the men as child-like domestic drudges: "They have no practise in talking to strangers, and in any case they know nothing. Women's only religion is making food! She is under the control of men and cannot go away from the village. I am often away for several days or weeks, but if my wife leaves the village without my permission I may kick her out and marry again. But I do allow her to attend devotional meetings or go out for some good purpose," (Daivya Nath).

This was echoed by Bindu. "Before marriage a woman cannot go out of the village but after her marriage she may go out with her husband. She cannot do any kind of paid employment outside the home without asking him. But when her children are grown up and married she has more freedom. Then she can go out to the market alone and visit her parents in their village alone, she can go on the bus or train alone. But as to finances, I still have to ask my husband if I want to buy a large article."

Once children are born and the husband no longer a stranger, a woman may achieve a respected position in her husband's eyes, at least in private. At the beginning of her marriage a woman veils herself in public and in the presence of her husband, but as they become used to each other she ceases to veil herself and "Slowly she can stop sitting on the floor and instead sit on the cot or chair even when her husband is there. Once they have been married some time they become used to each other," (Manendra Nath). Women may even exercise considerable influence. "Sometimes a group of women

quarrel and make their husbands also quarrel with others in the village, and encourage them to move somewhere else. Ladies have a hand in their families, we have these powers which are important. We can encourage our husbands to leave a certain place or quarrel with another family," (Bindu).

But in public a Kalbelia wife is a near-invisible veiled figure whose voice is rarely heard. Males generally are fond, even devoted to their mothers, and old ladies are well cared for and shown respect and attention to their comfort. Girls usually move away from their childhood home after marriage and often become very attached to their mother-in-law who helps them in childbirth, although Manendra Nath commented "No-one cares for these poor females, only God cares for them."

Once boys reach the ages of eleven or twelve years, they avoid unrelated Kalbelia females, unless they are old ladies. My son's teenage male friends were unable to speak to girls and women in the villages where we stayed unless they were related, and they also avoided looking at them or taking undue notice of them. Bhadra Nath explained he could not help me interview young women at Kanoda village because they were not of his *gotra* (patrilineage), but Chandra Nath could speak to them because they were members of the same *gotra*. Later Bhadra Nath asked a question of an older woman. This was permissible, he said, because she was much older than him and he was making an enquiry, not initiating a conversation.

As women become older they have vastly greater freedom and fewer duties. "I do any work, like sorting this grain. I go to Koti where I have a camel, to feed him. I am old now so I rest in the day time. My family is very scattered and they live in many villages. We visit each other and go to Ajmer and Marwar and Delhi for a marriage ceremony or a

funeral. We ladies can go anywhere, but not to laugh with men or to take gifts from them. No one will object to us going to meet relatives, to a fair or anywhere else. Usually we go in a ladies group, singing and dancing and we buy ornaments, necklaces, earrings and cosmetics, sweets, sugar cane or water melon according to season. We like the entertainment and visiting the Temple at the Hanuman Fair and the spiritual satisfaction. Ladies have fasts for religious reasons, so we do a religious ceremony in the day time and tell a religious story also. Sometimes everyone sings religious songs and we play music throughout the night."

The focus of intense affection and social interaction is within the family and sub-caste, although there are friendships outside the caste arising when a working situation has thrown people together, or when Kalbelia children meet children from other castes at school. But there is a marked preference and approval for friendship between people of the same gender and within the sub-caste rather than with outsiders.

Friendship is highly-valued. "A friend is more than a brother! If I have made a mistake or have an enemy then I will ask my brother for help, but my brother will first consider what I did wrong. But a friend will never think about that! A friend will help, always help!" If friends quarrel, others try to effect a reconciliation. Although it may be true that a brother is likely to enquire more closely than a friend into the nature of the trouble for which help has been requested, as a sub-caste, Kalbelias stick together. However much a person may be criticized within the sub-caste, when people from other castes are there, Kalbelias present a united front.

Kalbelia women sometimes have friends outside their sub-caste, but because of their limited opportunities to go out and meet new people, these friendships are limited to women living nearby whom they meet at the pump, or work with side by side in the fields of a local farmer who has employed them as temporary labour.

Cross-sex friendship either within or with someone outside the sub-caste is difficult because of the restrictions on communication between unrelated males and females after the age of ten years. But the institution of religious brother and sister (*dharm bhai* and *dharm bahin*) may overcome this problem. A male and a female decide to adopt each other as brother and sister, after which customary restrictions do not apply. All duties and rights are the same as between real brother and sister.

Not many people in the Kalbelia sub-caste have a *dharm bhai* or *dharm bahin* from within the sub-caste, but a number have these fictive kinship relations with people outside the caste. Rajata Nath made me his religious sister, and Bora Nath has a religious sister in the Rebari caste (camel keepers) because he is close friends with her brother. Limitations on simple friendship outside the sub-caste and the institution of *dharm bhai/dharm bahin* are mediated by caste distinctions. Kalbelias are low caste Shudras, so high caste Brahmins or Kshatriyas, for example, are unlikely to enter into fictive kinship relationships with Kalbelias. The Kalbelias also practise caste distinctions. I asked a Kalbelia parent of their reaction if their child should become close friends with an Untouchable child. His sombre reply was, "That would not be good."

A religious brother and sister are considered to be as true brother and sister. Their children may not marry, for instance, and a *dharm bhai* and *dharm bahin* are expected to

visit each other and make the appropriate presentations on occasions such as marriage, Holi, and Divali and on the festival of *raksha bandhan* itself, when sisters visit each of their brothers and present him with a coconut and tie a charm on his wrist to remind him of his duties towards her. Such duties include the provision of *mayra* (presents) each time she gives birth, and of help should she be widowed or in need when her parents are old or dead. After a sister (*bahin*), or *dharm bhai* (religious sister) has presented a coconut and tied a thread on her brother's wrist, he presents her with new clothes and an auspicious sum of money (eleven, twenty-one, one hundred and fifty-one rupees: always an odd number, which conveys a notion of increase).

Kalbelias do not appear to attach much importance to *raksha bandhan*, although they say *dharm bhai* and *dharm bahin* will meet in the next life. "They should not be greedy or cheat each other, they should trust each other. It is not possible to break *dharm bhai-dharm bahin* relationships, even by God. Even if there are some confusions or disagreements between them, according to *dharm* (religion) they are still brother and sister," (Manendra Nath).

In the next chapter I explore the socio-religious orientation of the Kalbelias and how their identity as Nathas informs and affects their lives.

## CHAPTER TWO

### SOCIO-RELIGIOUS ORIENTATION OF THE KALBELIAS

#### 2: 1 THE KALBELIAS AS JOGI NATHS

In this chapter I show how snake charming and soliciting aims are part of the Kalbelias' religious identity as Nath, the way this affects their lives and outlook, and how others view them.

Although the Kalbelias have good relations and sometimes friendships with members of other castes, where they are not known personally they are often spoken of in terms of unflattering stereotypes, perhaps because of their somewhat mysterious traditional occupation. Certainly snake charmers are nearly always depicted in folk tales as being cruel people who by means of *mantra* (magic spells) and drugs, exercise an irresistible power over the snake (Vogel, 1972: 133), often believed to be the representation of a God or an incarnation of an ancestor. Because they are Jogi Nath, a tantrik sect with an ambivalent, not to say sinister reputation, the Kalbelias are popularly believed to be expert black magicians:

'A sorcerer is believed to be a Nath. His wife is also regarded as a sorceress. Both of them... practise *Abichar*... (black magic: an incantation to destroy). If a newly built house collapses without any ostensible cause, or if cattle suffer from a sudden obstinate disease, it is attributed to the sorcery of the Nath, who is supposed to have been hired to employ his art against the owner... He is not dreaded and avoided like a witch but they secretly fear him and avoid the possibility of offending him.' (Gupta 1979: 192-3).

References to Nath and their cultic practices and tantrik propensities in Mayer (1960: 238), Carstairs (1983: 37-8), Gupta (1979), Briggs (1982: 274), and Crooke

(1972: 158-9), describe rites which are *tantrik*, well known, and believed to be thoroughly disreputable, although it is open to question how widely practised.

Hinduism forms the back-cloth to the lives of the Kalbelias. As Jogi Naths, Kalbelia men use 'Nath' after their given name. Nath means 'Lord' and the Kalbelias say it indicates the bearer is a follower of one of the twelve *Nath panths* (ways, sects) founded by the Nine Naths (*tantrik* masters) and their disciples. Kalbelia women are not called 'Nath' because the Kalbelia men say, "According to the Upanishads a woman is not a full human being because she is unable to control her senses."

Shiva was the one god of the Hindu triad of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva who came to be described as the *Mahayogi* (the Supreme Yogi), (Ghurye, 1964: 115). The descriptions of Shiva (and Rudra) exhibit, both as to form and practice, certain beliefs of the yogi. Rudra is an earlier guise of Shiva who eats flesh, blood and marrow and is fiery and fierce. He frequents cemeteries, performs awful rites there, and is terrible. He is the chief of *bhutas* (demons) and is served by *bhutas* and *pisachas* (demons and troublesome ghosts) and is called Bharava (Briggs, 1982: 157-9) or Bhaironji, whom the Kalbelias worship.

The Kalbelias' 'mythical charter' concerning their occupation as snake-charmers, and the origin of their caste, is derived from stories of their guru, Kanipa, and Kanipa's relationship with the famous Gorakh Nath (see Appendix I). These stories explain how they became nomadic and why they earn their living with poisonous snakes. The Kalbelias know, and many other people believe, that they are not merely wanderers who display snakes for a living, but that a whole socio-religious identity attaches to them. This factor is of the utmost importance to the Kalbelias in the way they

regard themselves and how it affects their occupation and concepts of selfhood. To donate to a Jogi Nath is, for many people, a meaningful religious act. On the other hand, a donation may also be inspired by pity, embarrassment or even fear, (Gupta, 1979: 193).

Although their Nath identity as followers of their *guru*, Kanipa, informs the identity of each individual and designates the parameters of the sub-caste vis-a-vis itself and outsiders, for the majority of Kalbelia men and to a lesser extent women, their Jogi Nath practises centre on the acquisition of their own personal (living) *guru*, and learning and repeating *mantras*. *Mantras* are words of power, and there is a *mantra* for every conceivable activity and article, although only a few devout people know very many. "Mantra is the only way to God," they told me, and there was no sign that any of the sub-caste, either collectively or individually indulged in the infamous sexual rituals of the *tantrik* left-hand path.

Outsiders' opinions of the Kalbelias are based on popular conceptions of Jogi Nath's mostly mediated through stories of the famous Gorakh Nath, (who is not the *guru* of the Kalbelia sub-caste). Stories of magical *siddhis* (powers, accomplishments) are even depicted in comic books. These *siddhis* are dependent upon the perfect technique of the *yogi* or the correct recitation of *mantras*, and not upon the moral rectitude of the practitioner. Therefore a Nath is sometimes perceived as a sinister figure. Kalbelias were represented by my first landlord and his wife, both university teachers, as black magicians. This aura tends to cling to all Kalbelias, unless personally known, so far as outsiders to the sub-caste are concerned. But Kalbelias themselves say black magic is a thing of the past and make no claim to be adepts. In fact they were surprised and seemed rather

gratified when I repeated some of the hair-raising allegations made about them.

By "concentrating", "meditating" and "realizing *samadhi*" (see footnote) in respect to a certain object or an entire class of objects, the *yogi* acquires occult powers (*siddhis*) in respect to the object or objects experienced, (Eliade, 1969: 85). The following examples are by no means exhaustive: To possess irresistible will and obtain anything desired, or alternately, to have perfect control over or suppression of all desires, (Bagchi, 1956: 273), clairaudience, clairvoyance, power to transmute iron and other base metals into gold by smearing with the *yogi*'s urine and excreta (Eliade, 1969: 130). To project mind-made images of oneself, pass through solid things, walk on water, fly through the air, touch the sun and moon, ascend into the highest heavens, (Bagchi, 1956: 273). To enter the bodies of snakes, demons, men, women or deities, and return at will. To enter more than one body at a time, leaving his own, and control these several bodies whilst retaining his own individuality in his own body. To become stronger than an elephant, bolder than a lion, (Briggs, 1982: 271). The ability to exercise complete control over 'women, husbands and kings', to have powers of attraction, immobilization, pacification, cause death, sow enmity, (Kakar, 1982: 179-80). To reduce oneself to the size of an atom, or expand to the dimensions of the cosmos, become as light as a cobweb, or as heavy as the Himalayas. To be transported anywhere in a flash, raise the dead to life, become invisible. To obtain

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Footnote: Eliade comments "The meanings of the term *samadhi* are: union, totality, absorption in, complete concentration of mind; conjunction." However he prefers to translate it as "enstasis," "stasis," "conjunction", (1969: 77, footnote 79).

irresistible eloquence that renders opponents answerless, to have congress with beings on other planes of existence, success with women and the ability to sexually satisfy any number of them. To enter into the body of another man in order to enjoy his wives, to seduce with impunity any virgin, to multiply his body, and simultaneously have intercourse with hundreds of women, (Walker, 1982: 46-7).

To have the power of subjugating all and establishing one's own superiority over others, (Bagchi, 1956: 273). To change the course of nature, having complete mastery of the elements and authority over the states of existence, (Briggs, 1982: 271). To have complete knowledge of all previous births, understand all the mysteries of the universe, to see all things and be familiar with the processes of the mind. The *yogi*... obtains full intuitive knowledge of whatever he concentrates upon, (Briggs, 1982: 272). Intuitive knowledge is deemed superior to that gained in any other way such as studying. It becomes apparent after reading this list and after glancing through Eliade (1969) and finding even more *siddhis*, that nothing is withheld from the *siddha* (adept) should he so choose.

One thing puzzled me. The stories Kalbelias tell prominently feature Gorakh Nath, yet the Kalbelias seem to know little of Kanipa, their own Nath guru. They say "Others may not know Kanipa but WE know him!" This seems more a protestation of loyalty rather than strict truth. Kanipa plays a minor role in their stories and published information about him is scanty compared to that of Gorakh Nath who was believed to possess many magical powers and is well known in North India, even outside the Nath sect. The stories indicate rivalry between Kanipa and Gorakh Nath, who represent rival schools within the *yogi/tantrik* tradition. The school of Jellander Nath, the *guru* of Kanipa (the Kalbelias' *guru*) represents the more ancient Shaivism

derived from Kapila, while Gorakh Nath represents the newer school of *hatha yoga*, says Biman Nath. Gorakh Nath's behaviour toward his own *guru*, Machindra Nath (see Appendix I) is not in the tradition of respect for a *guru*, and although in popular stories he sets out to rescue Machindra Nath from the clutches of *tantrik* women, he appears to have acquired many of the attributes of *tantrik sadhana* (means, practice) himself.

The Kalbelias say Kanipa refused to do magic. He secluded himself in the jungle and practised *samadhi*, which requires patience and dedication and leads to *moksha* (release from the endless cycle of rebirth). *Samadhi* is described in the *Yogatattva Upanishad* as realizing the paradoxical situation in which the *jivatma* (individual soul) and the *paramatma* (universal spirit) are placed from the moment when all distinction between them has ceased. Once *samadhi* is obtained, the *yogi* can choose to be absorbed into the *parabrahman* or retain his body and stay on earth, possessing all the *siddhis*, (Eliade, 1969: 131). Few *yogis* are believed to have succeeded in passing beyond the condition of the *siddha* (the 'magician' or 'god') because once the *siddhis* have been used, the *yogi* remains stuck at the level of a mere 'magician', (Eliade, 1969: 88-9). This presumably must have happened to Gorakh Nath, because he succumbed to the temptation of using his magical abilities.

*Tantrik yoga* propounded by teachers such as Gorakh Nath was regarded by orthodox Brahmins with suspicion as being harmful, or at the least inessential, (Bharati, 1976: 288-9). What sets *tantrik* practise and belief apart from orthodox Hindu or Buddhist teaching, is its method, which is psycho-experimental rather than speculative, (Bharati, 1976: 31). Tantrism developed in the North-west, along the Afghan frontier, and in western Bengal. Kamrup in Assam, is the *tantrik* place par excellence according to Eliade (1969: 201-

2), and the stories of the Kalbelias, (see Appendix I). Tantrism first appeared in the 4th Century and by the 6th Century had swept through India and was assimilated in some form or other by all religions and sects; there is a Buddhist, Hindu and Jain Tantrism, (Eliade, 1969:200). It is essential for anyone following the tantrik path to be initiated by a *guru*, "the master who alone can communicate the secret esoteric doctrine, transmitting it 'from mouth to ear', (Eliade, 1969:207). Some Kalbelias are *gurus*.

The doctrinal texts called *tantras* or *shaktas* were written in Sanskrit or vernacular languages in India from AD 600 down to Middle Ages. Some are about philosophy, some about magic, or the science of sound. Some are notorious for employing erotic imagery, probably the reason why they are regarded as dangerous and/or heretical by the orthodox, (Bharati, 1976:289; Rawson, 1971:7). The aim of the *Nath siddha* is the attainment of a non-dual state through the attainment of immortality, in a perfect and divine body, (Das Gupta, 1956:297). The teaching of the *Naths* was a continuation of the tantrik synthesis, but the *Naths* introduced new theories in the sphere of *yoga*. *Naths* believe the microcosm is an echo of the macrocosm, and everything found in creation has a parallel in the body, (B. Bhattacharyya, 1956:269). Therefore the body can be, and should be, used to gain ultimate liberation.

Marco Polo, described the chugchi (*yogis*):

'who live one hundred and fifty or two hundred years... These people make use of a very strange beverage, for they make a potion of sulphur and quicksilver mixt together and this they drink twice every month. This, they say, gives them long life, and it is a potion they are used to take from their childhood,' (Yule, 1903),

And Bernier in 1723 wrote:

'There are ... strange people; they are almost constantly travelling hither and thither; they are men who scoff at everything, who take no care for anything, men possessing secrets, and who, the people say, even know how to make gold and to prepare mercury so admirably, that one or two grains taken in the morning restore the body to perfect health and so fortify the stomach that it digests very well and can hardly be satisfied,' (Bernier, 1723 Vol II:130, in Eliade, 1969: 275).

Jalandhari (Jellander Nath) and his *cheis* (pupil) Kanhu-pa (Kanipa), the *guru* of the Kalbelias, lived about the middle of the eleventh century, (Bagchi, 1956: 276) and both belong to the Paonath *panth*, and were followers of Mahadeo (Shiva), (Briggs, 1982: 67). In the song below, Kanipa says allegorically that his fascination for a Dom (sweeper) girl compelled him, a naked skull-bearing *yogi* mendicant, to relinquish the guise of a *yogi* dancer:

'O Dombi, you sell gut string and wicker ware;  
For your sake I have discarded the wardrobe of a  
dancer.  
O! you are a Dom girl and I am a Kapalika;  
For your sake I am wearing a chaplet of bones.'  
(Sen 1956: 287).

This reference to skull-bearing indicates that Kanipa was a Kapalika *yogi*, criticized for their permissive attitude towards caste distinctions, (M. & J. Stutley, 1977: 141). 'Dombi' is the name of one of the spiritual aptitudes, not necessarily an actual person.

The attitude of a *yogi* to the phenomenon of physical death is revealed in a song of Kanipa:

'The real Self in the state of neutrality is fulfilled  
in the Void;  
At the removal of the physical reflexes and mental  
attributes be not depressed  
Say how Kanha would not exist,  
When he is ever moving about, measuring the three  
worlds.  
A fool is sorry to see the end of a show;  
Do the breakers ever dry up the sea ?

Men, being ignorant, know not:  
They perceive not the fat existing in milk.  
In this existence one neither goes nor comes;  
With this outlook Kanha the *yogi* fellow disports.'  
(Sen 1956: 289).

The following song in Old Bengali also reinforces the tantrik/yogic synthesis.

'Kanha, a skull-bearing *yogi* is on his round.  
He walks through the township of the body in the  
same guise.  
The vowels and the consonants are the bell anklets  
at his feet;  
The sun and the moon are made the ear-rings.  
He covers himself with the ashes of love, hate and  
infatuation;  
Supreme emancipation is worn as a string of  
beads.'

(Sen, 1956: 289).

Skull is a reference to Kapalin, 'Adorned with skulls', a name of Shiva (M. & J. Stutley, 1977: 141). Township of the body refers to the belief that the cosmos, the world, is mirrored in one's own physical body. Vowels and consonants refer to *bij* (seed mantra), meaning everything in the universe is sonorous and has its own sound. The sun is quintessentially female, *shakti*, which resides in the *chakra* in the genital region. The moon is quintessentially male, Shiva, and resides in the *chakra* in the crown of the head. Certain tantrik exercises preserve the elixir of immortality in this *chakra* and effect the rise of *kundalini*, a spiral of energy which lies like a coiled snake at the base of the spine, from the genital region, and up through the other five main *chakras*, finally reaching the *chakra* in the crown of the head when the unification of the two polar principles of sun (*kundalini*, fire-energy) and moon (elixir of immortality) is effected, transcending all opposites, (see Walker, 1982, 42-3; Eliade, 1969, 134-5).

Ear-rings refer to the huge ear rings going through the centre, rather than the lobe of the ear which Briggs (1982: 1) supposed to be solely worn by Kanphatas but which are worn by some followers of other *panths* too. They refer also to Kanipa's membership of the Nath *panth*, *tantrik* methodology and aim of the co-mingling of the sun and moon as described above. Ashes represent Shiva, the *yogi* par excellence who is often depicted wearing these huge ear rings, and to the death in this life of a *yogi*, and the ephemeral nature of physical things. The *gurus* among the Kalbelias wear necklaces consisting of thirty-two, sixty-four, eighty-four, or one hundred and eight Rudraksha berries (of the tree *elaeocarpus ganitrus*, seeds of the badar or jujuh), said to be born from the eyes of Rudra, an aspect of Shiva, when he carries out his work of destruction, (G. S. Churye, 1964: 92). Some say the one hundred and eight berries represent each appearance of Shiva on earth, (Briggs 1982: 14).

The followers of the Nathas at first formed a monastic group, but later constituted a caste in Hindu society, (Pratyagatmananda, 1956: 224). It is possible to be an individual householder Nath, which does not necessitate the abandonment of caste, normal occupation or family, or, as in the case of the Kalbelias, to be born into a caste of Jogi Nathas mainly composed of householders. Some Kalbelias minister to their own and other castes as *gurus* (see below).

Because of their identity as Jogi Nathas, the Kalbelias say they have a dispensation from Lord Shiva himself which allows them to beg for their needs, (see Appendix I). But many find begging embarrassing and prefer to work:

'Yogis vow not to engage in trade and not to take employment. So they are supposed to beg for their food. But this is by no means the universal practice. It is estimated

that but one in hundred begs... As beggars they go from house to house crying "Aiskh, aiskh," (Briggs, 1982: 44).

Aiskh means 'not perceptible' hence formless, ie. the Absolute Brahma. When Nathapanthis meet, they greet each other with the word 'Adesh' which means injunction. The hail must be considered to be esoteric, (Ghurye, 1964: 106; 135). To greet fellow-Kalbelias in any other way can be an insult, (see chapter Eight). 'They take both money and food. Some put on special clothes when they go out to beg,' (Briggs, 1982: 44). Briggs is referring to the orange or ochre-coloured clothes worn by many holy people in India. The Kalbelias' turbans are almost always of the ochre colour which they claim is their right to wear as Naths. Wearing ochre-coloured clothes can be problematic:

"Ochre clothes can be worn by males from any age but they should be devotional and know the mantra. This mantra is common to all castes. The ochre clothes are only for men, not women, because they are not as devotional as men," (Giri Nath).

"If a person uses this mantra he will remove his sins of seventy-one years. If he is not using this mantra but is wearing the ochre cloth he will go to hell," (Dharendra Nath).

"If I continually wear the ochre shirt without knowing the mantra I will go to hell, but once or twice is OK. It is not an insult, because these clothes are given to Kalbelia people for devotional purposes. I don't know the right mantra so I don't usually wear the ochre clothes," (Bhadra Nath).

Kalbelias wear ochre-coloured clothes when begging with cobras and *bin* (snake pipe) in the streets or in hotels,

partly because they consider their work an act of devotion since Shiva himself gave them this occupation, and also for pragmatic reasons. "Tourists will not give me much money if I'm wearing ordinary clothes, but if I'm dressed in ochre-coloured clothes they give more, and so do the Indian people in the streets. But if I went to my village wearing ochre clothes, my *guru* or anybody else can enquire if I know the *mantra* and if I don't, they can demand I remove the ochre clothes. Not all people wearing ochre clothes are perfectly devotional, but all are begging anyway. Only five out of every hundred are really devotional but they get money by wearing ochre. I am devotional but I don't know all the *mantras*," (Bhadra Nath).

Perhaps because of the ascription of expertise in black magic, the Nath cult holds a marginal position on the fringes of Hinduism. Other indicators of this are their heterodox rites for the dead. Not merely that they bury, as opposed to cremate, their dead, not uncommon in Rajasthan, but that their death rites are popularly supposed to include a gathering (*kenchuli panth*) of people from different castes who meet together for a sexual ritual where the women's blouses are mixed up in a pot and then drawn out at random by men who then have sex with the woman to whom the blouse belongs, (O.P. Joshi; Sushila Zeitlyn: private communications).

Mayer mentions a funeral rite in connection with the goddess Hinglaj Devi which he was requested not to attend, where men and women from meat-eating and vegetarian castes, high caste and Harijan, sacrifice goats and eat in the same line, (1960: 238). This ties in with references by Carstairs. A villager told Carstairs that he was a member of a cult where these rites took place, (1983: 37). Carstairs did not link the place of this man's first contact with the cult, at Ahmedabad, as an indication that it was a Nath sect, but

according to Ghurye, in this town there is a Nath centre by the side of a cremation ground, (1964: 138).

Possibly sexual rituals take place in other Nath *panths*, but Kalbelias do not indulge in them, nor do they form any part of their death rituals (see chapter seven), or life. However it is widely known to outsiders that Kalbelias are Jogi Naths, and stories about sexual *tantrik* rituals of the left-hand path are often recounted and certainly inform public opinion about the Kalbelias. The lowly occupations of most Naths... and non-observance of the Brahmanic social order, (Sen, 1956: 281; B.Bhattacharyya, 1956: 269) and presumably in the Kalbelias' case, their nomadism and connection with snakes, thought to be uncanny as well as dangerous, confirm their marginal state, although their baskets of cobras in the context of religious and folk beliefs transform them into priests and their baskets of snakes into portable shrines, at least on the festival of Nagpanchmi.

However, Kalbelias, although Naths, are considerably influenced by the Brahmanic social order, seeing it as an ideal to be attained in a future life after rebirth in a Brahmin family. Kalbelias always have a Brahmin priest officiating at their marriages and they say disapprovingly, that the Jogi Nath sub-castes of *Chabdivale* (basket-makers), followers of Gorakh Nath, do not. Notwithstanding their common membership of the Nath *panth*, a Kalbelia will preferentially marry a female from the Kalbelia Jogi Nath sub-caste, although some Kalbelia men take wives from, but do not give wives to the other two Jogi Nath sub-castes, (see chapter six).

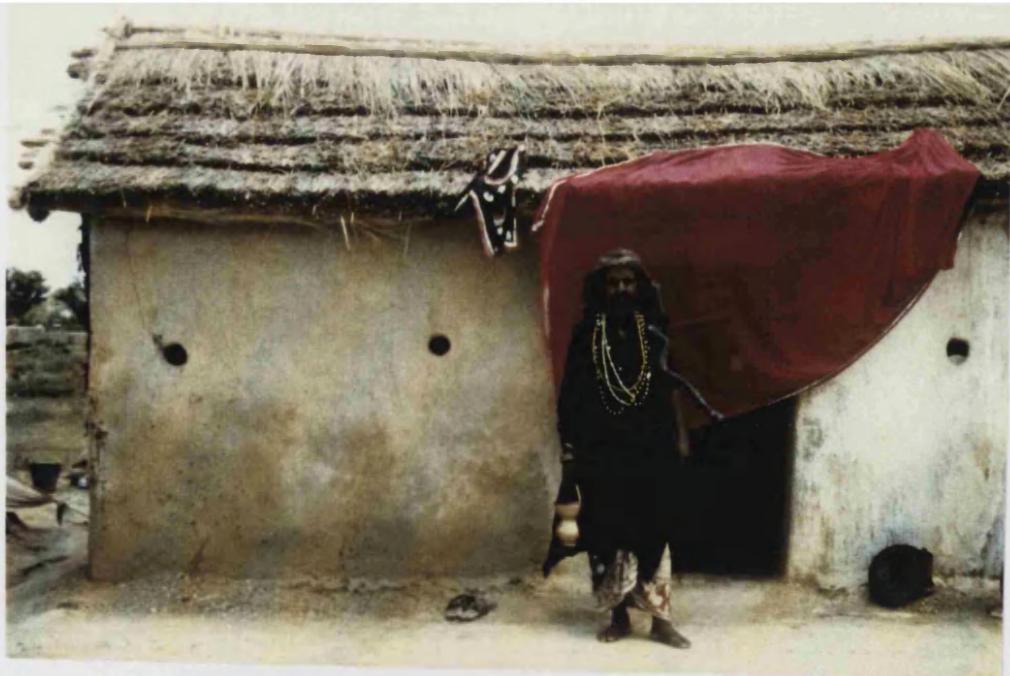
Although a common adherence to the Nath cultic ideology might be thought to forge bonds between the nomadic Kalbelias and their sedentary fellow-Naths, overcoming to

some degree the stigma experienced by non-pastoral nomadic groups (Kenrick and Puxon, 1972; Clebert, 1967), generally, it seems that sedentary Nathas prefer to ignore their nomadic cult-fellows: "Kalbelias are not important and never visit temples," said Dev Nath, resident priest at the Dev Narayan Temple in the holy town of Pushkar, in tones that brooked no opposition. But Kalbelias do visit temples, both as individuals and as families. Probably it is because they do not take along cobras and pipes they are not recognised as Kalbelias.

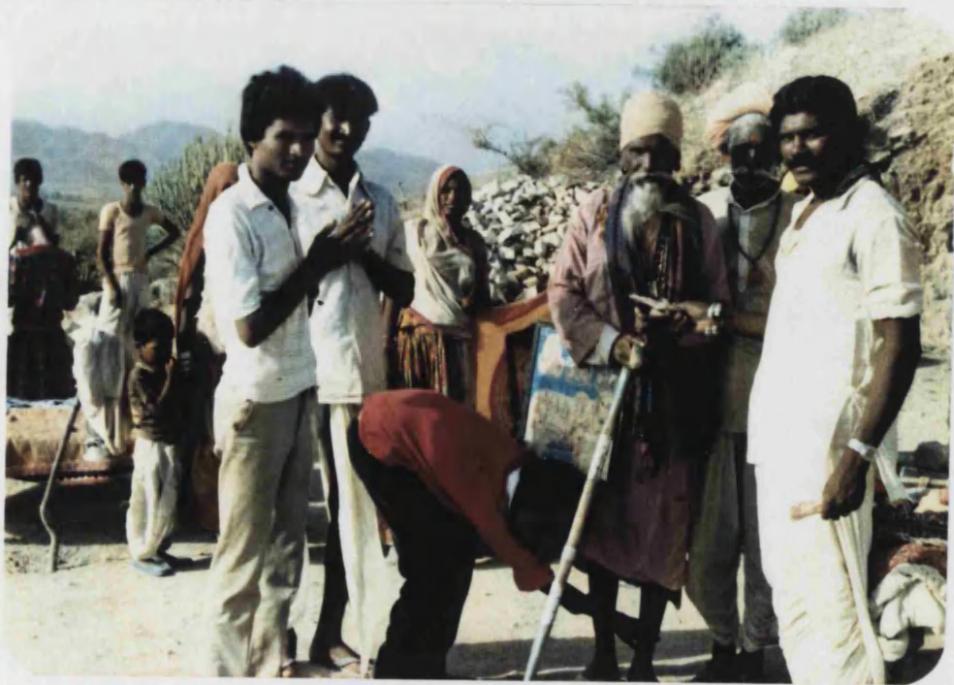
## 2:2 GURUS

Some Kalbelia men are gurus, sincere men who take a keen interest in spiritual and religious matters and have acquired some local fame as spiritual teachers. They have disciples drawn mainly from the Kalbelia sub-caste and occasionally from other castes. Some gurus work as healers too, particularly in cases of spirit possession (see chapter five), and also earn money by snake charming, or any of the other occupations followed by members of the sub-caste.

Although gurus are respected for their knowledge and it is accepted among Kalbelias that being devotional and being initiated by a guru is a good thing, not everyone has taken that step. "I have never spelled mantras, although my uncle knows every mantra and I have acquired a little knowledge from him," (Harita Nath). "I don't know any mantras. I sing only devotional songs according to books," (Rajata Nath), and from Maruga Nath, whose own father and uncle are both well-known gurus and healers, "I am not interested in tantra-mantra or improving my present life. I worship daily in the Shiva temple in our hamlet and my mind and heart are clear, that is why I am confident I will improve in my next life."



KALBELIA GURUS



The merit in having a *guru* is clear to those Kalbelias who are disciples. "Without a *guru* a person is *nugra* (not good). *Guru* teaches all kinds of moral duties, to be true in life, not to cheat, lie or steal, to do this kind of job, not that job. To try to keep good company, not bad. Not to just wait for visions, but to do your duty in the world and work without thought of profit. To be non-violent and not to kill any creature. To spell God's name in the morning. If a disciple is a criminal, *guru* will not punish him, but will give suggestions and instructions not to sin and commit crimes in this world. He will tell his disciple about the immaterial world," (Bhadra Nath).

Initiation from a *guru* destroys sin and gives spiritual knowledge via the divine *shakti* (power) in the *mantra* the *guru* whispers into the ear of the disciple. A *mantra* is so important that without it other ritual acts are said to be useless, and a *mantra* is no *mantra* at all unless imparted personally by a *guru* to a disciple, (Bharati, 1976: 189-90; 106). *Mantra* is a potent compelling force, a word of power, the fruit of which is *mantra-siddhi* (accomplishment, result). A person cannot be a *guru* unless and until his *mantra* has borne fruit, but the aim is to go beyond the *siddhis* which arise on the path to *samadhi*, and not to be tempted to use them as described by Eliade, (1969: 85; 131; 280), Kakar, (1982: 179-80), Walker, (1982: 46-48), Briggs, (1982: 271-2), and Bagchi, (1956: 273).

Knowing of the occult abilities attributed to the *siddha* (perfected *yogi*), perhaps it is understandable that outsiders to the sub-caste should think it more likely that *tantra-mantra* is used in the exercise of magic rather than to reach God. Kalbelias say, "Right-hand *tantra-mantra* is to cure disease, to bring about good things for public welfare, but the left-hand *tantra* *mantra* is like *kais jadu* (black magic) and can destroy someone." Most Kalbelias say they

know nothing of black magic, and Gonanda Nath is the only Kalbelia guru who offers destructive magic. None of the other Kalbelia gurus claim to touch the sun and moon or any such fabulous thing, or want to do other than good. Their attitude is that they are seekers on the path to God, and any adept who succumbs to the temptation to use the siddhis he has obtained is enslaved by them, and diminishes to a mere magician and loses his chance of *moksha*, (liberation).

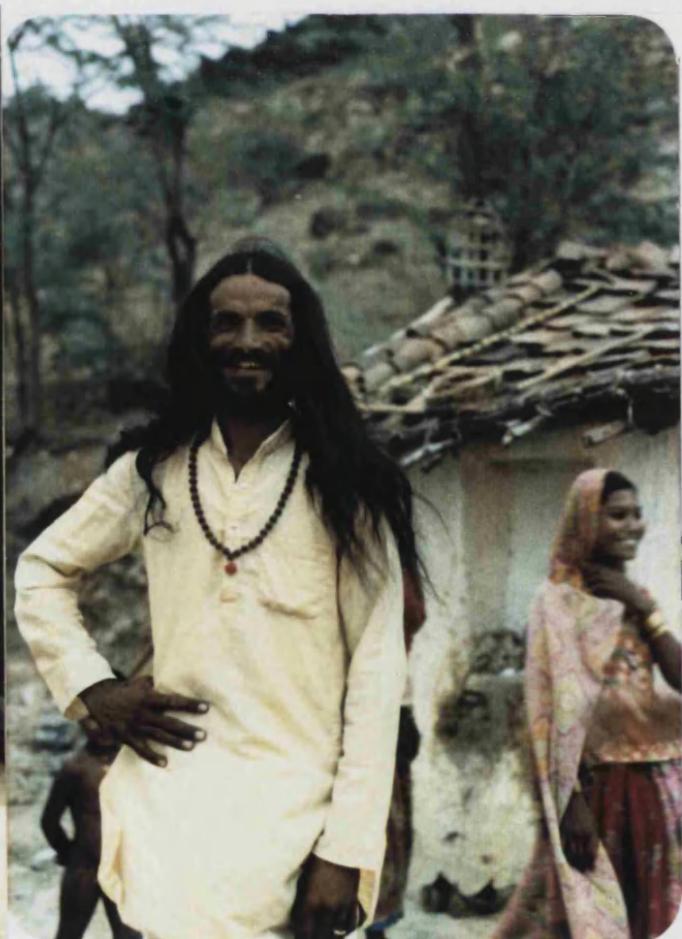
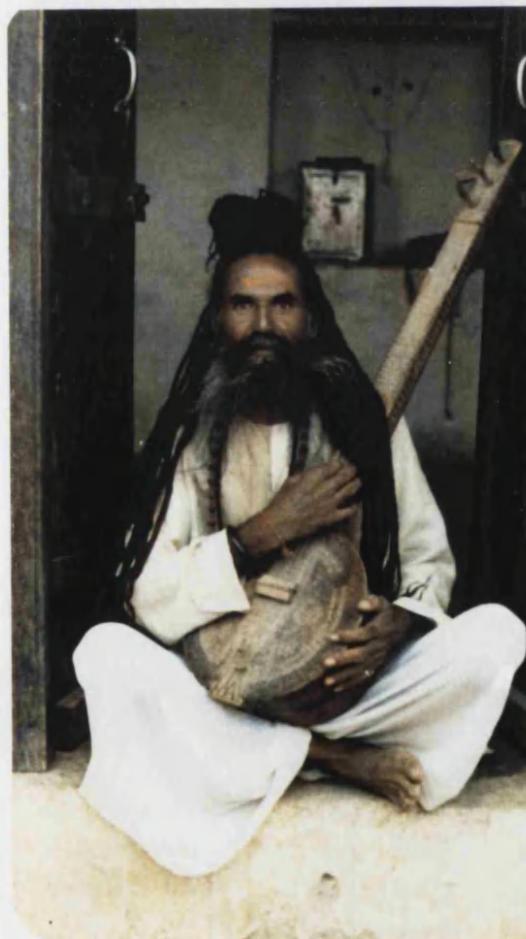
"We are wasting our time in worldly life so we should all learn *tantra-mantra*," said guru Dharendra Nath. "When a person has all the skills concerning mantras, ornaments, sindur, ochre clothes, then he will become a guru of any caste or community. He will be welcomed by a high seat among the Naths."

"When a person wants to be devotional, he should go to a guru of any caste, not of any particular caste. In religion there is no caste," (Bhadra Nath).

But only a qualified guru should initiate a disciple. Initiation by a charlatan could lead a disciple into disaster, a danger of which the Kalbelias are aware. "In this world there are so many gurus who are false" sadly remarked Harita Nath. These false gurus merely want tributes of money, food and goods and run the risk of going to hell and taking their deluded disciples with them: "When a person puts ash on their forehead and thinks by doing this he will meet God, it is nonsense because all donkeys and dogs are sleeping in ash. If they think they will meet God through having long hair, it is nonsense because any person can grow long hair. In the forest, lions and bears have long hair! If a person wears *sindur* (vermilion) and grows long hair and is not sincere he will not meet God and will not go to heaven. Instead he will go to hell!" (Bhadra Nath).



Kalbelia Gurus and disciples.



"But *gurus* living in the Jungle, they are real *gurus* because they have left this material world. If a *guru* has knowledge, he should control his senses and not run after wealth or beauty. He should be above all emotions and desires, then he has no anger in his mind, and his mind and life are full of peace. *Guru* has all the powers and knowledge. Nothing can destroy him, even if he has not taken food or water. He is not material, so he is in no danger in this mortal world, he is immortal," (Harita Nath).

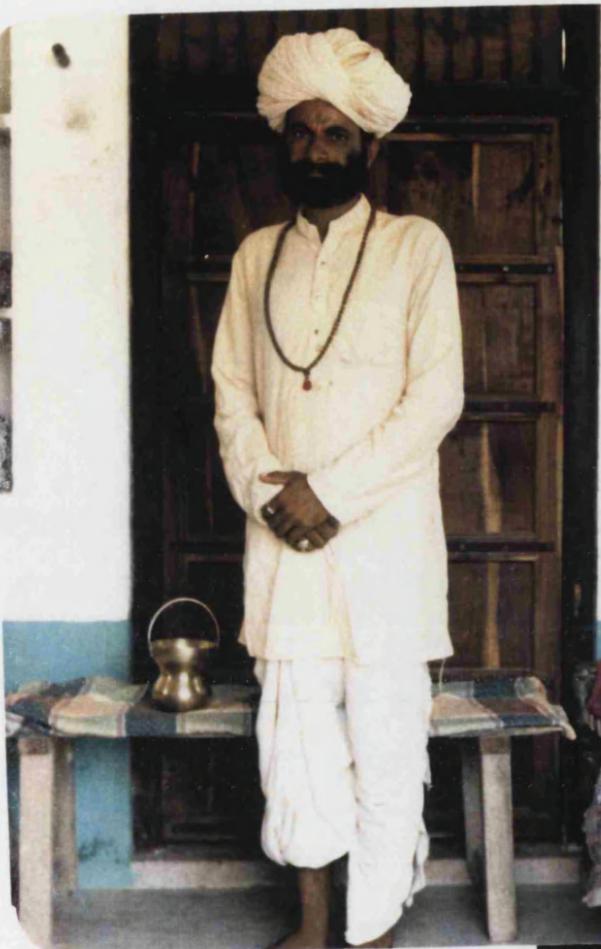
Present-day *gurus* are a physical manifestation of the god Shiva, the supreme *guru*, the *mahayogi* who even now lives on Mount Kailash in the Himalayas, surrounded by the Nine Naths and the eighty-four *siddhas* (saints who lived successful *tantrik* lives) and other perfected *yogis*. The teachings of the Kalbelias' *gurus* could be drawn directly from *tantrik* texts, but they rely mainly on oral teachings passed down from their own *gurus*. "The philosophy of *tantra-mantra* is the same for everyone. If a Brahmin came to me as a disciple he would gain the same knowledge as someone from my caste or any other caste. All *Nath* *gurus* have the same philosophy: the way of God, the same *tantra-mantra*," (guru Dharendra Nath).

The Kalbelias consider *mantras* should especially be known by those Kalbelias who are following their traditional occupation of snake charming. "They should know the *mantras* which go with all the things like the ear-rings, turban, ochre shirt, necklace of rudraksha seeds" (guru Dharendra Nath). This is because when following the occupation of snake charming and wearing the traditional ochre coloured shirt and turban, they are carrying out the task Shiva gave Kanipa and his followers, of whom the Kalbelias are descendants: that of controlling poisonous creatures, and therefore death.

Poison can also be a colloquialism for the acceptance of *dan* (ritual offerings) which embody inauspiciousness. Acceptors of *dan* are accepting, "digesting" and removing inauspiciousness from others, (Raheja, 1988; Parry, 1980). However, none of the Kalbelias ever indicated they knowingly accept *dan*, only emphasized that, by virtue of being descendants of Kanipa's original disciples they can beg without shame or danger.

It is said that a would-be disciple should be carefully observed by the *guru*. If an unworthy disciple is initiated, then all the disciple's sins will rebound upon the *guru*. Avalon and Chattopadhyaya suggest a probationary period of one year is normal (1972:lxii; 1978:61), but Kalbelias usually select a *guru* from their own caste and are already known to each other, so this rule is not observed. "When I was twenty my parents suggested I make a certain person my *guru* because without a *guru* we cannot gain knowledge," (*guru* Dharendra Nath). "There was a devotional song party at my home some years ago, and I was introduced by my parents to *guru* Ram Dasji who adopted me as a disciple. I was eleven years old," (Bhadra Nath).

A Kalbelia *guru* is visited by his disciples who bring him gifts of fruits or whatever they can afford, and receive spiritual teaching and advice. *Guru* Daivya Nath said, "I am interested in spiritual things, not material things although I am a labourer when work is available. I am master in devotional song programmes and meetings and for many years I have been asked to arrange these to help the welfare of society. All types of castes invite me for these programmes and I have visited many places in all districts of Rajasthan. I know *tantra-mantra* and I teach it. People ask for my advice and I advise them not to eat meat or take drugs or tobacco, and that they should not forget God who



Kalbelia Guru and disciple.



made them, to say the name of God early morning and evening. If people don't accept my suggestions I try and try again."

Mukti is one of *guru* Daivya Nath's female disciples. Although women may seek out a *guru* if they wish, this is not actively encouraged. Service to husbands, on the other hand, is. "I am only devotional, not interested in household work," said Mukti. "I am interested only in the name of God and attending devotional programmes. I make pilgrimages to Pushkar. Before my husband died I did normal household duties, and I advise other women that for us women a husband, whether he is right or wrong, is like God. Daivya Nath is my *guru* and all his sons are my *dharm bhai* (religious brothers). That is why I am here in this compound although I have family in another village." Mukti is not a religious devotee because as a widow no other course is open to her. She could have gone to live as a wife with her husband's younger brother or remarried into another family. All these courses are acceptable within Kalbelia society. (See chapter six).

Kuvala Nath is a *guru* living in Chandiwar village. Another Kalbelia said, "Kuvala Nath is the most famous person in this area. He was away from family life for twenty years doing meditation. He is very devotional, but fifteen years ago his mother died and his brothers insisted he come back and get married, so he returned. Because he has a good knowledge of religion all devotional people, including people from other castes come here and give him gifts. He gives financial advice to all families when they are in trouble." Kuvala Nath heals at the Ram Dev temple which he himself built in the village (he works as a builder). This temple also houses images of Shiva, Kali and Krishna, and is next to a shrine dedicated to Bhairon. In the evenings Kuvala Nath gives religious and moral talks to the other

families, and shares the gifts he receives among the children in the Kalbelia hamlet.

Gurus are respected and valued for their religious knowledge, spiritual insights and advice, even by those Kalbelias who have not chosen a *guru* of their own. A *guru* may see his disciples infrequently, perhaps only when they make a special trip to make offerings to him and ask for advice or teaching. But being a *guru* is not anyone's sole occupation, they all do other work as and when it is available, which I discuss in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE

### OCCUPATIONS

#### 3: 1 OCCUPATIONS AND NOMADISM

Indian society has often been seen as being based upon endogamous castes with their associated traditional occupation. These occupations ostensibly set the parameters of a caste and also give it its place in the caste hierarchy and its status in Hindu society, (Davis 1976). Misra, in his Karnataka survey of nomadic groups reported that each group specialized in an activity which acted as an identity marker for that group to outsiders, (1977b: 1). Kalbelias are popularly referred to as *sanpera* or *sanperin* (male or female snake charmer) or *sanpyala* or *sanpyali* (snake man or snake woman), even those who do not work as snake charmers.

Occupational activities are usually protected against encroachment by competitors, thus assuring subsistence to the supplier of goods or services, (Mandelbaum 1972: 161ff). Nomads do not often establish the same formal, hereditary, and exclusive economic relationships into which members of occupational castes enter, but they maintain close relations with particular villages which may be seen as analogous, (Hayden, 1987: 268). For instance, Kalbelias have settled on the outskirts of villages where they previously camped and were known and where their labour at harvest time is welcome.

Non pastoral nomads offering various services to the encompassing society are found nearly everywhere in the world, but South Asia probably has more groups of these nomads, offering more kinds of specialised goods and services than any other culture area, (Misra, 1977b; 1978). Before easy transport and communications were available

these mobile groups provided goods and services not otherwise available to settled populations. Hayden suggests that the general Hindu attitude that it is meritorious to give to beggars is obviously advantageous to service nomads, because it leads to a reasonable assurance of alms even from people with whom continuing relations have not been established, (Hayden, 1987: 268). This is correct, although begging is by no means confined only to nomadic groups.

Little is commonly known about the strategies for survival and livelihood practised by itinerant communities. Of the itinerant groups interviewed by Misra, Rajalakshmi and Verghese at three different sites in Mysore City, none were mobile all year. Some returned to base camps for a brief period, usually during the rainy season when other members of their community join them. Others travel for part of the year and return to their home villages, where they possess houses and agricultural land. Modern transport is used, and Misra et al found some people had come to Mysore in the south of India from as far away as Sikar and Jhunjhunu, remote districts of Rajasthan, north India. They return to their home base villages every year, (1971a: 76). Their occupations encompassed selling small articles, begging, various types of fortune-telling and magic, songs, acrobatics, snake charming, selling medicines, recording genealogies, hiring out horses and carts, horse-trading, selling manure, scraping and polishing cattle horns, and agriculture, (Misra 1971b: 320). So although non-pastoral nomads are commonly thought to be entirely nomadic, like the Kalbelias, most itinerants interviewed by Misra, Rajalakshmi and Verghese had permanent homes and/or agricultural lands in rural villages and travelled for only part of the year, (1971a). This pattern whereby people work both in cities and the countryside in each year has been rather aptly termed by McGee as 'circulatory migration', (1979: 320).

Partial nomadism seems to be the norm, as can be shown by the Gaduliya Lohars, itinerant blacksmiths and bullock traders who cease to travel during the rainy season (Misra, 1975: 238; Ruhela, 1968: 144-5), and the Banjaras, small traders and transporters of goods (All India Banjara Study Team, 1968; Childers: 1975: 253-4). Some Kalbelias, despite the peripatetic economic strategies of the sub-caste, have had permanent homes and an on-going presence in their villages for seven generations.

Malhotra and Gadgil suggest non-pastoral nomads generally occupy the lowest rung of a resources dependency chain (1982: 35), and their nutritional level must be directly correlated to that of their customers. Therefore in times of shortage, nomads will be the first to suffer. But Indian non-pastoral nomads take care to minimise the distance between patchily distributed populations, and adapt to the seasonal demands of customers, special festivals, harvest time and other agricultural schedules. Kalbelias are in special demand during the festival of *Nagpanchmi* when the cobra is worshipped, and in the rainy season when snakes are often discovered in homes and shops.

Non-pastoral nomads also try to obtain a social and economic spread of customers from a variety of castes, some more wealthy and influential than others. This spread of customers will encompass differing food supplies and other articles that will be donated or can be earned by itinerants. Kalbelias have access to all types of patrons, high and low castes, as well as foreign tourists, who donate not only money but clothes and such items as wrist-watches and cameras that can be sold. Because of their mobility, and access to a variety of patrons, non-pastoral nomads can enjoy access to a more varied and adequate diet than suggested by Malhotra and Gadgil, (1982). Certainly according to Freeman, low caste villagers do not gain a

secure food supply or income by remaining sedentary, (1979: 35).

Malhotra and Gadgil further posit that conditions of uncertainty are coped with by mechanisms which are designed to minimise friction between nomadic groups and to obviate undue competition for the same scarce resources, (1982: 36). Sutherland, in her study of American Gypsies (1975: 3), certainly depicts a well-organised people divided up into *kumpanias* (groups maintaining a monopoly on an area's economic resources).

However, the Kalbelias deny any formal regulation of travel or work areas, or negotiation with other nomadic castes, and these subjects do not appear to be brought up for discussion at their *panchayat*. In the streets of towns or on wasteland when camping in tents for a few days, Kalbelias pitch their tents beside those of other nomads. For a high level of adaptation and avoidance to be formally exercised among so many groups of nomads conceivably converging on the same customers, something akin to a military operation would have to be organised. No one remembered any extra-caste negotiations about this. Work patterns hinge on customary patterns built up over the years within or between non-pastoral nomadic castes, with subtle but pragmatic changes to the basic pattern over time.

Non-pastoral nomads have a work style that can be characterised as extrovert, ready to make new contacts, quick to add to their repertoire of skills and services in order to fill gaps in the rural and urban economy. This compares to the more conservative attitudes displayed by rural craftsmen, (Berland 1982: 145-6). Kalbelias are fully cognisant that they can expect to make far more money from tourists, especially foreign tourists than from ordinary householders. Therefore they are willing to travel to

customers in towns and villages spread over a wide area, even to a neighbouring state or foreign country. They are also able to supply labouring, medical, or magical services needed only sporadically.

Generally held beliefs in the public mind of the Kalbelias' magical abilities, whether for good or ill, their association with Shiva who is commonly depicted wearing the Kanphata ear-rings and draped with cobras, their ability to catch and remove dangerous snakes, as well as their snake-bite cures which are still in demand in spite of the advent of modern hospitals and anti-snake bite venin, together with their subsidiary occupations, ensure Kalbelias a living. Bhattacharya claims Naths avoid begging (1975: 732), preferring to work at any task however lowly (Briggs, 1982: 47ff), but Kalbelias say they do beg.

The Kalbelias' position as nomadic beggars theoretically at the end of a resource chain might imply that if patrons are short of money, food, or clothes, cooking utensils etc, all items typically begged by the Kalbelias, they will be the first to suffer. However, their risk-spreading policy means few members of the caste are totally dependent upon either begging or a single economic strategy, and it would be a mistake to automatically assume they are pathetic, dirt-poor nomads living under heaps of rags not knowing where their next meal is coming from. They benefit from a supportive and widespread economic and social network.

### 3.2 RECEIVING ALMS AND MORAL PERIL

But does the economic strategy of begging exact a penalty besides the social stigma experienced by beggars everywhere? Trautmann says the shastric theory of exchange distinguishes between worldly and religious gifts. Scripturally enjoined gifts (*dharma-dan*) are made to a

disinterested, superior being, of whom the Brahmin learned in the Veda is the type, (1981:26). As Parry points out, the gift is a surrogate for sacrifice, for a victim, that is, the donor; it stands for what he must expiate. But it is only Brahmins who have a duty to accept *dan*, (1986: 462), (although in north India, wife-taking affines are also appropriate recipients of *dan*). Its mark is the superior status of the recipient and the absence of an obvious reciprocity... in that meritorious effects of the gift do not immediately accrue to the giver and may not do so until the next life, (Trautmann, 1981: 26).

Although Brahmins, and in particular Brahmin priests are described as having a duty to accept *dan*, Raheja describes *dan* as given almost daily, not only to Brahmins, but also to Barbers, Sweepers or wife-taking affines, always to remove some form of inauspiciousness and transfer it to the recipient, (Raheja, 1988: 70-71), although later she appears to dilute this position somewhat:

'The term *dan* is occasionally used in a more general sense to include charity, alms and the like, prestations that are not made in a ritual context and do not transfer inauspiciousness... Furthermore, in many of the Hindi and Panjabi folk tales and dramas collected by Temple (1884-1900) in the general area of my fieldwork, a differentiation of *dan* (also *dan-jahej*) from "alms" (*bhikkh* or *bhiksha*) emerges. ' (The latter) 'are used to refer to alms given in non-ritual contexts to yogis and wandering ascetics...' (the Kalbelias are Jogi Naths - 'jogi' is the vernacular for 'yogi') - ...'while *dan* and *dan-jahej* are prestations made at the birth of a son and at other ritual occasions to one's daughter's son... and to Brahmins, Doms and so forth, in order to assure well-being and auspiciousness,' (Raheja, 1988: 260).

Madan criticizes the 'over-generalised notion of "the poison in the gift"' put forward by Raheja:

"All *dan*, the villagers say, is given to remove *sankat* (danger), *kasht* (afflictions) and *pap* (evil) from the

donor," (Raheja 1988:134)... If gift-giving is inauspicious in all cases, and if the gift is the basis of social life, the conclusion would then follow that social life is inauspicious in its very foundations. This obviously is unacceptable.' (Madan 1991:293).

There appears to be a cognitive gap in what the giving and receiving of certain types of gift implies. Parry's (1980) and Raheja's studies (1988) as well as my own informants, exhibit different notions on the issue (see Chapter Four).

Worldly gifts are those where the donor is 'giving for consideration' in expectation of reciprocal benefit in respect of material or political interest, desire, through passion for women, drink, hunting or dicing or shame, when a gift is given for which supplicants have asked, and one has promised out of shame, before the public gaze. Gifts are also given in respect of pleasure, out of gratification on having seen or heard things that please one, or from fear, in order to buy off those who threaten slander, damage to property, or bodily harm. Gifts given from piety are *dharm*, (Trautmann, 1981:26; 280-1).

Kalbelias receive 'worldly gifts' as payment for removing a cobra from house or shop, or for having cured a victim of snake bite. They always refer to their activities as *mangna*, to beg in the worldly manner, and do not refer to themselves as *bhikari*, religious beggars. They say people give them money, food and clothes out of sympathy for their poverty. However donations may be given to relieve feelings of shame or embarrassment, although Kalbelias do not beg in a supplicating manner: snake pipes played well are pleasurable entertainment and attract donations. There is also the possibility that some donors give alms out of fear, thinking Kalbelias may use tantrik powers to perform black magic, (see Chapter Two).

Kadru said, "We can beg without shame because we are followers of Kanipa." Kanipa was an ascetic, but as all but a few Kalbelias are householders, they are aware that attributes of asceticism are hardly justified, although they think of themselves as belonging to a religious sect the roots of which are in asceticism. When begging with pipes and cobras, Kalbelias usually wear the ochre colour of renouncers and are sometimes donated food and money because as Jogi Naths they are identified with ascetics, (see Van der Veer, 1987:688; Burghart, 1983:639-40; 642). Das comments that the ascetic transcends customary social divisions and is capable of inspiring contradictory attitudes such as reverence and fear, depending upon the interpretation placed on his mode of renunciation and asceticism, (1982:45; 150).

Although Kalbelias agree that, "Anyone who wears the ochre (when seeking alms) should know the *mantra*," (Bhadra Nath), this does not mean that they recognise the alms they receive as *dan* and therefore inherently dangerous, as do the Mahabrahmins of Benares, (Parry, 1980). Kalbelias claim their occupation was explicitly given to their *guru*, Kanipa and his followers by Lord Shiva and they would be in danger if they went against the god's wishes and did not beg with cobra and pipes, (see Chapter Two and Appendix I).

But "...not all bearers of a culture are equally aware of all the nuances of meaning and signification of a word or concept," (Madan, 1991:289), as examples from Raheja show:

'Illam (a Barber) said that Barbers likewise do not accept *pujapa*. Mangal (a Gujar) answered this assertion, saying "You take the *pujapa* of the betrothal," ... but Illam said no, that was not *pujapa*. Neither Mangal nor Sukhbir contradicted this statement, but in fact prestations that a Barber receives at the betrothal are, in everyone's estimation, *pujapa*.' (Raheja, 1988:246).

'*Pujapa*, *sandhara* and *bayana* are prestations that transfer inauspiciousness... (Raheja, 1988:172) ... there is

another type of ritual prestation, a kind of *dan* that is called *carhapa* or *pujapa* (Raheja 1988: 69) ... What is called *carhapa* is also called *dan*, and *dan*, villagers say, is always given to remove some form of inauspiciousness and transfer it to the recipient', (Raheja 1988: 70).

The other incident related in Raheja:

'The Dakaut recipient... (of *dan*)... arrived in Pahansu just as the ritual began... As he came forward to take the articles, the Dakaut asked Telu Ram to help him carry them away. Telu Ram, aghast at the request, told him that no one in the house would touch the *dan* articles after the circling', (Raheja, 1988: 112).

In these two cases the donors and recipients have entirely different notions concerning the implications of the gifts: the donors are intent upon off-loading inauspiciousness, the recipients are unaware of 'the poison in the gift'.

Ignorance of the doctrinal implications and intricacies of these ritual gifts given and received is widespread. Discussing the Mahabrahmins (funeral priests) of Benares, Parry comments:

'Though only the most doctrinally sophisticated of the pilgrims would be aware of the risks he... (the donor)... incurs... (in accepting *dan*)... the sacred specialists themselves insist that *dan* must be given to a Brahman of unimpeachable character for "by worshipping the unworshipful famine results". The recipient must be a "worthy vessel"; and if the *jajman* is unwise enough to bestow his charity on an "unworthy vessel" he becomes responsible for the latter's sins,' (1980: 102-3).

Although Raheja reports *dan* being given to a wide range of recipients, not just Brahmins, she says the exact source of the inauspiciousness must be known if the giving of *dan* is to be successful.

'Each type of inauspiciousness requires a particular ritual, a particular type of *dan*, and a particular recipient,' (Raheja 1988: 48) 'these various recipients are almost always involved in either kinship or intercaste relationships with the *jajman* donor' (Raheja, 1988: 92) 'there is nearly always an intermediate transfer: the prestation is first made to the source of the inauspiciousness - usually a deity or a particular kinsman - before being "given onward"... to the final recipient, the *patra*', (Raheja, 1988: 71).

The question arises of whether or not Kalbelias accept *dan*, or whether the goods and money given them are ordinary alms intended to relieve poverty? The alms the Kalbelias receive are nearly always given by donors in a non-ritual context, and therefore are not regarded as *dan* and are not held to transfer 'sin' or 'inauspiciousness', and are not seen by them as constituting a 'moral peril'. However, later in this thesis I discuss the festival of *Nagpanchmi*, when it is conceivable that Kalbelias are receiving *dan*.

Further sections of this chapter describe snakecharming, the traditional occupation of the Kalbelias, catching cobras and earning a living by showing them and curing snake bites. Other economic strategies of the Kalbelias are also described: healing, curing spirit possession, entertaining, agriculture, and minor or sporadic activities such as *rikshawala* or bill poster, together with women's work within and outside the domestic sphere.

### 3:3 CAPTURE AND CARE OF COBRAS.

In this section I will describe how poisonous cobras are caught and once captured, their feeding and care.

To understand how snake charming can be a money-earning occupation it helps to understand the place that snakes and snake beliefs occupy in Hindu religious and social life. Many Hindus associate cobras with the god Shiva and revere them on that account. A cobra occupying the house or garden is said to be an ancestor reincarnated in that form to guard treasure accumulated in its human life which it cannot bear to leave. Cobras are thought to confer fertility on barren women, and to donate money to buy milk for a cobra ensures a supply of milk for the donor's own children, (Sahi, 1980; Vogel, 1926; A. Bhattacharyya, 1977; Kothari, 1982). Of course the bite of some poisonous snakes can be fatal and expert Kalbelias fearlessly remove them from house, garden or shop, and provide a folk cure for snake bite.

There is a tradition among Kalbelias that in each generation at least one member of each nuclear family must earn his living as a sanpera (snake charmer). Although this is not nowadays, if it ever was, strictly binding, most men of the caste have kept cobras at some time or other. 'Kal' means death/poison, and for the Kalbelias their traditional role has come to mean protecting the public from the poison of cobras.

Indian cobras can be found in forests, open countryside, areas of cultivation, deserted places or in busy towns and villages. They vary in colour and markings, and Daniel gives a full description (1983:113). Cobras displayed by Kalbelias are usually greyish black, sometimes marked, sometimes unmarked. They grow to four or five feet long, sometimes to seven feet. Cobras mate at the beginning of the year and in May lay ten to twenty-four eggs in a rough nest. Together the parents act as guards until the young hatch. This aspect of cobra relationship is mirrored in the many folk tales: when one partner is killed, the remaining cobra of the pair is believed to take revenge for

the death of its mate. Baby cobras are more aggressive than their parents and are able to rear up, spread hoods and strike while still emerging from the egg, (Stidworthy, 1972: 99). I saw a tiny baby cobra which showed every indication of ferocity, flinging itself about wildly, hood spread, and striking at everything within reach.

Cobras eat frogs, mice or rats, (Stidworthy, 1972: 97), and perhaps this is why they are to be found in Jaipur - rats are a common sight in the streets. My garden was infested with them and I even had them running over my bed. Cobras usually hunt in early evening when they are inclined to be more aggressive, and are able to strike accurately because they can see well in a dim light.

When angered and about to strike, the cobra raises about one-third of its body, spreads its hood, hisses loudly and lunges forward, driving the fangs into its prey and injecting the venom by a muscular squeeze of its poison sacs, (Elliot, 1934: 191-2). In the venom of cobras, neurotoxins (nerve poisons) predominate and there are substances that break down red corpuscles in the blood and prevent coagulation. Cobras are said to bite approximately 10,000 people a year in India, although only one in ten bites are fatal, (Stidworthy, 1972: 98; 150). The average discharge of poison at a bite is two hundred and eleven milligrams dry weight. The lethal dose for a man is fifteen to seventeen and a half milligrams for a weight of about sixty kilograms. The symptoms of cobra poisoning start with a stinging, swelling, and oozing of blood-stained serum, followed by a rapidly advancing paralysis starting with the legs. The neck drops, the tongue, lips and throat are affected and speech becomes difficult. Swallowing also becomes difficult or impossible. Breathing becomes difficult and stops. Other symptoms are vomiting, and haemorrhage from the various orifices of the body, (Daniel, 1983: 114; 144).

Various remedies for snake bite have been tried over the last few hundred years, for example, amputation of the bitten limb, or administration of large amounts of alcohol, (Stidworthy, 1972: 151). Strychnine was much vaunted at one time which, according to Elliot, was a positive danger to life when given in the doses advocated. Even sucking the bite or administering potassium permanganate which neutralizes venom in a test tube is of little value because the venom is rapidly absorbed into the bloodstream and only a tiny amount remains at the site of the bite (1934: 199-200. When I enquired of an expert at the London Zoological Society what I should do if I were bitten by a cobra far away from medical aid, he replied succinctly and with chilling finality, "Pray!"

Nowadays the medically applied antidote to the venom of many snakes is produced by inoculating a horse with small doses of venom. Gradually the animal builds up a resistance in its blood to the venom. This blood serum (antivenin) is usually effective against snake bite if used quickly, although differences between venoms are so great it is impossible to produce a single antivenin to act against all kinds of bite, (Stidworthy, 1972 151-3). But in Rajasthan, only a small number of people bitten by snakes actually attend hospital, perhaps because of the distance of urban hospitals from where people live in rural areas, or possibly because of a feeling that the hospital will be able to do little to help. The one case of death I heard of while I was in the field, occurred in a man who was taken to hospital and died in spite of several injections. It may be that the hospital was unable to inject the patient with actual anti-snake bite venin since it is expensive, and difficult to store for any length of time.

Kalbelias told me of snake bite victims they attended during my time in the field. All the people survived, which

the Kalbelias take to be proof of their expertise and knowledge of medicines against snake bite. None of the people were taken to hospital, not even one man living on the outskirts of Jaipur who could have easily been taken by motor-*rikshaw*, and none of the cases were reported to the authorities.

The Kalbelias who entertain as snakecharmers at the Jaipur hotels also show a mongoose, the legendary adversary of the cobra. In India it is widely believed the mongoose has an immunity to cobra bites, and that after fighting with a cobra, the mongoose goes to the jungle and eats a certain plant which acts as antidote to any poisonous bite it might have suffered. This probably explains why the Indian population are willing to accept the possibility of a herbal, oral cure for a poison which has been injected into the blood-stream. Aristotle writing in his History of Animals in 350 BC claimed that before a mongoose fights with a snake it eats wild rue. Elliot is of the opinion that the mongoose does have some natural immunity to cobra bites, his experiments indicating that a mongoose required a far greater injection of cobra venom than other animals to bring about its death, (1934: 218).

### 3:4 EXPERT KALBELIAS

Among those Kalbelias who show cobras at hotels or around the villages or streets of the city, only a small number of expert Kalbelias actually catch the cobras themselves. Usually boys who are interested are taught to catch cobras when they are nineteen or twenty years old. It is rare for girls to be taught, but I met three women who catch cobras, although none of them exhibit snakes in public.

Expert snake catchers catch cobras for their own use to display to the public, or to order, if a fellow-Kalbelia has

recently released his cobra and needs another so as to beg in the street or fulfil a hotel engagement. In the rainy season when cobras come out of their holes and can easily be seen or tracked by the marks they leave in the sand, the price might be only one or two rupees (the price of a bottle of "Thums Up", a cola drink). Even I was presented with several cobras after a brief shower of rain. In the hot season cobras are in scarce supply, and may cost up to fifty rupees. This is a high price to pay: a person working at road construction only earns about ten rupees a day.

A cobra is usually caught in the jungle or fields by digging into a likely-looking hole. The Kalbelia plays his *bin* (snake pipes) in the belief the cobra will surrender to him, if it is *sughria* (good). If it is *nugra* (bad) it will try to make good its escape. When a snake is found, whether it is a cobra or some other kind of snake, a line is drawn around it in the sand or dust. This was not said to be with an iron implement that binds or contains evil, usually referring to the spirits of the dead or misfortune, but it is probably operating on the same principle. Or perhaps it is analogous to the assertion that a chicken that has its beak placed on a line drawn in front of it is unable to move. The snake is trapped by a stick placed across the back of its head and pressed to the ground. Then the Kalbelia removes the two poison-transmitting fangs by causing the cobra to bite on a piece of cloth, which he then drags away. This breaks the fangs.

Next, the two poison sacs inside the cobra's mouth are removed with a sharp piece of horn or a large needle. When the fangs are broken or damaged, a new pair of fangs eventually appear to take their place. Some Kalbelias continue to break these off, because a cobra can inflict an unpleasant bite. But because the poison sacs have been permanently removed, the cobra's fangs no longer have poison

to inject. There is a difference of opinion about the effect on a cobra of having its fangs and poison sacs removed. Some Kalbelias say it makes no difference to the cobra's health, but others disagree, claiming that removal should not be done lightly because these things are put there by God for a reason and the snake must be worse off without them.

The poison is buried because Kalbelias say if a chicken, cow or buffalo eats it, it may kill them. One or two people said it can be mixed with *kajal* (black eye liner) and applied around the eyes, which is good for the health and cures headaches, but Kalbelias do not usually wear *kajal*, or use the poison in any way. Some Indians say cobra poison is used in medicines, but Kalbelias have never been asked to give it to medical people, although an unknown man once came to the Railway *kachchi basti* wanting to buy cobra poison for an undisclosed reason. They refused to supply him with this poison. When discussing the incident, the Kalbelias said they would never give or sell this poison to anyone because the would-be purchaser may have some bad purpose in mind.

According to Thurston, the jungle Yanadis remove the poison sac with a knife and swallow it as a protection against snake bite, (1912:95). This does not bring about immunity to snake bite, and Kalbelias neither swallow the poison they remove from cobras, nor do they claim any immunity against the effects of a poisonous cobra bite. Only people with nerves of iron deliberately seek out a cobra complete with poison and I wondered what steps were taken in the event of a bite, perhaps alone in the jungle. "I keep very alert to avoid being bitten, and also take medicine with me. If a cobra bites, we suck the place where it has bitten, then take our own medicine. I do not know any person of our sub-caste who has been bitten by a cobra and died. It is not possible that he will die!" (Nanda Nath). This is a

brave assertion, but other Kalbelias say "Many men die doing this job," expressing a more pessimistic view of the occupation. Irya Nath's brother died after being bitten by a cobra during his work as a snake charmer, another man was found dead one morning, bitten by a cobra that had crept into his bedding while he slept. I heard of two other recent incidents of Kalbelias bitten while they slept, but luckily both survived.

There is a belief among Indians that a person bitten by a cobra while asleep is being attacked in revenge for causing the death of that cobra's mate, (A. Bhattacharyya, 1977: 227). Kalbelias never ascribe death by cobra to any such reason, although they, more than most people are likely to injure a cobra, albeit unintentionally, when removing their poison. Possibly Kalbelias feel immune from such vengeance since they received their occupation from Lord Shiva himself, or one of his delegates (see Appendix I). But it is more likely due to their pragmatic attitude, for they do not share the common superstitions concerning snakes and cobras. A man from another caste swore to me, with every appearance of sincerity, that his uncle, while walking in the jungie saw a snake rise into the air and fly. When I asked if any Kalbelia had ever seen such an event, the response was a resounding and withering "nahin!" (No). They were taken aback that I would apparently even entertain such a possibility. "These things are just stories," they said sternly.

Even knowledgeable and interested Kalbelias do not usually catch snakes until they are over twenty years old, and there are a considerable number who never have done this, and openly admit they are afraid. No-one is mocked for this fear. Mansi Nath who is only fourteen years old is somewhat of a phenomenon therefore, having already caught several cobras. One capture was in the garden of a tourist

hotel where he was entertaining guests. A hotel servant saw the cobra in the shrubbery and raised the alarm. Manasi pinned the cobra to the ground with a broom. He was not equipped for dealing with poisonous snakes because he had gone to entertain, not to catch cobras, so he had to transport the still-poisonous cobra back to the squatter settlement to be dealt with: "I took out my own non-poisonous cobra from its basket and put it into the bag in which I keep the snake pipes. Then I put the newly caught poisonous cobra into my snake basket and took both snakes back to the Railway *kachchi basti* on my bicycle. Manendra Nath removed the poison fangs." Manasi was aggrieved because the hotel paid him only fifty-one rupees. "If some elder Kalbelia had been there he could have asked for one hundred and fifty-one rupees, but I am just a child. That's why I only got fifty-one rupees."

No one seems able to distinguish the gender of the cobras. I was told they are female if they are small and skinny. The only classification that Kalbelias use is a *nugra* cobra, characterised as being very active and liable to bite, or *sughria*, when the cobra immediately surrenders to the Kalbelia on hearing the sound of the *bin*. Once defanged and ensconced in the basket, it willingly rears up and displays itself to the public, spreading its hood. A *nugra* snake will either not hear the music or will ignore it. A cobra is also termed *nugra* once it has bitten someone. It is said that if a snake is *nugra*, then the *sanpera*'s pipes will stop of their own accord and the man's best efforts cannot bring forth the smailest sound. But *nugra* snakes are still caught and continue to bite, inflicting flesh wounds even after their poison has been removed. A *sughria* snake may dart out at the snake charmer but will stop short of actually biting, neither does it try to leave the basket. But a *nugra* snake never ceases its escape attempts and angry behaviour, (Neka Nath). I heard a *nugra*

snake still hissing fiercely even although, because of the cold weather, it was in a nest of cloths inside its basket, which was swaddled in even more cloths, and carried in a quilted bag

Apart from the gross behavioural classification of *nugra* and *sughris*, cobras have no apparent individuality. Whenever I held a new cobra, it could have been any of the other cobras I had held before, so far as behaviour or personality was concerned. Kalbelias say cobras show no differentiation between one person and another. Pythons however were attributed with more intelligence and affection. These were not available locally, and the only python the Kalbelias owned was shown at hotels, and had been expensively purchased from Uttar Pradesh for about three hundred rupees.

After catching a cobra, the snake charmer decides to keep it for fifteen days or one or two months. The bigger the cobra the longer it can be kept but eventually, "the first charm of the cobra wears off and it becomes lazy having had no exercise in the basket," (Nabhoga Nath). After the cobra's poison has been removed and the snake has spent a period in captivity, it gradually becomes slow and lethargic and no longer bothers to rise up and hiss, even when irritated by tapping on the basket. "A cobra in a basket is like a prisoner. After it has done its time then it should be freed," (Bhadra Nath). The cobra is released on wasteland outside the town or in the fields where there are mice for it to eat, or in the jungle.

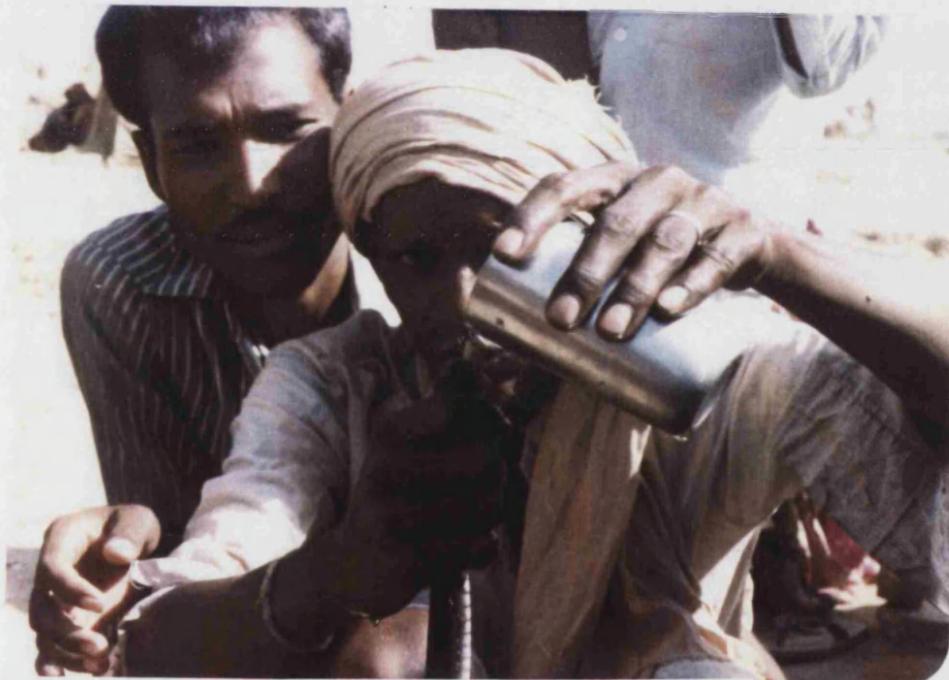
### 3: 5 THE CARE OF COBRAS

After its poison is extracted the cobra is kept in a basket unfed and undisturbed for the first two or three days in case of residual poison. During their first five days in captivity there is an increased danger the cobra may die.

The Kalbelias attribute this to the greater difficulty the cobra experiences in taking nourishment via a tube, but death is probably also due to the shock of captivity and removal of poison sacs and fangs.

Captive cobras do not often get the opportunity to catch their own food and instead are fed via a tube made from a hollow bone, or nowadays, the outer plastic casing of a biro. Various mixtures are administered, of water, milk, egg, oil, flour and occasionally, meat. All Kalbelias who keep snakes have differing opinions about what a cobra should be fed and at what intervals, but a typical regime is that they are given a little warm water every other day, and fed every third day on raw egg and oil beaten up together. After half an hour the snake is checked to see if it has regurgitated its food. If it has been sick, it is fed again. Care is taken that the feeding tube is not pushed too far down inside the cobra. This causes injury and death.

To show me how it is done, Bhadra made a feeding tube out of the outer casing of a biro and another bigger tube taken from a plastic hand *pankha* (fan), held together with a paper collar. He removed the cobra from its basket and placed it on the ground. It became erect and spread its hood and Bhadra waved his fist in front of it. Although the cobra followed Bhadra's fist, it did not strike - obviously a polite *sughria* snake. Then Bhadra held its head fairly close behind the eyes and put the feeder into the side of its mouth. Then he pulled the cobra vertical and pushed about one third of the biro casing down inside its mouth. Holding the snake firmly so that none of the liquid should escape. Bhadra poured a mixture of uncooked egg white, oil and water beaten together down the tube. As the liquid poured through the tube and into the cobra, to help the food go down, he gently and rhythmically stroked the snake from the head



Feeding a cobra via a hollow bone.

downwards. I saw its body become thicker as the liquid passed down. The feeding was over in a few minutes, and the cobra felt warm to the touch, not slimy or cold as it looks.

Once a week the cobra may be fed twenty to fifty grammes of goat meat. Two people help to feed the cobra this meat. They wedge open the snake's mouth with a bone and push the meat down a little, then stroke the cobra's body to help the meat go all the way down. Although the poison and poison-transmitting fangs have been removed, other teeth are left and the snake can still catch and eat prey even without its poison, which never comes back. Sometimes a live mouse is put into the basket for the cobra to catch and eat.

In hot weather, cobras are considered more likely to regurgitate their food, so are carefully watched. Their baskets are placed out of direct sunlight and water is sprinkled on the basket to keep it as cool as possible. They are fed the same food as in cold weather and at the same intervals. In cold weather, wrappings are placed inside the basket with the snake, and the basket itself is swaddled in cloths. The basket is put into a patch of sunlight during the day to keep the snake warm and healthy, and at night the snake's basket is placed in a box or swaddled in extra cloths and put under its owner's cot to give the snake extra warmth.

Sometimes a cobra is caught which upon examination has evidently been in captivity before, because its poison sacs have been removed. These snakes are considered to be lethargic and rarely retained.

### 3:6 RELEASE OF COBRAS.

Apart from the sluggishness of cobras which have been captive over-long, which makes it futile to keep them as entertainers, there is also a feeling among Kalbelias that a

cobra or any other snake should not have to die in captivity. The capture, or release of a snake is done quietly, with the minimum of fuss. The snake charmer does not wear his ochre *pagri* (turban) and ochre *kurta* (shirt) advertising to everybody that he is a Kalbelia. Instead he wears ordinary clothes and carries the cobra in a small cloth bag with a drawstring, and goes for a quiet walk or bicycle ride somewhere secluded, away from people and their homes, where he quietly releases the snake. This is because any member of the public realising a cobra or even a non-poisonous snake is about to be released in their vicinity will say "Take that snake away from here!"

Even although that newly-released cobra has no poison apparatus, many Indians believe that the poison is not permanently removed, only suspended for a short time by application of an ointment to the snake's mouth or by a *mantra* (magic spell), and the poison will return. This belief is fostered by the Kalbelias themselves who sometimes talk of a medicine applied to the cobra's mouth which "causes its gums to swell," or "shuts the snake's mouth for fifteen days or one month or two months," so it is unable to use its poison. They say this to turn aside accusations that they are misbehaving with the cobras or are not good Naths. Kalbelias say they should be non-violent, and meddling with the poison apparatus of cobras seems to be going against this principle in the eyes of other Hindus who do not know of the Kalbelias' dispensation from Lord Shiva. But even those Indians who believe the cobra has had its poison removed do not want the shock of accidentally treading on it in their fields or encountering it in the jungle when they take their goats to graze, or finding it in their house and having to send for a Kalbelia and pay for it to be removed, just in case it is a different cobra complete with poison and fangs.

All this is understandable, but why do similar stealthy tactics have to be employed when catching a cobra from the wild? Why should anyone object to the capture of a highly poisonous and potentially life-threatening cobra? Apart from the principle of non-violence to which many Hindus adhere, it is an offence for anyone without a wildlife license to catch a cobra, and if Kalbelias are seen armed with digging sticks, Forestry official become suspicious. Cobras are also useful in that they catch mice which eat crops.

Non-poisonous snakes are sometimes retained because, "People like to see different types of snake, they become bored with the same kind. They like to see others such as the snake with two mouths, one on the tail and one on the head. This coral coloured snake I have here is called *ghora pachad* which means he can go faster than a horse. When I saw this snake it was going into a hole and I dug it out. Sometimes if this type of snake cannot find food, it twines around a cow's leg and sucks the milk from her udder. It can bite but there is no poison. It has teeth so there may be bleeding but actually they don't usually bite," (Nala Nath).

Later, this snake was given away for a token payment of two rupees (about ten pence) to thirteen-year old Vibhu Nath who planned to beg round the streets of Jaipur, and it was the cause of a panic on one of the Jaipur buses when we were travelling to the village of Ramalpura. The *ghora pachad* snake was in a discreet drawstring bag so as not to attract the attention of bus passengers who might object to sharing their accommodation with a snake. I felt something slither over my foot and looked down and saw a snake the colour of uncooked sausages and realised the *ghora pachad* had escaped from the bag and was roaming around the bus. I whispered to Dari Nath sitting next to me and he informed Vibhu, sitting behind us that his snake had escaped. Then the snake

reappeared again by my feet and I made a grab for it but could not hold on.

Other passengers realized a snake was loose on the bus and a cry of "Cobra!" went up. People stampeded off the bus in panic - luckily it was stationary at a bus stop in the market place. The *ghora pachad* reared up and tried to escape through the bus window, much to the terror of passers-by. Vibhu hauled it back and wrestled it into the bag and secured it with a very large, tight knot. Once people realised the snake was not a cobra but harmless and non-poisonous, the bus filled again, although seats around our group were left empty. Vibhu Nath was berated, then people began to laugh about the incident and the bus moved off. It gave me some insight into the terror the presence of a cobra would evoke, for being in contact with them only after they were rendered harmless and ensconced in a snake charmer's basket, I had almost forgotten cobras could pose any threat, or were even poisonous.

### 3: 7 REMOVAL OF SNAKES BY REQUEST

If a cobra is discovered in a house or someone is bitten, a Kalbelia is hurriedly summoned to remove it and/or administer an antidote to the poisonous snake bite.

On one such occasion I was staying in the Kalbelias' hamlet outside Chandiwar village. A few people were quietly talking and singing in the darkness while other men, women and children slept under the moon and stars in the area between two facing rows of stone houses. Suddenly the dogs barked and a man wearing a large red turban denoting a member of an agricultural caste swept in on a bicycle. Kalbelias rose from their heaps of quilts fully clothed. Every adult was awake. The visitor was agitated. A cobra had been seen in his house and his family had taken refuge with neighbours. Three senior Kalbelia men quickly donned turbans

and leapt on to bicycles, one riding pillion on the visitor's bicycle, another two riding bicycles of their own. I asked to watch them catching the cobra but they refused to take me. "We can take risks for ourselves," they said, "but not for others," and the agricultural caste man was manifestly worried when he thought I was to accompany the rescue party.

I was advised to stay awake so I could see the cobra when the men returned, but when they came back an hour later they said they had made a thorough search of the house but the cobra had gone. The three Kalbelias laughed and joked with the agricultural caste man for some hours until he departed to his now cobra-free house.

Nanda Nath was asked to remove a snake from a man's house after the family had noticed a cobra there. "A person who was living in Sodalla called me," (Sodalla is a village some distance away from where he lives in a tent at Krishnapura Marg). "He had left his house all night because there was a cobra there. I went there and the cobra was on a shelf and I took it away. I keep snakes I remove from people's houses, but when I catch a cobra in public I will not remove the teeth or poison in front of other people because then they will learn how to do it."

In another incident, a teacher in the village of Ramalpura went home at lunch time and found his wife unconscious, having been bitten by a snake. The villagers immediately sent a message to local Kalbelias in the nearby hamlet. Biman Nath went to the house and roused the woman giving her a herbal remedy and reassurance of a positive outcome. While this was going on in front of the assembled villagers, a man arrived who claimed to be possessed by the legendary Teja, a cultivator who allowed a cobra to bite him because of an undertaking made to the creature. In return

the cobra promised Teja that snake bites would be cured in his name. The man claiming to be possessed by Teja said the woman would certainly die unless he was paid to save her. But the headmaster of the local school challenged the man, saying he did not believe he had any power to save the woman. The teacher's wife recovered and the Kalbelias were credited with her cure.

Although Kalbelias are traditionally known for their work as snake charmers, none of the women earn money by showing cobras or taking them to be worshipped by the public. Only a minority of women, and I only met three, even know how to catch cobras, or care for them or administer snake bite cures. Kadru explained she and her sister Tejini were taught by their parents to catch cobras because they showed an interest, and their parents asked them to continue this, "as a service to society." When she removes a cobra from someone's house Kadru releases it in the jungle far away from the village. She does not remove the poison since she does not keep cobras, and considers it a sin to remove the poison unless the intention is to keep the cobra for showing, as her husband and sons do.

Most of the women, even those married to men who exhibit cobras or even catch them, show little or no interest in cobras, but evince a strong fear of meeting one unexpectedly in their house or jungle before its poison is removed. Although cobras are said to be timid creatures that silently slither away when they hear the vibrations of people or animals approaching, this is not always the case when suddenly disturbed by, for example, someone treading on them. They are so well camouflaged this would be easy to do while crossing fields or going to urinate in the bushes during the night without lamp or torch. Even Kalbelias, members of a sub-caste which people from other castes look to for help when they have problems with cobras or other

snakes, have a lively fear of poisonous snakes. "Three days ago there was a snake bite case near my village and the man went to hospital and died the next morning even after three or four injections," (Dais Nath).

Some people claim there is no place for Kalbelias in Indian society. My first landlord, a high caste Brahmin, asserted vehemently that Kalbelias were the scum of the earth and not needed now anti-snake bite venom is available, and should not even be allowed in Jaipur. But only a few days after this diatribe I saw Harita Nath pulling a cobra from a tree in one of the busiest main roads of Jaipur. He was on his way to a nearby luxury hotel where he entertains guests as a snakecharmer, when he observed the almost imperceptible tracks of the snake in the sand and saw a cobra hanging only inches above the heads of people walking along the main road. The occupants of the nearby house watched from the safety of their window while Harita Nath expertly removed the cobra and put it into his basket. Even in a busy and populous town such as Jaipur, along a main road with endless streams of traffic and people passing by, cobras can still pose a threat.

### 3:8 TREATING VICTIMS OF SNAKE BITE.

Kalbelias who treat victims of snake bite are experienced, expert, snake charmers who catch snakes themselves and do not merely exhibit snakes caught by other members of the sub-caste. They claim a high success rate for their medicines, one or two flatly stating that it is impossible anyone should die once they had received their treatment, others not so sanguine, saying "If it is a man's fortune he should die nothing can save him."

The rural name by which the snake charmers are known, 'Kalbelia', is itself a statement of what the snake charmers does. "Kal" means death, and Kalbelias control poisonous

snakes and remove the fear of death. "The village people call us Kalbelia and the city people call us *sanpera* (Hindi for snake charmer). We are very proud that we can catch any snake requested. Tell me which one you want and I will catch it for you!" (Nala Nath).

The knowledge of poisons or antidotes is one of the eight chief subjects of Indian medical science:

'Innumerable are the famous Lords of Nagas (holy cobras) headed by *Vasuki* and beginning from *Takshaka*, earth bearers, resembling the sacrificial fire in their splendour (*teja*), who incessantly cause thunder, rain and heat and by whom this earth with her oceans, mountains and continents is supported and who in their wrath might smite the whole world with their breath and sight. Homage be to those. With those there is no need of the healing art. But of those of the poison fangs that belong to the earth and bite human beings I will enumerate the number in the appropriate manner and in the proper order.' (Susruta, 1835, vol. 11:232, cited in Vogel, 1972: 17).

In the Atharaveda (viii, 7, 23) snakes themselves are said to have knowledge of medicinal herbs. The main remedies employed against snake bites are herbs and *mantra*, the secret of which is supposed to be in the possession of ascetics, (Vogel 1926: 17). This fits with the Kalbelias' own claims and beliefs that as a *panth* (way) of the Nath sect, and descendants of the original followers of their Nath *guru*, Kanipa, who was given power over snakes by the God Shiva himself (see Appendix I), that same power has devolved to them.

The Kalbelias' mode of operation when called to a patient is first to give comfort and reassurance of the successful outcome of the treatment and then administer the *jaributi* (herbal medicine) either by mouth or by rubbing the site of the puncture marks. The Kalbelias claim to prefer treatment by one of their own sub-caste if bitten by a

cobra, even although they do not hesitate to utilise medical services for other ailments.

I tried to discover the exact nature of their remedies and was shown pieces of what looked like tree bark, but specific names and botanical specimens were not forthcoming, probably because each practitioner adds his own variation to a basic theme and does not wish others to learn of it. Or it may be because I suggested samples might be scientifically analysed, thus discovering their secrets. "People don't always tell the truth about medicine because then you can cure yourself," said Rajata Nath. "Our guru, Kanipa always personally attended a snake bite case. He refused to give the medicine to anyone else to administer because this would have led to a loss of knowledge among his disciples."

"There are two or three medicines. A tree bark or plant root, usually found in the hills. And there is another like *alu* (potato) which has a bitter taste. It is mixed with water and drunk and will make the person vomit. It goes to the stomach and dilutes the cobra's poison, otherwise the poison will attack the heart, eyes, head," (Nanda Nath). I queried how snake poison injected by the cobra's fangs directly into the blood stream could be treated by a slow-acting medicine administered by mouth. "Even *chapatis* make blood and bones eventually," Bhadra Nath replied.

"The bark of the tree is boiled in a brass pot. *Imarti* (a sweet preparation made from a paste of gram, horsepea and sugar) is another *jaributi* and so is *kaddu* (pumpkin, gourd). All come from plants, but I don't know the names of them. They are boiled with two or three coins of brass in a brass pot until only ten drops remain. These ten drops are drunk. This is treatment for a less poisonous snake. This medicine should always be kept in a hot place like inside a lump of cow dung near the fire.

Another medicine is *chach* (buttermilk). Put a glass of buttermilk in a brass pot with a few brass coins and they will rub together until the buttermilk turns blue, then drink it. This is also poisonous. All these medicines cause vomiting and all work, but few people know how to cure snake bite. My father's elder brother died after being bitten by a snake, but if I was bitten I wouldn't go to hospital. I am careful not to be bitten but anyway, I have a perfect medicine made from camel's urine and *fitkari* (alum). I mix these two ingredients together, put into a bottle or pot and then put it into cow dung for five or six months. Then this medicine can be more dangerous than snake's poison! If you are bitten by a cobra this medicine will cure you - poison cuts poison. But if you take it without having been poisoned by a snake bite, you will die," (Manendra Nath).

Elliot writes: 'They (snake charmers of South India) professed to trust to various vegetable drugs, but I feel sure that they knew that these were quite useless, and I do not think they placed the smallest reliance upon them,' (1934:206). This may be true for the snake charmers of South India, but the Kalbelias appear sincere in their belief that their herbal remedies can alleviate the deadly effects of cobra poison, and claim a high success rate for their medicine, although several members of their own sub-caste had died, not only when attempting to catch snakes, but after being bitten by a cobra while asleep. Snakes, both cobras and the non-poisonous varieties sometimes creep into the warm bedding and bite the sleeper during the night, perhaps when the snake felt in danger of being crushed. I was trying to sleep one night in Chandiwar hamlet while a dog was barking near our cots and I must admit I was silently cursing it as I eventually dropped off to sleep. The next morning I was shown a new cobra which one of the men had found in the bushes near our cots when investigating the dog's incessant barking. The dog saw something in the

bushes and, perhaps luckily for me and my children, was demanding protection for her pups.

Carstairs mentions a case where a man taking a short cut across a neighbour's field was bitten. The bite was thought to be the work of a powerful god, (1955: 126). The Kalbelias never employ the idiom of a snake bite being the work of an angry god. Instead they treat it pragmatically. A snake has bitten somebody and they try to cure the patient by reassurance and medicine. Some Kalbelias work as healers (see Chapter Five), and say they become possessed by Gods in order to question the possessing spirits of their patients, but they do not use this method to cure snake bite.

Indigenous snake bite cures are numerous and the literature has many accounts, for example, the application of a snake-stone applied to the site of the snake bite. When it has absorbed all the poison it drops off, (Crooke, 1926: 363; Thurston, 1912: 93-4). Kalbelias deny these snake-stones have any efficacy whatsoever, and there seems to be some question about the substance of which these objects are composed. Thurston reports they are made from the leaves of a creeper, but Manendra Nath says they are nothing more than a piece of burnt and blackened, polished bone.

A. Bhattacharyya mentions a remedy involving three sanctified cowrie shells sent (not explained how) to find the snake who bit the patient. These shells stick to the snake at its head, middle of its body and tip of its tail and somehow force the snake to return to the victim and bite him or her in exactly the same place in order to draw out the venom which the snake then vomits into a cup of milk. The incantations used in this process must never be written in black ink which would render them ineffective, only in red ink which symbolizes blood, for charms written in blood are believed to possess magic power, (1977: 218). It must be

a terrifying ordeal for anyone bitten by a snake to submit to being bitten by the same snake a second time, and this method must have little possibility of even calming the patient since he or she would be frightened by the possibility of undergoing a further bite from a poisonous snake, or conversely, worried by the likelihood of the snake NOT returning to suck out the poison. The Kalbelias never mentioned this particular method.

There is still a strong belief in Rajasthan that Kalbelias have the knowledge and expertise to cure poisonous snake bites, and often they are resorted to in preference to hospital treatment. Now antivenin is available, and it is possible to get a snake bite victim to hospital by bus or motor cycle, or medical aid to him, why should so many people still prefer to seek the aid of an indigenous healer? This is something of a conundrum, although there have been incidents of snake-bite poisoning where the hospital was not able to save the patient, perhaps because supplies of the correct anti-venin were not available. And it is known that not all cobra bites prove fatal. In some cases the worst effect of a snake bite is a state of shock and fear, although people have been known to die, apparently from shock, after a bite from a harmless snake, (Stidworthy, 1972: 151). For people living in rural areas miles away from a hospital and doctor, the local Kalbelias with their knowledge and experience of snakes and snake-bite must be of psychological comfort and exert a calming effect, which could be instrumental in aiding recovery.

Carstairs (a medical doctor) had dried polyvalent antivenin serum for intravenous injection in case of snake bite. He heard of several cases, two of them fatal, but no one asked for his treatment, because, he believes, of the association of the illness and the god, (1955: 126). If it is believed by non-Kalbelias that a poisonous snake bite is the

work of a god, it might explain why Jogi Nath Kalbelias, with their aura of mystery and magic are called in, instead of a medical doctor. B. Bhattacharyya reports that Naths are popularly known as "pedlars of medicinal herbs, performers of miracles and tamers of serpents... these powers are accepted by all and none dare to offend them," (1975: 732-3).

The next chapter describes and discusses snake charming and begging.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### SNAKE CHARMING AND BEGGING

In this chapter I will describe the economic strategies of begging and snakecharming.

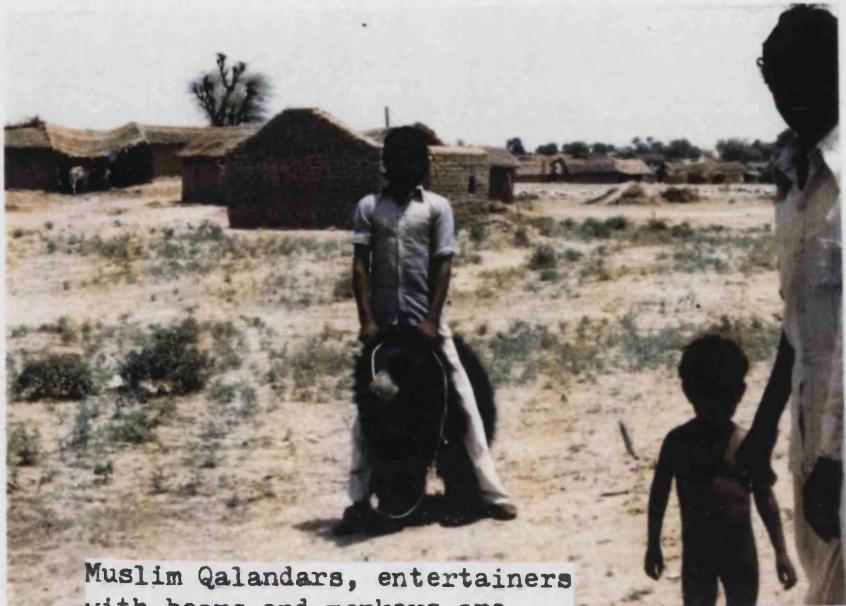
#### 4: 1 SNAKE CHARMING

Snake charming as an occupation affords advantages perhaps not immediately apparent, compared to other nomadic groups' economic strategies. It costs time, effort, and entails a serious risk to obtain a cobra, although they can be purchased from more courageous members of the caste. That accomplished, a cobra then costs little to feed and maintain. But the large herds possessed by some pastoral nomads require pasturage and are vulnerable to theft. Few people, however, are tempted to steal a basket of cobras, and money received is tucked inside the snakes' basket to deter pilferers.

Kalbelias can move easily and quickly by train or bus with a basket of snakes, with none of the other passengers usually any the wiser. By contrast Qalandars, entertainers with bears and monkeys, some of whom camp in tents near a Kalbelia hamlet just outside Jaipur, have to expensively purchase bears from a considerable distance away and are forced to travel slowly or hire a truck, (Berland, 1982:94). No riding on a bus with a bear in tow! The Qalandars' bear has to be carefully trained to perform, an arduous task which takes a period of time and sometimes results in injury to the trainer (Berland, 1982:98-101). But a cobra needs no training since the snake charmer exploits only the cobra's natural responses, and once its poison is removed there is no danger to the public or to the Kalbelia who takes it to a hotel or round the streets. But a bear, however well-

SNAKE CHARMING AND BEGGING

PLACE	PERSONNEL	ROLE	DONATIONS	DONORS
Streets	Men	snakecharmers sadhu	money food goods	householders shopkeepers passers-by
	Women	singing, dancing		
Railway crossing. Strategic places.	Men and boys	snakecharmers sadhu	money	passers-by in vehicles
Tourist attractions, Museums, etc.	Men and boys	snakecharmers	money	tourists passers-by
Shrine	Men and boys	snakecharmers, nandi vale	money	pilgrims
	Women	beggars	food	tourists
Hotels	Men and boys	snakecharmers	money goods	tourists



Muslim Qalandars, entertainers with bears and monkeys are neighbours of the Kalbelias at Harjipura village, built on a Government grant of land.



Snake charming in the streets of Jaipur.

trained, could be irritated enough to inflict a serious injury on its trainer or a bystander. A cobra without poison still has teeth and can bite and even draw blood, but it is not a serious injury.

Elliot was of the opinion that cobras used to perform were specially trained and selected. 'Their obedience and tractability are most striking... I am satisfied that many of the cobras brought round to perform have in no way been mutilated,' (1934: 190-1). These are common beliefs, but untrue. No Kalbelia would dream of putting himself or his family at risk by keeping a poisonous cobra in the house or tent day after day, even sleeping with its basket under the cot in the cold winter months. One of my cobras escaped from its basket twice and was missing for some hours before Bhadra Nath found it curled up in a pile of bedding, so a poisonous cobra would certainly present a dangerous risk to family members.

Neither would a Kalbelia put spectators in danger by exhibiting a cobra with poison apparatus intact. If even one onlooker died from the bite of a Kalbelia's captive cobra, the information would spread like wildfire and snake charmers simply would not be tolerated in the community. Snake charmers exhibiting cobras were banned by the Minister of Tourism from the streets of Pushkar during the 1987 Camel Fair, reportedly because the previous year tourists had been alarmed by merely seeing the cobras. Kalbelias are quick to truthfully assure onlookers there is no poison and no danger, although if they suspect they may be accused of cruelty or criticized for permanently removing the poison, they prevaricate by saying they have applied an ointment to the snake's mouth so it cannot produce poison for two weeks or some other length of time, for 'The cobra is an object of worship and it is a sin to kill or maim it,' (Thurston, 1912: 124; Sahi, 1980: 165-6). The majority of Indians appear

to assume that any cobra exhibited in the basket of a snake charmer has been divested of its poison or in some way rendered harmless, because in the street passers-by show no alarm as they walk near the snake charmer's open basket with one or more cobras clearly displayed. On the other hand, a snake out of place so to speak, in a shop or someone's home or on the bus (see earlier), gives rise to panic.

Elliot is also mistaken about the selection of amenable cobras to be trained for showing to the public. Although Kalbelias categorize their captured cobras as *nugra* or *sughria* (see Chapter Three), either type are exhibited. And they are merely taking advantage of the creatures' natural behaviour and reactions: there is no need to train cobras to rear up and spread their hoods. Most cobras are *sughria* (timid and docile) but *nugra* cobras, which lash around and hiss like infuriated steam kettles attract larger audiences and therefore more money than quieter *sughria* cobras. The cobra remains coiled up in the basket until the lid is removed, then the snake charmer plays his *bin*. The cobra is sensitive to vibrations, but the *bin* is also played in order to attract the notice of possible donors. The Kalbelia puts his hand in the basket and touches the snake until it rises up and spreads its hood, ready to strike. It sways about with its eyes fixed on the *sampera*'s snake pipe which he keeps moving. A *nugra* cobra will strike at the *bin*, and even try to escape which sends a ripple of excitement through the crowd. *Sughria* cobras rear up and spread their hoods but do not strike and appear to be eager only to return to their baskets.

#### 4: 2 RELIGIOUS AND PRAGMATIC ASPECTS OF BEGGING

Cobras are the preferred snake charmer's snake because of their religious identification with the Mahayogi (Shiva, the Great Yogi) and thus of all *yogis* (*jogis* in the North Indian dialect). In the social and religious climate of

India, a Jogi Nath sanpera is able to attract donations with a creature which to Hindus is full of religious symbolism, mystery and danger. Puranic tradition relates that the serpent is the ornament of Shiva. Snakes garland him, and his hair streaming out in the cosmic dance is a mass of serpents, (Sahi, 1980:166). The breast band of Durga, the shakti of Shiva, the divine power or energy personified as female and dynamic as distinct from its male or passive aspect, (Stutely, 1977:260) is a serpent, and the noose with which Durga binds the buffalo demon is also a snake, (Gupta, 1979:35). The cobra also figures in popular beliefs as a bringer of male children, and of illness, unless propitiated.

Begging with cobra and *bin* runs as an important thread through the Kalbelias' lives. Even those who have never begged on the streets as snake charmers are surrounded by male family members who do. It provides an economic resource which can be used on a regular basis, and the preference for populated cities where donations are plentiful has caused the Kalbelias to make efforts to establish themselves in Jaipur. The importance of several squatter colonies in the city where they can live or stay for short or long visits are of inestimable value, both now and for the future, when, as seems likely, more members of the caste become educated and enter mainstream employment. These urban residential networks already make available work opportunities, hospitals, entertainment and food superior to those obtainable in rural areas. In Devghar, a rural village in Marwar for example, the vegetable market consisted of two old ladies. One sold cucumbers, the other squashes, nutritionally a limited selection.

Kalbelias tell many stories of how they came to have the occupation of snake charming and begging. This story highlights the religious aspect of their traditional

occupation "One thousand years ago a man was born from the mouth of a fish and his name was Machindra Nath. He went to the mountains where he became immersed in deep meditation. After some time he acquired two disciples. One was Gorakh Nath (famous in North India for his magical abilities) and the other was Kanipa, the *guru* of our caste. Both these disciples were hard workers.

One day Machindra Nath said he was going to examine their spiritual progress and showed them a bowl of poison and requested them to drink it. Gorakh Nath said 'Machindra Nath, this is not an examination of my work. It is a punishment of death. I will not drink the poison.' But Kanipa said, 'This is the order of my *guru* and it should be obeyed,' and he drank the poison. Then Machindra Nath pronounced, 'Gorakh Nath is disobedient. But you, Kanipa have passed this test. You will be reborn in the Jungle with two bags of ochre colour (the holy colour) and you will keep snakes to show for entertainment.' This was a blessing for Kanipa, and this is our religion," (Nala Nath).

There are other versions of this story (see Appendix I) where Lord Shiva offers the poison and is pleased with Kanipa for relieving him, (Shiva), of the burden of swallowing the poison of the universe. Shiva saved the gods by drinking the poison threatening the universe which emerged from the ocean when it was churned, (O'Flaherty, 1981:32). Thus Kalbelias explain why they have the right and ability which other castes do not, to have dominion over poison and poisonous creatures and to beg without shame as descendants of Kanipa's original disciples. Kalbelias regard themselves as representatives of Lord Shiva in matters concerning poison. Their *guru*, Kanipa is said to be one of the Nine Naths, perfected Masters who sit with Lord Shiva on Mount Kailash.

The story of Kanipa and Shiva's poison points to Kalbelias obligation to continue with their traditional occupation, but there is also the public response to begging.

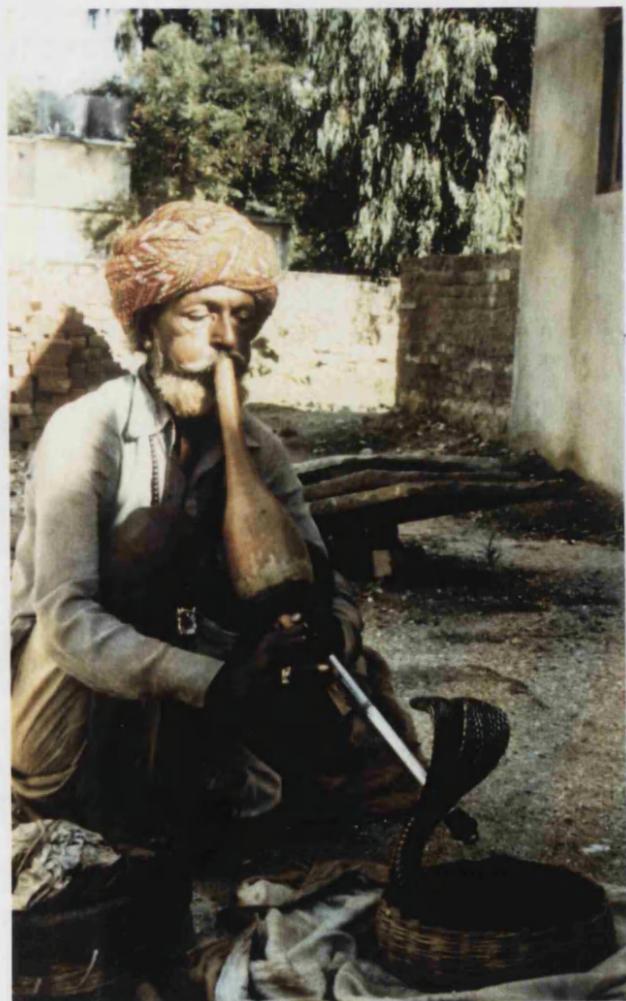
'It was never challenged that a person who is in need has a right to beg what he requires from others who are more fortunate. There is a clear obligation on the donor to give what is begged of him. Failure to do so will have evil consequences, (Carstairs, 1967:56). People give to beggars not because they enjoy giving... but because they feel intensely uncomfortable and guilty if they fail to do so,' (Carstairs, 1967:160).

Kalbelias describe themselves as beggars who beg because of need, but they are also suspected to be greedy rather than needy 'Donations are given to avoid the pestering of these kind of beggars. Snake charmers who wander the streets playing the pipes are perceived as worthless beggars and people give money to get rid of them,' (Dr. O. P. Joshi, private communication). Certainly, people do not always seem to give willingly.

But a Kalbelia does not have to be actively soliciting for alms by playing his pipes. Just the very sight of a sanpera walking down the street, bags slung either end of a stick on his shoulder, containing the cobra in its basket in one bag and items donated during the course of the day in the other, is enough for a housewife to call him over and give a few coins, or items of food or clothing. This may be because hospitality is one of the main duties of a married couple who should not eat their main meal of the day without feeding a guest, visitor, relative, or a poor man, (Jagannathan, 1984:65). Presumably a Kalbelia admirably fills the role of a poor man. As members of a tantrik sect Kalbelias also have a reputation as practitioners of black magic, even among educated people, and possibly some people give to them for fear they may suffer the effects of a curse



Kalbelia snake charming in the streets of a town.



if they do not. Donations are ostensibly given to buy milk to feed the cobra. This is thought to ensure a supply of milk to the donor's own children, but donations of clothes, chapatis etc are obviously going to be utilised by the snake charmer and his family.

Generally Delhiyale Kalbelias do not allow their womenfolk to go into the streets to beg, sing or dance, and the few women begging or singing in the streets of Jaipur at the Festival of Holi are saperins from other regions or from the Chakkivale (grindingstone makers) or the Chabdiyale (basket makers) sub-castes.

The Kalbelia sub-caste's customs differ slightly from region to region, so the picture is complicated by some Delhiyale Kalbelia men having married women from other regions of Rajasthan or from the Chabdiyale (basket-makers) and Chakkivale sub-castes, whose women are freer in their behaviour than is customary in the Delhiyale area of the Kalbelia sub-caste. If these women have been accustomed to begging while living with their natal families, they may demand to be allowed to continue. These two sub-castes although Jogi Naths, are considered by Kalbelias to be their ritual inferiors, "because of their behaviour and profession."

There are groups of tents made from rags and polythene, inhabited by various castes near the Chabdiyale camp at Krishnapura Marg. As we arrived, teenage girls from the basket-maker sub-caste came from the tea stall and waved and shouted at the two Kalbelia men accompanying me. Kalbelia girls would only behave like that toward their brothers, and would not have been hanging around tea stalls anyway. The girls gathered round me, peered with undisguised curiosity into my purse when I opened it, and when I said I was there to order a new basket for my cobra, which kept escaping from

its present wrecked basket, they briskly undertook the bargaining themselves and pocketed the deposit. Perhaps these particular girls are atypical: employed by the state sponsored entertainment party they are economically independent. The little children from the basket-maker's tents were as bold and persistent as a cloud of mosquitos, surrounding me, asking me for money, pulling at my clothes and hair, demanding photos. Kalbelia children are usually well behaved, and I felt inclined to believe them when the Kalbelias said although the basket makers are Nathas, they are below them in the caste hierarchy because of their behaviour.

A *sanperin* from any region, may be forced to beg if her husband has died and she has to support herself and her children because the rest of her family are unable to help. This does not happen very often, and generally it is uncommon for the Delhi-region Kalbelia women to go out begging. But one Kalbelia man said over the years his mother had come to so enjoy going out begging, meeting people, and being given many good things, money, clothes, cooked and uncooked food supplies, that she still begged in the streets with a statue of a goddess in her basket, even although all her sons were now prosperous and had forbidden her to do this. This practise of begging with a holy image is not confined to *saperins*, women from other castes do this also.

In the Marwar region, one Kalbelia women did not depict begging as enjoyable, merely as a lucrative economic strategy. Apart from child care, household work and taking the goats to pasture, several times each week Phuli goes by bus to a nearby town, taking the baby with her and begs round the streets. "Very often householders are abusive to me but they give a lot, mostly food and grains, not much money. I do very well out of it. I don't mind the abuse or the insults. If I go out into the streets I am all things to



Earning money as a snake charmer



Some Kalbelia women beg with a cobra or image of a god in their basket.

all men. They can think and say what they like, how can I stop them? But I don't take any notice, I don't let it upset me. I am there as a beggar. They don't have to treat me with respect. I am just there for the grains and the money, I don't care about the insults!" (Phuli).

But other members of the caste would like to break away from begging and snake charming. Dari Nath, a teenage boy who occasionally works at hotels as a snakecharmer as well as begging round the streets, admitted he had a problem with snakes - he was afraid of them! Nowadays he can handle and even feed cobras, but when he was younger he was very nervous of them and even now does not really like to touch them.

Some Kalbelias find begging round the streets acutely distasteful and embarrassing. Bhadra Nath, eager to get hotel snake charming work which is more akin to entertainment than soliciting for alms, was distinctly disenchanted with begging in the streets, which he was forced to resort to from time to time. He was trying hard to find some other way of earning money, but his earnings were never large. I asked why he did not just go out and beg. At first he said it was because there was no cobra available but then admitted he felt humiliated by begging. He preferred to work as a *rikshawala* even although this work is far more arduous than going round the streets with a *bin* and cobra.

Kalyan Nath, a college student said although he was born into this sub-caste, he did not want to beg or be a snake charmer. "People would say to me 'You are young and strong, why are you begging, why are you not working at a job?' And what could I say to them? I could remove a snake in an emergency, but actually I have never caught a snake in my life and have never wanted to. Other members of my family

work as snake charmers but I am hoping to get into Government service or some other job. I don't want to work as a *sanpera*."

But for any government job advertised, however lowly, there are many thousands of applicants. As members of a Scheduled Caste the Kalbelias may expect some preference as the Indian Government has a policy of 'upliftment' in favour of Scheduled Castes, but they would still be competing against numerous candidates. Government jobs are highly valued because of the security they offer, the pensions, and sometimes low-rental flats and low-fee English-medium schools for children of Government employees, and other perquisites. It is with this fierce competition in mind that Manendra Nath said, "Our children have to be brought up to think well of our occupation of snakecharming and begging. If they go to College they won't do snakecharming, and since there is a lack of Government or office jobs, they won't do anything at all and will be lazy and a burden on their family." (see Robertson, 1990: 3-8).

Some men feel no qualms about begging as a snakecharmer or pretending to be a *sadhu*. "I go in the streets with a pipe and call out O-alakh! I am a *sanpera* Nath, *nagyalia* (cobra man) Kalbelia, encouraging people to give food to the cobra and also to me. Sometimes I beg without a cobra or snake pipes, as a *sadhu*, but I am not really religious or devotional, I just go in that guise if a snake is not available," (Bhola Nath). One of the teenage boys broke in to justify his feelings of reticence about such activities. "When I go in the streets with a snake people say, 'You are a young man, why don't you work, why are you begging?' He (the other man) is an old person, that is why people give and don't discourage or expel him," (Dari Nath).

In Jaipur, many people besides Kalbelias beg. Men, women, children, and the handicapped. Children appear to relish their role as beggars, and operate in an assertive, not to say, aggressive manner. They gang up on a victim and laugh as he tries to escape in a *rikshaw* or into a shop or restaurant. Tourists are favourite targets of beggar-children who wrap their arms around their victim's legs, a gesture of worship and abject poverty, but which also ensures the victim is pinned to the spot. Kalbelias do not employ these methods. They are mild-mannered and polite and their main method of begging is to sit in a shady corner of the street playing their snake pipes to the cobra. The tune played is often '*Nagina*', music from the latest of three versions of the hit film of the same name, where the story reflects the popular belief that cobras can assume human form, (see Appendix II).

Kalbelias hold opinions concerning likely donors, "We like middle class or lower class people, not rich class people because they don't give anything. We know the houses where we will be given food, flour, money or clothes. The good houses are where the people are polite, and we discuss this among ourselves. But if there has been a death in a household, we won't take the clothes of the dead person, and we don't take donations from people who are lower in caste than us, even if they are rich. We recognise caste mostly by how people speak and what they say, but if we can't recognise their caste, what can we do about it? If we are directly offered something by someone we know is from a lower caste we would not be rude. We accept the donation, but don't use the money, food or clothes, we give it away to a person from another caste," (Manendra Nath).

It is not very likely that anyone lower in the caste hierarchy would proffer a donation to a Kalbelia, but it was not possible to test the assertion that a donation from a

rich Harijan for example, would not be utilised. However, Kalbelias share in the general Hindu concern with caste hierarchy and the opposite poles of purity represented by the Brahmin, and pollution represented by the Harijan, and believe they can be polluted by those lower in caste. Pollution can be temporarily accumulated from certain contacts, through the acceptance of food from castes lower than one's own for example. Temporary extra pollution, such as a death within the family passes away in time, but the innate pollution with which anyone but a Brahmin is born is fixed and inalienable and is a different entity from inauspiciousness which might conceivably be transferred to Kalbelias via money and goods they receive. Yet their comments deal only with the pragmatic aspects of which castes are likely to give them the most donations, rather than possible inauspiciousness that might be transferred via a coin or foodstuffs, even though they are aware of the notion that inauspiciousness can be transferred away from one person to another person, (see section on Healers in Chapter Five).

#### 4:3 FESTIVALS

The Kalbelias say they can beg without shame because they are followers of Kanipa, and the cobra is a representation of the God Shiva. At Shivaratri, the Festival of the God Shiva held in the Hindu month of Magh (January/February), Kalbelias go out in force wearing the ochre clothes of holy men/ascetics in order to beg as *sadhus*. It is traditional in the Nath caste as a whole, not just the Kalbelias' sub-caste, that upon this occasion Nath householders, whether or not they are conventionally employed, adopt the guise of ascetics. Other Hindus do not necessarily believe them to be true ascetics. Jatin Nath was admonished to "Get a proper job!" Some older men, if no cobra is available, admit to going out in the streets on other occasions and masquerading as ascetics. Men from other

castes also practise this deception, giving rise to a commonly-held suspicion that many *sadhus* are impostors. "Donations are made to *sadhus* in order to earn religious merit and are given even if the *sadhu* is suspected to be an impostor, because pious people do not want to accidentally deny a real *sadhu*," (Dr. O.P. Joshi, private communication).

At the time of Holi, the Festival of Colours in the Hindu month of Phalgun (February - March), Kalbelia men go out on the street and call on shopkeepers and onlookers for alms. They dress as women and dance accompanied by the *bin* and a small drum, (see also the *hijras* in Chapter Four). Sometimes men are accompanied by Kalbelia women singing the special Holi song but, "Kalbelia women from Delhi region are not allowed to sing and dance in the street," (Manendra Nath) or in front of any but closely related males. Here again, people are not very willing to give donations, and the singers sometimes wait some time outside a house or shop before receiving a few coins.

A Brahmin said his family gives for the specific purposes of ridding themselves of impurity and attracting wealth: "On the Festival of Makara Sankrati (between 12th to 14th January) in the month of Pus (December - January), the sun starts to return from the southern part to northern part, an inversion of the usual order." (The sun is crossing the Tropic of Capricorn) "A sweet dish is made and eaten among the family, but there is no family worship. Donations are made of growing things like *til* (sesamum) seeds, wheat, flour and fruit to beggars or to people who need it. This is to make the donors pure. We can't donate to equals or wealthier castes because that wouldn't have the required effect of bringing an increase of wealth." This attitude can be contrasted with that of Dari Nath: "Kalbelias beg at this time because people will give us something. That's all I

know about it." Manendra Nath said, "They give us these things because it is their religion."

One occasion when Kalbelias may be recipients of *dan* is the festival of *Nagpanchmi*, held on the 5th day of the dark fortnight of the Hindu month of Sravan (July-August) (A. Bhattacharyya, 1977:134) or according to Crooke, on the 5th day of the bright fortnight of Sravan (1926:396), the period of the waxing moon of the month of Sravan, the first month of the rainy season, (Vogel, 1972:275). There are variations in the date and local modes of observance, but generally pictures or images of snakes are made, and in the home there is no grinding or preparation of food and a fast is kept. No ploughing, digging or anything that might cause injury to snakes takes place on that day. Offerings of milk are placed near snake-holes, and an image of a cobra or an actual cobra is worshipped, (A. Bhattacharyya, 1977:152; Briggs 1982:149). Worship of, and offerings to cobras ensures fertility, and male, rather than female offspring. These are also acts of propitiation because anyone who may have killed or injured a cobra is believed to contract leprosy. And cobras are sometimes taken to be an incarnation of an ancestor, particularly one who is reluctant to abandon his worldly possessions and who, if neglected may cause sickness in the family.

At *Nagpanchmi*, even Kalbelias who normally follow other occupations borrow a basket and cobra and patrol the streets of Jaipur or the nearest town or village, playing their snake-pipes to let it be known they have a cobra available for worship. Even people who do not normally donate money to snake charmers will do so on this occasion.

Those men whose main occupation is that of snake charmer have non-Kalbelia families request their attendance in advance, and take their cobra to the house where the

family assemble to worship the snake, after which they break their fast. By late afternoon Kalbelias make their way home where some worship the cobra: "The *pujan* (worship) is carried out at home and there should be *dudh* (milk), *dahi* (curd), *ghi* (clarified butter) red coloured powder and a coloured cotton laid on a *thali*, (large dish). We worship the snake and afterwards release it in the jungle, away from houses and where people are living. Then my sister puts a *tilak* (auspicious mark) on my forehead with red colour and ties the thread round my wrist. To replace the cobra we release we will catch another, but not on that special day," (Manendra Nath).

Not all Kalbelias who release their cobras on Nagpanchmi worship the snake. They appeared frankly embarrassed and were nonplussed and silent when caste-mates said, very seriously, that they worshipped their cobras on Nagpanchmi. Those who worship the snake, Nanda Nath, Nabhoga Nath, Naia Nath, Bhuji Nath and Manendra Nath, are all men whose main occupation is the catching and showing of snakes and the curing of snake bite. They are the expert snake charmers, whilst other men and teenage boys who did not worship the snakes do not themselves catch cobras or cure snake bite, and are involved in other occupations economically more important to them than the role of snake charmer.

Kalbelias perceive the rituals carried out by themselves and the people who make offerings to the cobra on Nagpanchmi to be worship offered to the cobra representing the God Shiva:

'Puja... is a ritual to show respect, homage and devotion... it serves to bring deity and worshipper closer together. Puja consists of a series of offerings to or services for the deity, which are usually performed before the deity's image... they almost invariably include an offering of food... Afterwards this food is normally

"returned" to the priest or devotee, or both, as *prasada*, the material symbol of the deity's power and grace, which are internalised by the human being when the food is eaten,' (Fuller, 1988: 22).

The cobra is also venerated because the earth is supported on Shesha Nag, a thousand headed serpent, (Kanitkar, 1984: 43). Vogel suggests the ceremony is worship in some parts of India (1972: 277ff), in others the rituals are propitiation: 'to separate the worshipper from an angry deity or malevolent demon', (Fuller, 1988: 23). But inauspiciousness transferred in *dan* must be assimilated by the recipient:

'If not properly "digested" . . . the inauspicious qualities . . . exhibit their negative consequences in him and in his family: disease will affect them, they may become mad, their "lineage" will gradually fail, the intellect will be ruined, sin and evil will come upon them, and their "fiery energy" (*tej*) will be decreased . . .' (Raheja, 1988: 91).

The Kalbelias attribute such dire happenings to a black magic curse - which they say no longer exists in these modern times. But Kalbelias may be considered by others to be 'appropriate recipients' of *dan* on Nagpanchmi (see Chapter Three), and the worship of the cobra before its release by some Kalbelias, could be an implicit acknowledgement of this and a way of 'digesting' *dan* or of passing it to the cobra, identified with Shiva and soon to be released. However, my informants themselves never said they were accepting *dan* or were worshipping the cobra in order to digest *dan* or transfer it, and evince no claims about using money and goods gained on Nagpanchmi. The Mahabrahmins, funeral priests in Benares, believe acceptance of *dan* puts them at risk of leprosy or dying a horrible death, vomiting excrement, (Parry, 1980: 89; 104; 1985: 621; 626). Kalbelias do not advise their sons to abandon

the acceptance of alms for these reasons, as do the Mahabrahmins. In fact, Kalbelias say they have never had a case of leprosy in their sub-caste.

'Heat produced by austerities (*tap, tapasya*) is a prerequisite for the successful assimilation of the inauspiciousness... and if this heat is present the negative qualities will be rearticulated without disastrous consequences to the recipient... Brahman recipients must then replenish their power by daily austerities, the recitation of *mantras* and so forth, and other categories of recipients do so through other means,' (Raheja, 1988: 91).

Harita Nath said, "If you are pure in spirit, you can do any work without danger." However, the reasons Kalbelias give for reciting the correct *mantra* when begging and wearing the ochre appear to refer more to their view of what a Kalbelia Jogi Nath should be, rather than any ostensible acknowledgement of inherent danger in the alms they receive. Only a few older men who take a particular interest in religious matters, know more than a few *mantras*. Bhadra Nath, who said those who wear the ochre should know the *mantra* that goes with the wearing of it, does not himself know the *mantra*, even although he has his own *guru*, and two of his uncles are also *gurus*. If they believed receiving alms wearing an ochre-coloured shirt and turban to be a dangerous undertaking and reciting the correct *mantra* a defence, they certainly would make it their business to ensure Bhadra was well-armed with that knowledge before he followed the traditional occupation of the sub-caste. A young son of one of these *gurus* also begs in the streets with cobras and says he does not know any *mantras*.

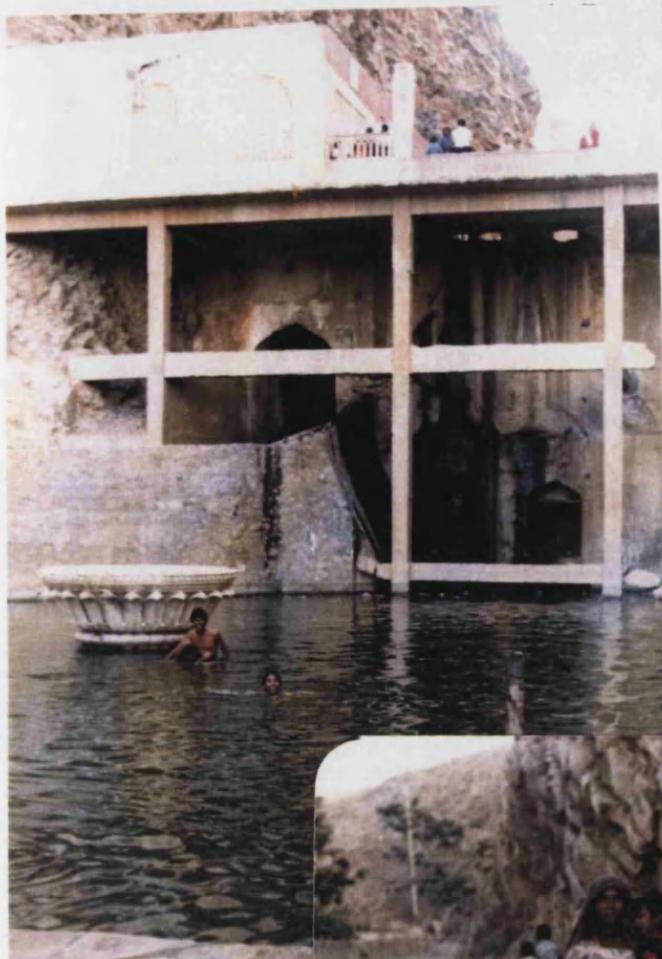
Kalbelias usually receive worldly gifts not intended to transfer inauspiciousness, but on Nagpanchmi, when they may conceivably be accepting *dan*, some, but not all Kalbelias, perform rituals which might be for the purpose of passing on the inauspiciousness to the cobra, which represents Shiva

and is about to be released into the wild, perhaps serving the purpose of a *totka*, (see the section on Healers in Chapter Five). The Kalbelias themselves evince no apprehension that *dan* is involved, but Raheja and Parry have shown that donors or recipients are not always cognizant of all the ramifications of giving or receiving *dan*, (Raheja, 1988: 69-70; 112; 172-4; 246; Parry: 1980: 102-3).

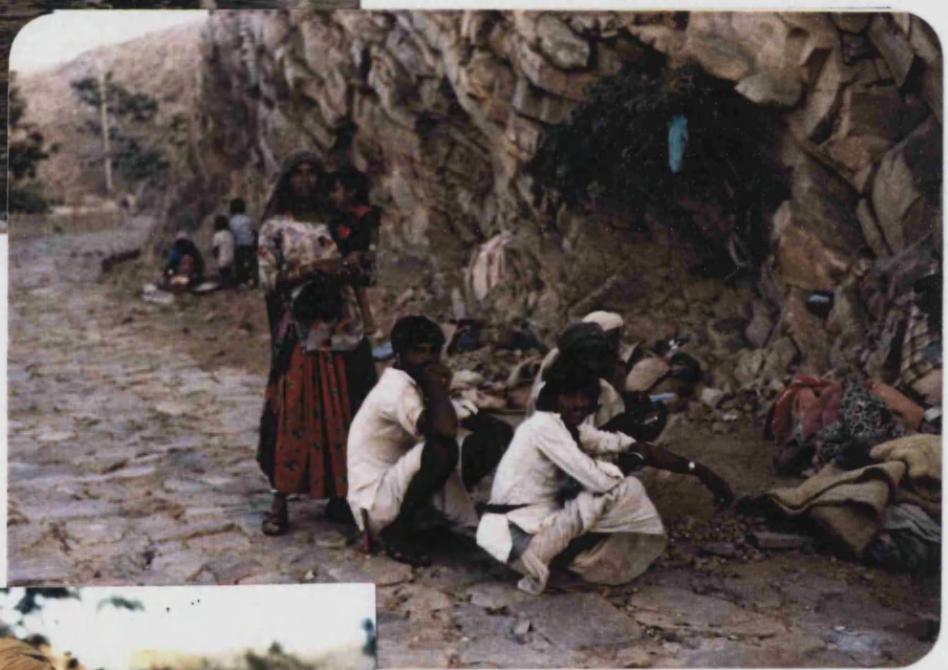
#### 4: 4 GALTA SHRINE

On the second, eighth, eleventh and fifteenth days of the Hindu month of Kartik (October - November), many Kalbelias from surrounding villages congregate at Galta, a holy place in the hills just outside Jaipur. A conglomeration of temples, holy baths fed by an underground spring, refreshment shops and booths cover the steep gorge and spectacular hill side. Kalbelia families camp on the steep, winding pathway to the shrines, brewing up *chay* (tea) over fires, both men and women helping with the cooking, grinding spices, peeling garlic and kneading dough to make *chapatis*. Children play and people visit other family groups.

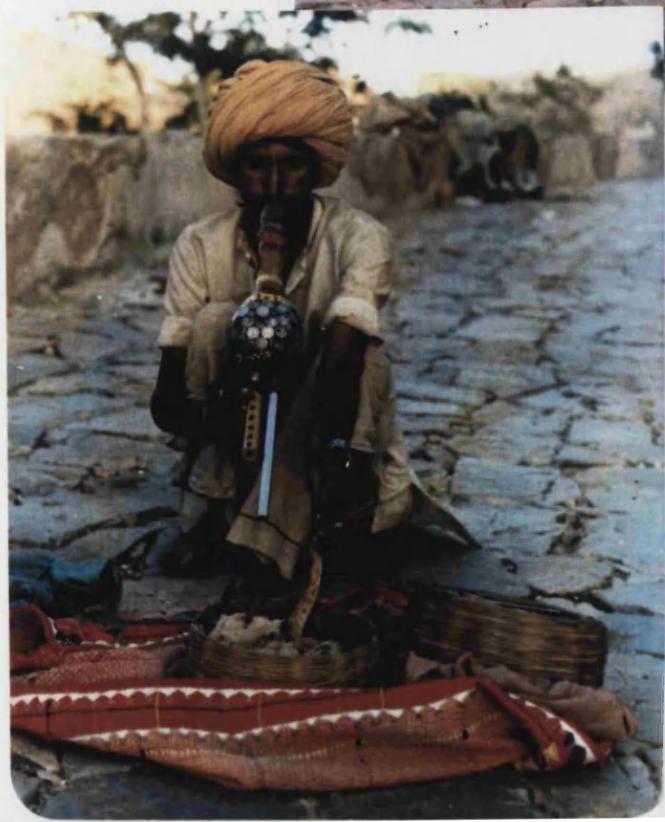
Hindus go to Galta to worship at the temples, make offerings of crops to pandits and feed the beggars. The offering of donations goes on for the whole period of fifteen days from the 1st to the 15th of Kartik and the Kalbelias are not the only beggars there, but at each twist and turn in the path there is a Kalbelia man with cobras and pipe. Bhuji Nath was there in the guise of '*nandiyala*', with his two cows decorated to represent Nandi the bull, vehicle of the god Shiva. Women, both Kalbelias and from other castes, sit beside cloths spread out to receive offerings of grain from the pilgrims to the shrines and temples. It is likely that the pattern of alms-giving follows that described for the temples at Kalighat, (Chaudhuri, 1987) and Puri, (Jha, 1979), (see below: Discussion of Begging).



Holy bath at Galta



Camping on the pathway at Galta



Snake charming at Galta.

Although the Kalbelias did not mention this connection to me, according to Ghurye, the founder of the Gaita Gadi, Pavahari Krishnadasa, was adept in the practice of *yoga* and had some connection with the Nathapantha. The centre near Jaipur, which he captured for the Ramanandi sect, formerly belonged to the Nathapantha, but he succeeded in impressing the Maharani of Jaipur against her Kanphata preceptor Tara Nath, described as a *Kapalika yogi*, (skull-bearing *yogi*) who shortly left with his pupil Catur Nath, (1964: 166; 175).

The historical connection of the Naths with the place might explain why of all the beggars at Gaita, the Kalbelias and their families were the most numerous.

#### 4:5 STREETS

The Kalbelias who beg in the streets of Jaipur with their pipes and baskets of snakes are not strictly organised, although there is a day-to-day casual agreement about who goes where and when. This is because should one road of residential homes be canvassed by a whole procession of snake charmers they would get short shrift from the householders, although it is often possible to hear more than one *bin* playing in adjoining streets. Sometimes local children follow a Kalbelia chanting rude slogans. He usually ignores them but if especially goaded, he may remove the lid of the snake basket and flourish it at his tormenters. This has the effect of quickly dispersing them, since there remains in the minds of young children a lingering doubt as to whether captured snakes have had their poison removed.

Shopkeepers keep a store of small denomination coins, one or two of which they hand over almost without looking up. There are beggars trusted to help themselves from this fund of small coins and who never take more than their customary allowance of five or ten paise per day. Kalbelias do not collect alms in this way, which suggests organisation

and arrangement between beggars and shopkeepers, (see Nanda, 1989; on the *hijras*, and Schak, 1988, on Chinese beggars in the Discussion of Begging, below).

It is unusual for a Kalbelia to receive a request to see the cobras but it does happen sometimes. Dari Nath was wearing the characteristic ochre dress of a snakecharmer and carrying two of his father's cobras in a basket on his bicycle, and returning to the *kachchi besti* where his family was temporarily staying, when he was hailed, and offered one rupee to exhibit his cobras, and then given a further fifty paise to feed them a mouse provided by the spectator. He was gratified to see quite a crowd gather.

#### 4:6 TOURIST SITES

As well as walking around the streets playing the *bin*, Kalbelias also derive part of their income from passers-by and tourists at the Hava Mahal, the City Palace and the Observatory. Beggars from other castes are also regulars at these places. Here the snakecharmers have a rota system for sitting in the favoured spots in the shade, because sitting in the full glare of the hot Rajasthan sun for more than a short period is debilitating. Each Kalbelia is there only for a couple of hours, then he gives up his place to another snake charmer. The rationale is that there should only be one Kalbelia seen at a time because money will be given to a single snake charmer, but if many are present, passers-by are likely to become confused or angry and give to no-one.

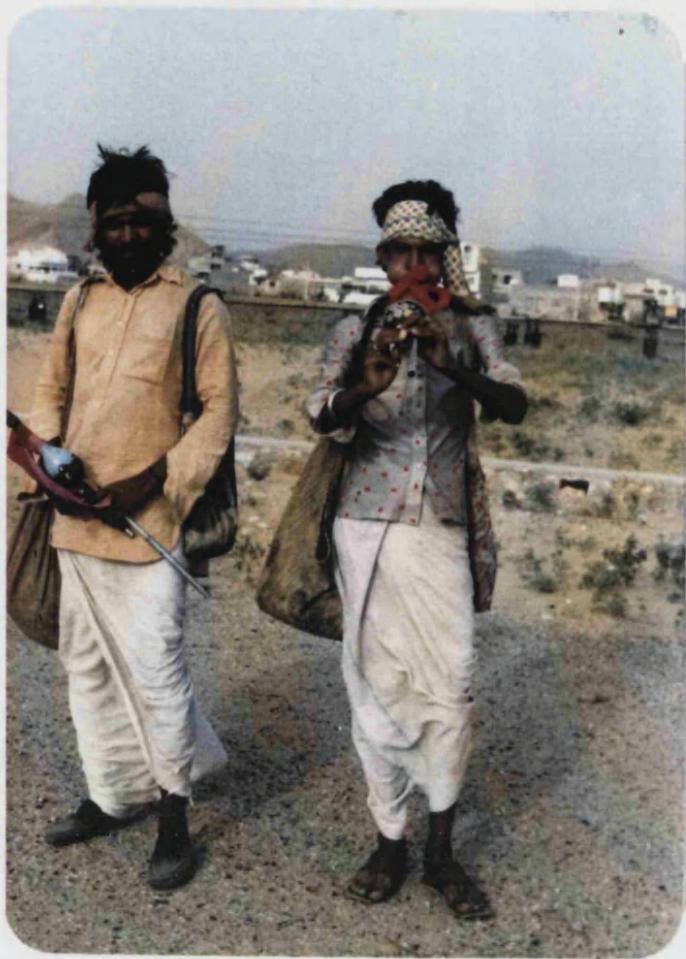
Kalbelias try to avoid annoying would-be donors which might result in the authorities banning them from the area. Young Vibhu Nath was at the City Palace Museum with two cobras in a basket, smoking a *biri* (cigarette), and not playing his *bin* which might have been a warning to the foreign tourist walking backwards taking a photo. He narrowly avoided stepping into the open basket containing

the cobras and was very shocked. Gopal was scolded by other Kalbelias for not paying attention. They said the tourist may have been injured or made a complaint and then all Kalbelias would have been excluded from that area.

The Kalbelias' policy of not flooding a site marked down as suitable for begging is echoed by other beggars who hope to attract donations of money from foreign visitors near the ancient Palaces or the Museum. One day there was a fight between a woman beggar who cries out pitifully and wrings her hands, but other than being rather bald has no obvious disability, and two lepers, one of whom was confined to a small wheeled cart which her partner managed to pull in spite of having no fingers. Normally the lepers begged amongst moving traffic in the main road outside the old city walls, and so the fight was over an infringement of territory. Other beggars there didn't feel threatened by the appearance of the lepers, but none of them were sick and/or helpless, and the bald woman knew more sick beggars meant that money given by passers-by would probably be divided among all the three disabled beggars, instead of given only to her.

#### 4: 7 RAILWAY CROSSING

There is usually a small group of Kalbelias camping near the main road close to a railway level crossing outside Jaipur. The Kalbelias begging here stay in tents made from quilts and polythene in order to avoid the daily journey by bus or hired bicycle from Jagatpura village, a few miles away. When the level crossing gates close to allow a train to pass, vehicles on the road are forced to stop sometimes for as long as half an hour. Truck drivers make up most of the traffic, and there are a few camel carts, donkey carts, cyclists, scooters, cycle and auto rikshaws, and somewhat rarely, a private car. While Kalbelia women and children stay under the shade of a tree near the chay stall, the men



Begging at the Railway crossing.



patrol the lines of stationary vehicles, soliciting donations by playing their pipes, carrying the cobra in a basket slung in a *jholi* (large cloth bag) suspended from a stick slung over the shoulder.

Most Indian people have seen snake charmers on many occasions and rarely ask for the cobra to be displayed. On the contrary, my impression is they pay in order to avoid seeing the snake. A basket of cobras suddenly appearing at the open door of the lorry cab does not please everyone and the sound of a *bin* is indication enough of what is concealed in the basket and that the Kalbelia is begging. Financial pickings at this pitch are small. If local lorry drivers are obliged to stop here every day on their way to and from work it would soon become an expensive business if they gave something each time. This applies also to the long distance lorry drivers from the Punjab or Gujarat who stop many times on their journey and are approached by many beggars.

Another negative factor is that traffic cannot be approached when it is moving, so much of the snake charmers' time is spent sitting under a tree near the *chayvala*'s stall. Pedestrians are few and probably poor, otherwise they would not be on foot in a hot, noisy and dusty main road which has no shops or anything worth visiting. Indeed, it is likely other pedestrians are competing beggars: a blind woman led by her husband by means of a stick, a young woman with a baby, a *sadhu* who may or may not be genuine. So when the traffic finally comes to a halt in order to let the train go over the level-crossing, the beggars are galvanised into action, the line of waiting vehicles quickly canvassed and its generosity swiftly exhausted.

In Rajasthan, people can arrive with tents and carts and make camp behind a few trees on a main road, or on the outskirts of a village, sometimes on the very pavements of

towns. They light cooking fires and hang washing in the sun. Passers-by carefully walk round the bare-bottomed babies and the women grinding wheat, and normally no-one interferes. But this usual happy state of affairs had been disrupted at the railway crossing. The police told the Kalbelias to remove their tents from the railway crossing because they have a permanent settlement of mud huts at Harjipura and it should be possible to travel from there each day by bicycle, by bus or even on foot.

Some Kalbelias shifted their tents to fields outside a nearby village, and begged there. Others returned to Harjipura and travelled by bus or bicycle each day to the crossing, but Nala Nath said, "I have not gone back to the village because I don't want to spend money on the bus fares, so now I'm camping on a construction site. No one objects. There are other people staying there also, grindingstone makers, people who collect paper rubbish from the streets and *rikshawale*. I am showing the cobra and playing the *bin* round the streets. Gonanda Nath is also there in the guise of a *sadhu* and is selling medicines. We don't expect to be there long, because after a while the police will forget they asked us to move and we can camp near the railway crossing again." Some guests from a nearby luxury hotel may have commented unfavourably on being approached for money at the crossroads.

There are also transients going through the streets of Jaipur. For example, Bhuji Nath walked miles from Jhakari, his village outside Jaipur, stayed at the Gulab Marg squatter settlement in the centre of Jaipur, then walked through Jaipur, stayed at the Railway *kachchi basti* on the other side of Jaipur and then walked on to Harjipura, a village just beyond the suburbs of Jaipur where he was trying to arrange a marriage for his younger brother. En route he begged as a *nandiyala*, leading two decorated cows

dressed up as representations of Nandi the Bull, the vehicle of the God Shiva. While Bhuji Nath walked with the cows and begged, his wife and baby son travelled by bus to Marjipura, escorted by her brother. The marriage negotiations proving abortive, Bhuji Nath returned to his own village, again walking with his two ceremonially dressed cows, soliciting alms as he went, staying with relatives and caste-mates en route.

#### 4: 8 HOTELS

Hotel snakecharming should arguably not be considered to be begging because tourists are, I think, paying for entertainment. However the Kalbelias themselves always describe it as begging. It is a half-way stage, perhaps, between the donations they receive from other Indians with their cultural connotations, and the foreign tourist's perception of payment in return for being entertained, diverted or even informed.

Kalbelias in the best situation to collect money and goods that can later be sold for cash are those who exhibit cobras in Jaipur's luxury hotels. Snake charming at the hotels is a monopoly in the hands of one family of which Biman Nath is head. He is held in such high esteem that when he suggested to Jaipur hoteliers that he could organise snake charmers to be a regular and dependable asset to high class hotels his offer was eagerly accepted. Biman Nath himself no longer works as a snake charmer. He made the acquaintance of a foreign businessman whilst working at one of the prestigious hotels and they are now business associates, buying Indian and Tibetan folk artefacts for export. For working purposes his family primarily consists of two younger brothers, one of whom is in charge of the day to day running of the hotel rota, and the two sons of a brother who died, and then other wider kindred.

Biman Nath's family do not pay commission to the hotels to show snakes to tourists on hotel premises, nor do they receive any payment from the hotel management for providing this extra tourist facility. But the hotels accept only snake charmers sent by Biman Nath's family, guaranteed to be polite, punctual, and dressed traditionally as Kalbelias should be. So the hotel Kalbelia rides to the hotel upon a hired bicycle, wearing a white *dhoti*, ochre *pagri* and *kurta* and loaded down with a basket containing one or two cobras, a larger basket for a python, and a mongoose.

This arrangement is good for the hotels because at no cost or trouble to themselves they have an additional tourist attraction totally organised for them, and it is good for Biman Nath's family because showing the cobras at top hotels is lucrative compared to donations attracted by wandering the streets or waiting at the railway crossing. The family allow other members of the Kalbelia sub-caste to work at the hotels on a commission basis. The core of regulars from Biman Nath's extended family occasionally yield up their places on the rota in order to attend to domestic duties in their home village, where some have a little agricultural land, or to participate in an entertainment tour. These places are eagerly sought after, but any Kalbelia not a close member of this family pays a commission of up to six hundred rupees per month to work as a snakecharmer at a top hotel, (I rented a two-roomed bungalow with kitchen and bathroom for the same amount each month). Biman Nath's family arrange for one of their own experienced members to accompany novice hotel-sanperas until they are familiar with the etiquette of such luxurious surroundings: no smoking *biris* or chewing *pan*, and how to cope with questions from guests who do not speak Hindi. The family provides cobras, mongoose, python and traditional dress which has to be pressed and spotless. That most Kalbelias are willing to pay a commission of up to six

hundred rupees per month in order to gain access to luxury hotels shows how lucrative this work is. A day's work on road construction pays about ten rupees.

There are hotels, still in the luxury league, where the commission payable is not so high. "If a Kalbelia comes from another village and wants to work at The Lily Hotel he only has to pay three hundred rupees, because the Lily Hotel is not so good for snake charmers. But sometimes people ask permission to go to the hotel and they earn there but don't give my cousin-brother any money. Some people are not reliable," (Manasi Nath).

Hotel work consists of sitting for three hours in the garden of the hotel, ready to show the snakes to any guest who evinces interest. The Kalbelia plays the *bin* (snake pipes), the cobra rears up, spreads its hood and sways to and fro. Some visitors ask to see a fight between a cobra and a mongoose, a pet the Kalbelias have had since it was a baby. It is tame and stands on top of the snake basket secured to the back of the sanpera's bicycle as he cycles through the busy Jaipur traffic on his way to the hotel. My ten year old daughter played with the mongoose at every opportunity, and I was startled to later read of 'its great carnassal teeth, which shut down in serried rows, the upper on the lower, like the remorseless blades of shears,' (Elliot, 1934:224). The mongoose figures in Indian folk tales as the implacable enemy of the cobra, and the snakecharmer will, if requested and for a fee, stage a fight between the mongoose and cobra, although they never allow it to get to the point where the mongoose kills the cobra. Most hotel guests are content to just see the cobra and mongoose, and fights are rarely requested or staged.

If a curious hotel guest asks the Kalbelia how he catches dangerous, poisonous cobras, he explains that

because of the magical power vested in him by virtue of being a Jogi Nath Kalbelia, when he plays the *bin* the cobra erupts from its lair hissing and breathing fire but powerless to resist the call of the *bin* and the will of the magician-snakecharmer. Then the fearless Kalbelia utters a mantra which renders the cobra docile. Another note is played on the *bin* and the cobra creeps quietly into the Kalbelia's basket, recognising its master. A further mantra is employed to prevent the snake from biting, or a secret medicine is administered which prevents the snake from producing poison for a period of time. If he is not feeling imaginative that day the snake charmer simply says the poison has been removed. Novice snake-charmers who have never caught a cobra do not admit this. They think tourists expect a dramatic story and should not be disappointed.

A python is also displayed at the hotels. Pythons do not have poison apparatus, although they could inflict a nasty bite with their teeth which might go septic. The python owned by the Kalbelias was young because as they become older they grow to an enormous size and can be exceedingly dangerous. 'They launch themselves at their prey, wind their powerful bodies round it... The force they exert is enormous and a large animal has all its bones broken and is reduced to inert pulp,' (Elliot, 1934: 253-256). The difference in force exerted by a cobra twined around my arm compared to even the young and small python was marked. A cobra exerts muscular power akin to a human arm engaged in a playful competition of strength, but the python pulled painfully tight and I needed help to disengage it.

Hotel guests like to be photographed while they hold a cobra, or pose by its side as it rears and spreads its hood, or with the python draped around their shoulders. The snake charmer poses alongside, holding the snake's tail in case of



Setting out as a *Nandivālā*.



Snake charming at luxury hotels  
is lucrative.



Showing the mongoose.

accidents. Not of a bite or lethal embrace, but because the snake may escape and disappear down one of the rat holes found in the gardens of even the best hotels.

Pythons have the advantage of being viewer-friendly. They are prettily patterned and appear to have no objection to being picked up and draped around anyone's shoulders. A disadvantage, apart from their high initial cost is that although they can be kept for a much longer period of time than a cobra, since a young python appears to be none the worse for its captivity, they eventually grow to colossal proportions and are extremely heavy to carry about in a basket under the broiling sun of Rajasthan, even on a bicycle or bus. In addition, a succession of baskets, steadily increasing in size have to be provided as the python grows larger. Pythons are fed on goat's meat which is rather expensive, but the cost of food was never the reason for the snake charmers preferring the cobras with which their occupation is traditionally associated, but rather the initial cost of the python and the inconvenience of its eventual large size and heavy weight. Pythons are popular snakes for hotel work because even a baby python is bigger than a cobra and makes a better photograph when draped around a tourist's neck. A cobra makes a fine display on the grass with its hood spread but once picked up, diminishes into nothing more spectacular-looking than a small piece of rope. But pythons are used only by hotel Kalbelias because they are expensive to purchase (about three hundred rupees) and entail the disadvantages mentioned above.

The snake charmer always requests that a copy of the photograph is sent to him, care of the hotel. The photograph is displayed in his album with testimonials from hotels where he has worked, and letters from delighted tourists. These he shows to hotel managers or tourist camp organisers

to prove he is experienced in working in top hotels with foreign tourists and has suitable clothes to wear.

"Tourists are sometimes interested in the snakes and sometimes not. Usually they stand far away, then one person comes over and asks if the snake is poisonous and I explain that it is not poisonous, then the Group Leader will ask how much we will charge for ten or fifteen people to have their photos taken with the snake, then all the tourists come and take photographs and hold the snakes. Tourists usually want to know if the snake is poisonous, how long is it, what does it eat, did I catch it, and how much money to have their photo taken with the snakes?" (Manasi Nath; Manendra Nath).

The correct reply to the last question is "As you wish!" and whether the amount proffered is one rupee or one thousand (this never happened!) it must be accepted politely and without argument, although the snake charmer may allow a look of profound disappointment to cross his face when the donation is smaller than hoped for or reasonably expected. Actual remonstrance is out of order, as fifteen year old Dari Nath was sternly informed by other Kalbelias, after a hotel session where he refused to accept five rupees in return for posing for numerous photographs, answering questions and generally exerting himself. It was wrong, he was told, to demand the tourist hand over at least twenty rupees. This puts the goodwill of the hotel at stake, since the guest might complain about Dari Nath's rapaciousness, and five rupees is five rupees and even one rupee is better than nothing which was the outcome of that particular encounter.

Kalbelias do not set specific prices for posing for photographs. They hope a rich tourist out of ignorance of the usual level of donations, or on a whim, will give them a larger amount than they themselves would dare to suggest.

This happens quite often although the system does not always work to the Kalbelias' advantage. A tourist apparently happily handed over a not-exorbitant sum of money, only to later denounce the snake charmer to the hotel manager, who ordered him to return the money forthwith.

Hotel snake charmers are sometimes given gifts in addition to, or instead of money. Biros, bottles of beer, biscuits, snacks, clothes, even wristwatches and cameras have been given by tourists. These find a ready market round the squatter settlements. Russian tourists are reputed never to give money, only biros, badges, biscuits, and once, a blow-up rubber toy Basset hound given to Manasi Nath who rather resented being fobbed off with a toy. Tourists are portrayed by the Kalbelias as strange beings. A tourist gave a young Kalbelia boy money and cigarettes, but then another man demanded to know the boy's age. When told "Fourteen years," he forbade the boy to smoke the cigarettes, and seeing him an hour later having a surreptitious smoke, smacked his face.

I enquired as to how much money they received, but I was met with evasive answers, explicable in a society where the best defence against others who might have a legitimate moral or social claim to your money, or might stupidly tell someone else who has such a claim, is to pretend to have no money at all. Ever. To keep up the appearance of destitution, teenage Kalbelias habitually borrow money from each other under some pretext or other, even when they do not need to, and try not to pay it back for as long as possible, preferably never. The obligation to share goes a long way to explain the Kalbelias ethic of frugality. To avoid unwelcome demands or the need to defend one's property, it is often better simply to conceal what otherwise might be demanded. One boy just back from his

morning shift at the hotel, took a bath at my house. I noticed he had left his wallet on the window-ledge and before handing it back I counted the money he was carrying: about seventy rupees in notes, and he probably had coins in the pocket in his *kurta*. My research assistant thought seventy plus rupees for a boy of fourteen or fifteen years old to be carrying, was a lot of money. An average wage for women working on construction work or road making is ten rupees a day, a meal at one of the bus station cafes was about five rupees, and he had yet to go to his afternoon session of snake charming at one of the other hotels.

Snake charming at the Jaipur hotels is lucrative, and because the Kalbelias have the permission of the hotel management to be there, it is unnecessary to bribe the police to avoid threats of arrest. Contact with wealthy, generous tourists is in a comfortable environment instead of in the streets or near a historical monument competing with others for alms under the blazing sun. For those Kalbelias who are members of Biman Nath's extended family, hotel work means a virtually guaranteed enhanced income compared to other Kalbelias who beg in the streets or do odd jobs such as *rikshaw* cycling or road construction. Hotel snake charming has made it possible for some agricultural improvements to be financed, such as an electrically operated tube well in one of the rural hamlets. And there is the possibility of making valuable contacts such as the businessman Biman Nath met. Now Biman Nath travels abroad and brings back foreign clothes and goods for his family. His hut contains huge padlocked metal trunks, popularly thought to be full of immense wealth.

When Biman Nath's son's engagement was arranged, Biman Nath told the prospective in-laws that Mukunda Nath was studying and would not be available to do brideservice. (see

Chapter Six). Instead of paying money in lieu of the brideservice Biman Nath offered them a permanent place on one of the hotel rotas, free of commission. So Biman Nath's innate charm and business acumen has won him not only a good personal income, but relief from the burden of bridewealth compensation too. He has secured a good living for his close family and other relatives, and for a wider circle of members of the sub-caste too. Although Biman Nath himself no longer works as a snake charmer he still has the power of veto over anyone who asks to be included on the hotel snake charming rota. "Very many people ask for permission to work in the hotels. These things depend on the reliability of the person and the arrangement they make with Biman Nathji or Manendra Nathji," (Manasi Nath). And although Kalbelias refer to hotel work as begging, hotel guests see the display of snakes and mongoose as entertainment, and the money they hand over as paying for the sanpera's time, trouble and attention.

On the face of it, it might appear easy for any Kalbelia to break this family's monopoly of Jaipur's better hotels, but there are a number of reasons why this is not likely. Top hotels are huge and luxurious, full of vigilant staff who would certainly question the credentials of any newcomer who just walked in and started snake charming or dancing or whatever. To even attempt this would take nerve, and most Kalbelias live in tents made of rags and polythene bags, or tiny mud huts. A huge luxury hotel is another world to them, and none would attempt to gatecrash such a place. The Lily Hotel, considered by the Kalbelias not to be of the highest standard, is the first venue for newcomers. Only after they have shown themselves able to cope with that hotel are they allowed to "sit down" in the more lush hotels.

The hotels require a snake charmer be guaranteed to behave well and wear a clean, freshly pressed ochre shirt and spotless white *dhoti*, and these are not easily available. Kalbelias met at my house after their appearance at a hotel to strip off their ochre "uniform" and give it to the next man waiting to return to the same hotel or to go to another. The snake pipes, cobra, python and mongoose were also often handed over. For the payment of commission to Biman Nath's family, hotel snake charmers get relatively clean uniform, sometimes a bicycle, snake pipes, a python and mongoose, both expensive to purchase, and one or two cobras, which in the hot weather are hard to find or even buy. They also gain a mentor, an experienced hotel snake charmer to accompany and instruct them in the behaviour appropriate to these unfamiliar surroundings.

In addition, if visiting Kalbelias have no relatives living within reach of the hotels, they can temporarily stay at the Railway *kachchi basti*. Although this is a squatter settlement, it is internally regulated. The people living there will not allow newcomers to flood in, so visiting Kalbelias have to be guests of a family already living there.

Kalbelias are essentially a peaceful, law abiding community who avoid friction over working places by sensible discussion. If there was serious disagreement over working practises the matter would be taken to their *panchayat* (caste council). If anyone tried to infringe the hotel monopoly I doubt they would find much sympathy from other Kalbelias. Under the existing system there is opportunity for all to work in the hotels. Although commission is payable, hotel snake charming is somewhat in the nature of a franchise operation with pitch, advice, uniform and all necessities provided, and usually the takings are large enough for most men to pay the commission without complaint.

Possibly the few people who are said not to have paid commission may have hit an exceptionally poor week with an almost empty hotel or tourists who were just not interested in cobras. It is accepted by all that it was Biman Nath who set this scheme in place and it is only right that he and his immediate family should reap the major benefit. After all, they do not keep all the rich pickings to themselves. Other Kalbelias can come in from the rural areas, stay in the *kaschchi basti*, and earn good money for a week or two. And it is money that would not have been available at all if it had not been for Biman Nath's entrepreneurial spirit.

I asked Abhi Nath, a member of the hotel-monopoly family what they did with their income. I put it to him that some of his sub-caste, mainly his family, seem to earn as much as some office workers in Jaipur, yet they do not live like office workers in flats or houses, but stay in mud huts in squatter settlements, or in tents by the side of the road (although nearly all have permanent homes in villages as well). He said one family member was in debt after a business selling oxen failed, leaving him with huge interest charges. "But everyone is different with their money. Biman Nath is thinking of buying land in a village nearer the main road and building a good stone house there. He already has a hut and owns some land around his village, but it is far away from the market and difficult to reach the hospital," he said.

Like the 'beggar money-lender' Pardhis (Birch: 1971), it is not in the Kalbelias' interests to display wealth if they are fortunate enough to possess it. They know conventional jobs are hard to secure and they may have to resort to begging again, and people would be unwilling to give donations to those whom they had reason to suspect may be as well off as themselves.

#### 4.9 DISCUSSION OF BEGGING

"Kalbelias are saving a lot of money. Banjaras, Kalbelias and Lohars (traditionally non-pastoral nomads) are all saving a lot of money although they seem poor. They are saving for their children. Their children are still taught to beg and to save. We are in the habit of saving, not spending. I have two bank accounts, one in Jaipur and one in the town near my village," (Manendra Nath). He is, I think, exceptional in having bank accounts, although Naia Nath said, "There is a village near Bundi where the Kalbelias are very wealthy but they are still showing cobras in the streets. Even if a man is a millionaire he has to show snakes in the streets because this is our *dharma* (religious duty) and our way of life. We have a tradition that within each household at least one person has to beg in the streets with cobra and pipe." I would be surprised to learn that any Kalbelia has achieved millionaire status just yet, but due to their frugal and unostentatious lifestyle, it is likely that most families succeed in having some savings.

Alongside the traditional religious imperative to adhere to the occupation given to the Kalbelias' guru, Kanipa, is the knowledge that begging is financially rewarding compared to other limited avenues presently open to Kalbelias. Berland reports that in Muslim Pakistan, the Sansi, Chunger and Qalandar communities derive as much as sixty per cent of their income from begging (1983:29). It would be risky and foolish therefore, to totally abandon this economic strategy, even when things appear to be going well. Unexpected circumstances may dictate that any Kalbelia may need to fall back on begging to survive.

Kalbelias mainly receive donations as secular beggars, people who are poor and in need, and perhaps because of their reputation as *tantrik* black magicians. Some cobras are believed to have inside their head a jewel of such

brightness, it lights up a room. It is also 'an amulet that can secure the attainment of every desire,' (Crooke 1926: 390), presumably both good and malevolent desires. As *tantrik Naths*, Kalbelias are popularly supposed to be in possession of such jewels, a euphemism for *siddhis* (see Chapter Two), and therefore may be practising magicians. The Kalbelias themselves do not even consider this public persona of magician as a possibility, but other people have a lively apprehension of them as likely to be black magicians. Sometimes donations are made to them as *sadhus*, sometimes as *nandiyale*. They also receive money from tourists, both Indian and foreign, in their role as snake-charmer entertainers. Many Indians ignore the Kalbelias' services as removers of dangerous cobras and dismiss them as worthless.

Kalbelias describe themselves as beggars and although begging is illegal, India has more than five million beggars, (Illustrated Weekly of India, April 16th, 1972, in Jha, 1979: 9; 82). The Children Act 1960 defines begging as:

'soliciting or receiving alms in a public place or entering on any private premises for the purposes of soliciting or receiving alms, whether under the pretence of singing, dancing, fortune-telling, performing tricks or selling articles or otherwise exposing or exhibiting with the object of obtaining or extorting alms any sore, wound, injury, deformity or disease, whether of himself or any other person or of an animal, allowing oneself to be used as an exhibit for the purpose of soliciting or receiving alms, (Sushil Chandra, 1957: 134, cited in Jha, 1979: 9-10).

As Jha remarks, begging requires the assent of a large number of members of society, and half of India's beggars are able-bodied and make on average more income than the wages of poor peasants and workers, (1979: 9; 82).

There are similarities in the ways in which beggars and groups of beggars organise their economic strategies.

Research by Jha (1979), Chaudhuri (1987), Bhatia (1945) and Nanda (1989) in India, and Schak (1988) in China, show that, as with the Kalbelias, begging is nearly always internally organised by the groups of beggars themselves, taking into account the norms and mores of the society in which they operate. Sometimes external organisation is imposed upon beggars: the specific influence of a leper colony or temple at a religious centre, for example.

Jha and Chaudhuri carried out separate research into begging at two religious centres: Puri in the Bay of Bengal at Orissa, famous for its Jagannath Temple, (Jha, 1979), and at Kalighat in Calcutta, (Chaudhuri, 1987). Religion has made 'giving' a virtue which can atone for sins, and religious shrines and pilgrim centres attract large numbers of beggars, (Chaudhuri, 1987: 4; 71).

The beggars at the holy places of Puri and Kalighat draw attention to their plight by constantly asking for alms, evoking pity by carrying a baby, by displaying the signs of leprosy or a handicap such as an amputated stump or a false or self-induced ulcer. Kalbelias beg by displaying a basket of snakes, either to entertain in the case of those working in hotels or to remind other Indians of the useful purpose they fulfil in society as catchers of poisonous snakes. Except for their annual visit to Gaita near Jaipur, Kalbelias do not target pilgrims or holy places. Rather they emphasize their mastery over snakes as a service to society against a background of a god-given occupation.

At Kalighat, an estimated five hundred beggars daily take *prasad* (rice offered to the deity) from the Kali Temple, and compete with dogs to collect the remains of food discarded in the road after marriage feasts (Kalbelias never do this). Income from begging in Kalighat was estimated to

range from .25 paise to Rs. 5 per day, (Chaudhuri, 1987: 29; 35; 37).

Alms received in Puri are mostly cash in shopping areas, and rice, food and other edibles in the residential areas, (Jha, 1979: 56). Beggars also receive alms from pilgrims distributing money, clothes, rice and food near the Jagannath temple. Religious mendicants formed only 5.4% of Jha's sample, despite Puri being a religious centre with hostels that supply food and shelter to needy religious mendicants. Jha estimated there were about 1,500 beggars in Puri, the figures varying seasonally because large numbers of day labourers working on farms beg from time to time. Women may beg because their husbands' earnings are insufficient to maintain the family. The majority of the beggars fell into the age groups of twenty-one to sixty years, due to the lepers living in the Puri leper asylum. (The disease manifests itself after childhood). The leper colony at Puri holds an annual function when local worthies are invited to donate money to the leper colony. Lepers also go in groups to beg, pooling the alms which are shared out equally, overcoming the disparity in handicap and mobility between individuals. A few lepers are smugglers of ganja and opium from other states. The Kalbelias do not involve themselves with illegal activities.

Jha estimates that about 31% of the beggars had no place to stay and as in Chaudhuri's sample, sleep on the verandahs of shops or beneath trees, (Jha, 1979: 15-16; 29; 32-3; 36; 42; 66-7; 73-5). If Kalbelias are away from their home villages, they go to squatter settlements where they have relatives or pitch tents in the streets of the town. I have never heard of them being quite so without organized shelter that they would have to sleep on shop verandahs.

Chaudhuri paints a pitiful picture of rootless individuals, quite unlike the strong caste-consciousness of the Kalbelias and their high degree of warm and friendly relationships. At Khalighat, most beggars were children between the ages of six and fifteen years, many of whom did not know their parents. Among the beggars of fifty-six years upwards there was a predominance of females, most of whom had no near relatives to care for them, (1987: 22; 43).

Regular beggars stay at Khalighat and primarily depend on begging, perhaps additionally doing *rikshaw* pulling, selling fruit, working at tea stalls or as seasonal agricultural labourers. Female beggars work as casual maid-servants, some as prostitutes. Some people beg at Khalighat once or twice a week, then return to their native places or stay somewhere else in Calcutta. The Kalbelias follow a similar strategy of taking seasonal or casual work when it is available, although I never heard of Kalbelia women working as domestic servants or prostitutes. Other Khalighat beggars smuggle rice, make and/or smuggle liquor, or save money and take up petty trading, (Chaudhuri, 1987: 22; 26-7; 31; 98; ).

Beggars at Khalighat are also given food, clothes, and rugs. The rug is commonly received as *dan* in the winter months, (Chaudhuri, 1987: 33; 37-8; 87-8). Chaudhuri does not discuss *dan*, but evidently not all alms given by pilgrims is considered to be *dan*, either by the donors or the recipients. At these holy places, it is probable that *dan* is differentiated from ordinary alms by being first offered to the deity via the *panda*, who then passes it on to one or other of the beggars. Ordinary alms would, I think, be given directly to the beggar without going through the *panda* - and the deity.

Economic need due to handicap or poverty is the common reason given for begging. The research of both Jha and Chaudhuri show similarities of gender and age distribution, although Chaudhuri reports young children aged six to fifteen years begging unaccompanied by any family, and Jha's research shows a disproportionate number of lepers because of the presence of the leprosy hospital in Puri. Unlike the Kalbelias, most beggars at Puri and Kalighat operate individualistically rather than as families or part of a cohesive group. Apart from the lepers of Puri, Jha and Chaudhuri do not mention beggar-group organisation from within. If anything, organisation is imposed from outside upon the beggars by individual *pandas*, and more impersonally, by the religious framework of the temples in these famous pilgrimage centres. But interestingly, both Jha and Chaudhuri depict local residents as being co-operative, even sympathetic towards the beggars of Puri and Kalighat. Kalbelias are also well accepted by the communities among whom they live, and in Jaipur and other places where they go to earn and beg, they are tolerated and mostly accepted sympathetically.

In contrast, Bhatia paints a sinister picture of beggar colonies in the big cities of the Punjab. Beggars are members of organized monopolistic groups, governed by elaborate codes of behaviour, stern discipline and ceremonial drinking parties. The vows they take suggest a band formed by recruitment rather than by birth, and for a limited purpose, reminiscent of a criminal fraternity, rather than a group merely beseeching alms or offering services or entertainment. In fact, Bhatia claims that parties of beggars commit thefts, robberies and kidnappings by night, and some temples and mosques are strongholds of kidnappers and women seducers, (1945: 54; 57-8; 60).

Territories are allocated and groups go round the city, temples, mosques and churches in rotation. The blind, crippled and infirm are considered assets to the colony, (Bhatia, 1945:55). This contrasts with the attitude of the Kalbelias: the only person expected to remain unmarried was a Kalbelia man born with a deformity of the arms. Another difference between Bhatia's subjects and the Kalbelias is that although Bhatia depicts beggars banding together within a strong organizational framework for begging and other nefarious purposes, the city beggars in the Punjab, unlike the Kalbelias, are not held together by the bonds of caste, despite their vow to marry according to the dictates of the *panchayat* of the colony. However, the research of both Jha and Chaudhuri show that some beggars have no knowledge of their caste since they do not even know their parents. In these circumstances it is likely that unattached individuals band together and over time a new caste may come into being, (cf. Childers, 1975:249).

*Hijras* are a community of men who dress and act like women, a group formed by recruitment and not birth, since emasculation is a religious obligation. Their community is organised around a traditional occupation, and functions as a religious cult. The census of India does not count *hijras* separately, but the most common unofficial figure cited is 50,000 nationwide. They beg when their traditional services are under utilised, (Nanda, 1989: xxii; 36-38).

Traditionally, *hijras* perform at homes where a male child has been born. They bless the child and his family and entertain them with dancing and singing, accompanied by drums and harmonium in return for their traditional gifts of cash and goods. *Hijras* also perform one or two days after a wedding when the bride and groom are at the groom's house. The *hijras* bless the married couple for fertility in the name of *Mata*, the Mother Goddess, (Nanda, 1989: xxiv; i; 4-5).

But although *hijras* have an auspicious presence, they also have an inauspicious potential and insult and curse families who do not meet their demands for money and gifts, (Nanda, 1989: 6-7). Additionally,

'the *hijra* is supposed... even by intelligent Brahmins, to have the power of detecting impotence. This belief affords a ready means of extorting money from the married and childless, who, aware of the contempt and derision which a charge of impotency, coming from such a quarter would subject them to, are glad to purchase secrecy at any price,' (Preston 1987: 378; in Nanda, 1989: 50).

Kalbelia men dance as women in the streets on the festival of Holi (see above in this chapter), and some don women's clothes to dance at weddings within the sub-caste, (see Chapter Six). *Hijras* do not expect to perform at Kalbelia weddings, presumably because the snake charmers are considered too impoverished to warrant the effort of mounting a performance. And in the past, *hijra* notions of territoriality would have conflicted with the nomadism of the Kalbelias.

To collect alms, *hijra* groups establish exclusive areas, subdivided by the days of the week. Some shopkeepers give a fixed sum of money weekly or monthly to avoid harassment. Earning a living asking for alms is considered by *hijras* to be unpleasant, tiring work, for it is necessary to ceaselessly roam the streets, vulnerable to ridicule and abuse. Certainly, young Kalbelia males reaching school-leaving age appear to dread having to go out to beg, and hope instead for a proper job which is almost never obtainable. But begging can be a steady source of income which reinforces the *hijra* self-image as religious mendicants. But not all *hijras* undergo the emasculation operation and many *hijras* have sexual relations with men and earn their living through prostitution. This is considered "deviant" since it goes against the wishes of the *hijra*

celibate Mother Goddess and contravenes the cultural ideal of the *hijra* as a *sannyasi*, an "other worldly" person, (Nanda, 1989: xxiv; 50; 52-53).

Both the Kalbelias as snake catchers and entertainers, and the *hijras* as performers or prostitutes (Nanda, 1989: 54), have created an organized yet flexible society by which they maintain control over their traditional occupations. An account of more highly organised begging activities appears in Schak's research into Chinese beggars, (1988).

Begging in premodern China was a legitimate but lowly occupation. For Buddhists and Taoists, begging was seen as a way to rid oneself of earthly desires and provide an object of charity for others, who gain merit by giving. Begging was also utilised by those who, because of physical disability or lack of property or position, were unable to support themselves, (Schak, 1988: 17-18; 26).

Local magistrates appointed beggar chiefs for various areas within cities. These beggar chiefs were often city watchmen or proprietors of establishments where marriage chairs or funeral biers were kept for hire, good places for gathering information useful to Chinese beggars, (Macgowan, 1912: 293; Wang, 1974: 148; Doolittle, 1865ii: 260; Gee, 1925: 24; Gray, 1878ii: 60 in Schak, 1988: 20).

The beggar chief provided his beggars with housing (Schak, 1988: 23), and paid the expenses of the sick and for the funerals of those who died, (Liu Hsu, 1936: 171-172 in Schak, 1988: 24). Beggars obeyed the rules of the den and turned over a share of their take to the chief. He also negotiated with local shopkeepers and wealthy families holding private ceremonies to keep beggars away, in exchange for a fee, (Schak, 1988: 20).

Nowadays, begging is illegal, although the educated middle and upper classes of mainland Chinese origin may be sympathetic toward the plight of beggars on humanitarian rather than religious grounds. By 1977 Schak found that greatly improved economic conditions in Taiwan meant that many who previously begged now worked in factories. Both begging and gambling dens had declined among the Liang-hiat beggars of Taipei in Taiwan, although prostitution continued to be a good source of income, (Schak, 1988: 85-6; 96-7; 160).

It appears that societies by and large condone begging, whether by reason of poverty or religious beliefs, and that beggars, as individuals or as part of a group, beg in a guise appropriate to the society in which they live. Many beggars (but not all) belong to organized groups with internal rules regulating not only their professional activities, but also their private, or social lives. The *Kalbelias* and *hijras* are internally organised groups. The lepers at the holy sites appear to be organized both internally, and externally by the leper asylum and the religious milieu in which they operate.

Ruiz-Perez remarks that begging has:

'proven to be so adaptive, still existing in most societies... (since) a whole category of individuals can base their economy on the receiving of alms, then there must be another category of individuals willing to give alms on a regular basis.' (1979: 251-2).

She notes patronage between particular beggars and donors, together with a generally held view that all beggars deserve alms and pity (1979: 251-2; 257-8; 261; 264; see also Gmelch, 1977: 75).

*Kalbelias* do not identify particular patrons (apart from steady employment in hotels), but in India, as in China

and elsewhere, religious merit accrues to the giver of alms, the recipient popularly thought to be degraded thereby. Ruiz Perez suggests that in a stratified society beggars maintain the asymmetry on a societal level. In Mexico, the Catholic Church has institutionalised alms giving, making it part of the established ritual of the Mass (1979:251). In Italy, the peripatetic Xoraxane arriving from Yugoslavia, rely upon theft and begging:

'...the survival of a type of Catholic conformity in which the giving of alms is seen as a deed of Christian charity, enables (the Xoraxane) to occupy the "begging niche" which the modern welfare state has tried to eliminate...' (Piasere, 1987: 114 in Rao (ed) 1987).

Since begging everywhere is a stigmatised occupation, it is hardly surprising that Schak's research shows that when favourable economic changes occurred in Taiwan, most beggars and those who formerly were likely to have become beggars, took the newly available jobs and even supported their parents, thus relieving them of the necessity to beg, (Schak, 1988: 165ff). Begging is nearly always a last resort and the research of Jha (1979), Chaudhuri (1987) and Schak (1988) suggests that when suitable work is available, most beggars disappear - metamorphosed into wage-earners.

But in India there has been no such economic expansion similar to that in Taiwan, and in begging, the Kalbelias are

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Footnote: Begging (with 'trickster' variations) is found in most societies and has a long history. Concerning beggars mostly in England, the following can be referred to for fascinating information: Anonymous (1958), Beier (1985), Carew (1931), Chesney (1972), Dekker (1904), Head and Kirkman (1928), Jusserand (1961), Mayhew (1983), McCall (1979), Partridge (1949), Phelan (1949), Salgado (1972).

utilising a strategy which is economically valuable, especially to those exhibiting snakes at hotels. But even those Kalbelias without particularly good pitches work less strenuously and for less time than other people of approximately the same educational or social level who depend upon labouring or other low-paid manual work in India's scorching heat.

Many Indian children have to forego their education in order to work, for example, in cafes where they fetch and carry and the work is long rather than particularly hard. Others send their children out to beg, for example the Qalandars and Kanjars, (Berland, 1987: 3; 106-7; 119-20; 123; 131). In Italy, the Gypsy Xoraxane from Yugoslavia 'hire' children from relatives and friends remaining in Yugoslavia, to beg or steal, (Piasere, 1987: 129). The Kalbelias however, attract sufficient money by the work and begging of adults (nearly always males) to be able to send their young children to school and not require them to work or beg.

Many Kalbelia parents feel begging is an occupation they do not want their children to pursue. "I beg but my main occupation is agriculture," said Raju Nath, from one of the two Kalbelia hamlets near Kanoda village. "I have three and a half hectares of permanent land which I own myself." (One hectare equals a metric unit of ground equal to 2.471 acres). "I am making arrangements for my children's education. They are small now, but after a while they will become mature and have a little knowledge of what is outside their house. They will study, and after study they will get a job. If they do not get any degree or job they will do some labour work - any kind of labour work. We will not object to anything they do, but they are not to beg in the streets. I will make sure they will not do our traditional

work of begging." His wife agreed. "Our children will not do begging."

Piasere points out that the important characteristic of begging as an economic activity is that it is accessible for men, women, the elderly and children, (1987: 114). Although Kalbelia children do not beg, it is recognised that from time to time, the old, the young, the uneducated, the handicapped, the able-bodied and even the College-educated among the Kalbelias may be forced to utilise the economic strategy of begging. Apart from ensuring survival at however basic a level, begging can sometimes lead from the streets into hotels as an entertainer, on to television, to working all over India and even abroad in America, Switzerland (if a wildlife licence is obtained), England, France, Germany and Holland. And then probably back to the railway crossing and the tent by the side of the road. As yet, begging is a strategy the Kalbelias, unlike the Liong-hiat beggars of Schak's study, cannot afford to discard.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### OTHER OCCUPATIONS OF THE KALBELIAS

#### 5.1 HEALERS AND SPIRIT MEDIUMS

By virtue of their identification with the *tantrik* tradition and their special role and expertise in connection with poisonous cobras, Kalbelias are popularly believed by members of other castes to have special knowledge and occult powers. In short, they are held to be magicians. Kakar says since *tantrik* healers are believed to be endowed with supra-human powers, the notion that the correct *mantra* cannot fail to achieve successful results can be utilised to cure or alleviate emotional disorders, (1982: 186). Allopathic doctors and hospitals are available, but concentrated in towns and not within easy reach of rural populations. Therefore many people from other castes are in the habit of turning to Kalbelias for treatment of minor physical ailments or conditions believed to stem from supernatural causes.

Although only specialist Kalbelias have more than a passing knowledge of the system, *tantrik* healing is based on the premise that there is a subtle, non-material body with thousands of channels of energy and seven wheels of energy (*chakras*), which influence physiological and psychological processes in ways which a *yogi* recognises and knows how to deal with in order to restore physical and psychological equilibrium. The main spheres of healing activity undertaken by Kalbelias, apart from cures for poisoning by snake bite (see Chapter Three) and minor physical ailments of adults, are Evil Eye (*buri nazar*), to which many children's ailments are attributed, and Evil Spirit (*buri atma*).

"Evil Spirit is possession by *pret*, a malevolent spirit from another caste or village, never a *pitr* (ancestor) of the sufferer's own family. A *pitr* gives warnings and good advice to his or her descendants about health matters and how to increase wealth," (Manendra Nath; Kadru). A *pret* is the unquiet spirit of one who has died without realising his or her potential, or feels cheated or frustrated in some way. "A woman falls in love with a man and dies. Then her spirit is wandering around looking for that man and his wealth. A *pret* possesses a human body in order to enjoy earthly pleasures, or because it is mischievous or feels insulted," (Manendra Nath)

*Pret* and *pitr* are conventionally distinguished as two sequential states.

'At death... the soul becomes a disembodied ghost or *pret*, a marginal state dangerous both to itself and to the survivors. Rituals... construct a physical form for this ethereal spirit... by the end of the tenth day the body is complete, and on the eleventh day life is breathed into it and fed. On the next day a ritual is performed which enables the deceased to rejoin his ancestors. The wandering ghost becomes a *pitr*, an incorporated ancestor,' (Parry, 1982: 84).

Gold writes, 'To become a lingering ghost, suffering, envious, hungry and intent on communicating with the living is far from the ideal outcome, but it is nevertheless accepted and known to be likely under certain circumstances. These are the spirits of the dead who possess men; the ancestors - peaceful, satiated, and remote - do not,' (1988: 41).

But 'If mortuary rituals are not adequately performed the soul of the deceased is never assimilated to the ancestors but is stuck as a wandering ghost who is a constant menace to its surviving kin,' (Parry, 1980: 92).

Those who die young, or suffer an untimely death are thought to be most likely to become a *pret*, but

'Those who died a violent death in a just cause become... guardian of a village or city neighbourhood... Their aid may therefore be invoked in the course of exorcism,' (Parry, 1994:231. See also Robertson, 1991:9-12).

After possession, Kalbelias say the victim may become unconscious, or shout out at regular intervals or refuse to speak to others or look strange, and sit and shake while his or her arms and legs twine together. The latter is considered to be a certain indicator of possession.

Anyone possessed by a *pret* is taken to the shrine of Bhairon, described by Kalbelias as Lord Shiva's gatekeeper. A line is drawn around the sufferer with an iron implement. He or she is unable to cross that line because iron absorbs or contains evil influences. A fire is kindled and loud music played, sometimes sufficient to frighten away the Evil Spirit. If the spirit does not depart, an experienced medium, escorted by another person, prepares by taking a bath. After about fifteen minutes the medium is possessed by Bhairon. That he is possessed by Bhairon and not some malevolent spirit is easily ascertained because Bhairon always possesses his mediums in a standing position, and although the medium shakes, his arms and legs do not twine together, neither does he wander about. Then Bhairon's medium throws some grains on to the possessed person and demands of the *pret*, "Will you stay or will you go?" If the Evil Spirit refuses to go Bhairon says, via his medium, that he regrets not having thought of the sufferer for a long time which has resulted in the patient carrying this *pret* under his arms. The *pret* is visualized not as being inside the possessed person's body, but carried under the armpits.

Then Bhairon's medium recites a *mantra* and sometimes the *pret* announces "I am going!" But if the Evil Spirit still refuses to go, Bhairon's medium beats the *pret* with a broom or iron chain, and of course it is the patient who

receives the beating because the *pret* is inhabiting his or her body. After a beating the *pret* agrees to leave the victim, and Bhairon's medium puts food and pieces of iron into an earthenware pot and orders the *pret* to go into the pot. A lid is secured upon the pot and the medium and a member of the patient's family take the pot to the graveyard, not speaking a single word on the way. At the graveyard they dig a hole, bury the pot and put iron nails in the hole, and "Bhairon" recites a mantra to prevent the Evil Spirit from ever re-emerging. The victim's family hold an all-night *bhajan* session (devotional songs) to thank Bhairon for ridding their family member of the *pret*. This ritual is not represented with the pot as a *totka*, a device to pass the *pret* on to the next person who comes across the buried pot, but as a once and for all imprisonment of the *pret*. Morris E. Opler (1958), S. A. Freed & R.S. Freed (1964) and Ann Grodzins Gold (1988) give fuller descriptions of spirit possessions.

Persons who most commonly think themselves possessed, according to Kalbelias, are those suffering from diseases such as TB, or women because of family problems or unhappy marriages. "This *pret* stuff is never found in reality! Sometimes it is a pretence because the person is suffering from his family or circumstances," (Manendra Nath). Freed & Freed suggest the patient is often in a situation where his expectations of help and support are low, (1964:1/0). "But possession treatments are held in public and cannot be stopped, even by people from the same caste. Even if I do not believe the person is possessed I cannot interrupt, because it is in public and has to go on," (Manendra Nath). This results in a thorough airing of grievances with the immediate community involved and the patient probably gaining needed sympathy and attention and the alleviation of worries or wrongs.

The Kalbelias telling me this (none of whom treat patients for possession) found the topic amusing and there was much sniggering and laughter as they recalled incidents where people claimed to be possessed by Bhairon. Bhadra Nath said, "He was jumping up and down so much he hit his head on the roof and it collapsed on him! Another man said he was possessed by Bhaironji, but then someone squeezed his hand tightly and he shouted out 'Oh, oh! I am not Bhaironji!'" Possessed by the spirit of Bhairon, he should have been impervious to pain.

Although the topic of possession provoked assertions of incredulity about the phenomenon (see also A. Grodzins Gold, 1988:58-61; Parry, 1994:229-30), there is some belief that possession can sometimes truly occur. "Many years ago when my father was fifteen or sixteen years old he was possessed by a *pret*. My grandfather said 'Go and fetch our donkey from that field.' My father was leading the donkey when he walked across the burial place of a Banjara (a caste of nomadic traders) and a Banjara man slapped him for walking on the grave. Just after this my father developed a fever and started shouting out and became afraid of his mother, father, everyone, and he tried to frighten them away. But people possessed by these spirits are not harmful to others (see also A. Grodzins Gold, 1988:60), and my grandfather's elder brother was a medium for Bhaironji, so Bhaironji possessed him. There was a wall of mud and he put his left hand in the mud wall (and the *pret* went into the wall). At that time my father was hiding under the cot, and he gave one shout and recovered," (Manendra Nath).

I never witnessed anyone possessed by a *pret* or Bhairon. Mindful of the warning that people would pretend if I said I was interested in possession, I kept quiet, although I met several people who treat evil spirits. Daivya Nath is a *guru* and also locally famed in his region of

Marwar as a healer. "Three or four days ago I was called to Sojat where a man claimed he was possessed. People have faith in me and call me *maharaj*," – a term of respect, which according to Gold would normally be reserved for a Brahmin, (1988: 59). Daivya Nath makes his diagnoses of physical disease or possession by observing the patient's demeanour, enquiring about their diet and feeling three pulses in the three middle fingers of the patient's hand to determine if a *chakra* is malfunctioning.

But Daivya Nath too, casts doubt on the reality of the possession syndrome. "Some people, mostly women convince themselves they are possessed by a spirit. I do not believe in possession, but if someone tells me they are possessed I go along with their opinion. Actually I think they are confusing themselves by saying they are tortured by spirits. I treat them by psychological methods, talking to them in ways they can understand. I also use *mantra* but mostly I suggest they should be obedient to God." Obedience to God implies an acceptance of one's fate and performance of duty in society.

It is customary for successfully treated patients to donate wheat, crops and gifts immediately after treatment, and subsequently every three or six months after the treatment, continuing the donations for a few years out of gratitude for the removal of their affliction, and to ensure prompt treatment should their illness return.

Although Evil Spirit is the more spectacular condition, Evil Eye is far more common. Children fall prey to Evil Eye, the symptoms of which are fever, lack of appetite, general malaise and failing to thrive. "Evil Eye can be caught through jealousy or if the mother does not veil herself and the child when she is breast-feeding. Ignorance can also bring suffering from the Evil Eye. Children are ignorant,

they don't know what to eat or not to eat, so while doing latrine a child can also put latrine in his mouth," (Hemanya Nath).

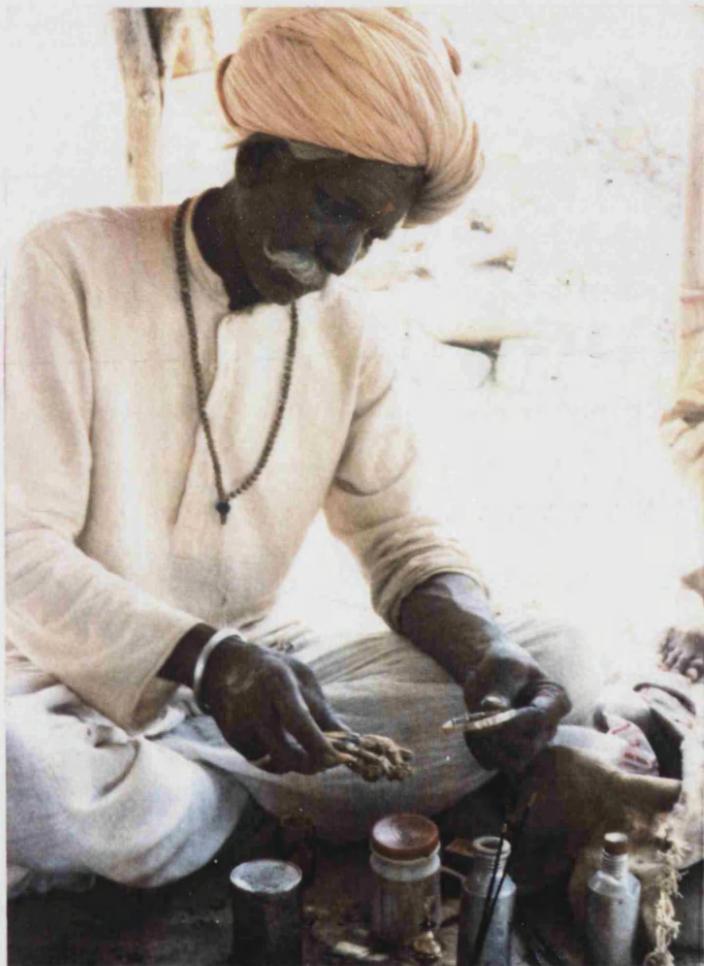
There are various strategies a family tries before resorting to a healer. "A cross is lightly traced on the child with a knife, not leaving any scratch or mark. Then some old copper coins, the kind with holes in them, are passed round the baby and put in an earthen pot of water. The child's family drink the water and this removes the Evil Eye from the child. Another way is to prepare an image of a child made from dough and cut the image vertically into four parts and throw them, one part to the east, one part to the west, the other parts toward the north and south. This means the baby's spirit has no more burden, the family has taken it upon themselves," (Dharendra Nath; cf. Raheja's description of passing coins round the head or body to disarticulate inauspicious influences: 1988:94; 101). Raheja notes a *totka*, an object used to transfer illness or inauspiciousness from one place to another or from one person to another, is commonly placed at the crossroads or at a village boundary. This inauspiciousness is thought of as going out into four directions, (1988:86; 114). In the first example the baby's family take the affliction upon themselves. In the second, the affliction is scattered abroad. I am unclear as to whether the Evil Eye is thought to gradually dissipate or whether it seeks another child to afflict.

Guru Hemanya Nath is a famous healer in his local area of Marwar. "People come on scooters from other villages to be treated by me." I accompanied him from his house over the hill and down into Devghar village to the tea shop, where he treated a child whose symptom was continuous crying at night. Hemanya Nath felt the pulses in the child's three middle fingers and diagnosed Evil Eye rather than physical

sickness. A young man, son of the local policeman, hissed to me in English, "Now he is going to do some hypocrisy!" - evidently Hemanya Nath's healing methods are not universally admired. Hemanya Nath made passes over the child with a vulture's claw he says has special powers. After this, with the help of his nephew, he twisted and knotted a thread, recited a *mantra* over it and passed it through an iron bracelet. This thread, with each knot imbued with the power of a *mantra*, was tied around the child's neck, and the child's father given seven *chana* seeds and instructions to make seven rounds of the child with one seed each day. "In seven days the child will be cured," Hemanya Nath assured the father.

Kalbelia healers also diagnose physical conditions. "Today when we were in front of the shop I was giving treatment to someone with stomach pain because of dysentery and unappetising food. I pushed with my thumb and discovered he had a stomach vein removed from its place. I pushed this vein back into place and spelled *mantras* into a bracelet." Hemanya Nath sold several protective bracelets to other villagers who were watching the treatment process.

Although Hemanya Nath, his wife, nephew and I were welcomed into the *chay* shop, served *chay*, and Hemanya Nath was deferred to by his patients and some villagers as a *tantrik* healer, I noticed his wife had to wash our glasses. This mark of low caste is the norm in rural areas and although forbidden by law, shows the still strong belief in notions of pollution, despite belief in the ability of Kalbelia and other low caste healers to alleviate common ailments or psychological problems. Successful healers are attended by considerable local fame. "Every Sunday over one hundred and fifty people come to our Temple in Chandiwar village and Kuvala Nath cures diseases and removes evil



**Imbuing a bracelet with a jantra**

spirits by *mantra*, and gives medicine from the jungle to cure physical ailments," (Raju Nath).

Kalbelias treat primarily by *mantra* and the giving of protective metal armlets or bracelets which ward off Evil Spirits which may be lurking around. Children are given a metal capsule which is tied around the neck or to the arm. After rituals are carried out and *mantras* spelled, these items are imbued with one hundred *mantras* and become *jantra*. A childless woman would be given a *jantra* of the Goddess Parvati, wife of Lord Shiva. The *jantra* Hanuman (Hanuman is the monkey-headed God) bestows health and protection from enemies but, "The wearer should believe in that God, otherwise the *jantra* will still work but it will be the opposite of beneficial. It will do harm and the person wearing it will be very unhappy." A *totka* is also equal to a *jantra* or one hundred *mantras*.

Kadru and her sister Tejini and some other Kalbelia women work as midwives (see below), and treat ailments of children using the methods outlined above.

Most Kalbelias turn to allopathic doctors and medicines for their own medical treatment, except in cases of poisonous snake bite which they believe hospitals are unable to help. They themselves give only a little credence to the Evil Eye, and although some ambivalence remains, they say Evil Spirit is usually a cry for help from an individual who needs sympathy and understanding from family and caste-mates to cope with some unhappy life circumstances. Any Kalbelia persistently behaving oddly over a period of time is more likely to be taken to hospital rather than be exorcised by one of the sub-caste's mediums.

Despite their reservations about the reality of the supernatural causes of certain conditions, it would be wrong

to suppose Kalbelia healers are merely cynical exploiters of their patients. They know healing processes can often be effected or at least helped by legitimating the ventilation of the sick or "possessed" person's fears and grievances and demands for better treatment, attention and understanding. And experienced Kalbelia healers recognise those conditions they cannot ameliorate and urge the sometimes reluctant patient to consult a doctor or go to hospital without delay.

#### 5:2 ENTERTAINERS

Non-pastoral nomads have long been associated with entertainment, although not all such groups actually work as entertainers. However, entertaining has always been an economic strategy exercised by some Kalbelias. Nowadays some are licensed by the State Government to work as folk musicians and dancers, which enables them to seek engagements at tourist hotels and entertainments.

Panita Nath's group is solely occupied with Government-sponsored cultural programmes. The group has girl dancers mostly from the *Chabdiyale* sub-caste (basket-makers) with Kalbelia musical accompanists playing the *bin* (snake pipes), harmonium and drums. Their act is popular in hotels and Government Tourist Camps, and with their long skirts and energetic dances, the women conform to the European image of romantic Gypsy dancers - and the announcer makes a point of introducing them as members of a Gypsy tribe. This group toured abroad with the Festival of India.

While I was visiting the Gulab Marg encampment where Panita Nath, his family and some members of his group stay, the owner of a nearby hotel came to engage an entertainment party. He said "I arrange work for these Gypsy people just to help them, I make nothing out of it for myself. Some of the dancing girls come from this camp to give lessons in Rajasthani dancing to my foreign guests." He pressed me to



Entertaining tourists in the



Tourist Village at the



Pushkar Camel Fair.

go to his hotel for tea. Two Kalbelia men accompanied us. Although the hotelier said he wants to "help these people," he did not extend the courtesy of tea or even water to these men, even although the temperature was over one hundred degrees fahrenheit. They were too proud to request it.

Bhadra Nath was accepted into a Government-sponsored musical folk dance and singing group run by a man from the Bhopa caste. Bhadra felt this was a big chance for him since he loves music and the entertainment group offers the prospect of good wages. We went to a rehearsal held in a brick hall still under construction, adjacent to the *kachchi basti* at Krishnapura Marg. The group has Bhopa and Kalbelia musicians, and girl dancers from the *Chabdiyale* (basket-makers) sub-caste. At first, Bhadra performed secretarial duties and organised booking arrangements, then later was allowed to perform on the *bin* (snake pipes) with the group. His group appears on television, performs for tourists in hotels and tours towns and villages singing traditional folk songs and more modern compositions advocating family planning, although Bhadra remarked, "Men in my region (Marwar) always have big families and it's not considered a bad thing, either!" Engagements in such widely separated places as Bombay, Simla and in the state of Gujarat were booked, and Bhadra has hopes of eventually performing outside India, because the leader of the group toured abroad with the Festival of India. In the meantime, Bhadra is pleased to perform in Chittorgarh and other towns and villages throughout Rajasthan.

Most of my time was spent in the *Delhiyale* region around Jaipur where Kalbelia women are not encouraged to work as dancers, who still have an association in the public mind with prostitutes, and all but two women dancers I met were from the *Chabdiyale* (basket-makers) sub-caste. The two Kalbelia dancers were Gupti, married to a man originally

from the Carpenter caste (see Chapter Eight), who performed with Panita Nath's group at the Pushkar Camel Fair and toured abroad with the Festival of India to Britain, Paris and Washington, and Nirbha, who also formed part of that group. I was told by Dari Nath, "They are not from our region. They are from Marwar, I think, or perhaps Mewar." Of the Marwar villages I researched, none of the women there worked as entertainers and I think Gupti and Nirbha are exceptional in working as dancers.

The Kalbelias entertaining with folk song and dance programmes are considered fortunate by other members of the sub-caste. The performers enjoy their music and performing at hotels and tourist villages wearing beautiful clothes. They sometimes earn more than an average amount of money, and there is the exciting possibility of travel both within India and abroad.

But although opportunities to work and entertain abroad come up from time to time, bureaucratic difficulties can cause these rare chances to be lost. Manendra Nath was offered a booking in Switzerland for two weeks at one hundred rupees a day (less than five pounds), plus his fares, food and lodgings, but not warm clothes suitable for the snowy climate of Switzerland. Manendra Nath felt one hundred rupees a day was very little. "I can earn that at the Khazana Mahal (a luxury hotel) in one day..." and was trying to improve the terms. In the meantime, he was having trouble obtaining a passport because he had no document to prove his age. And in order to obtain Indian Government permission to take two cobras and a mongoose abroad he needed photographs of the creatures and a vet's certificate. With difficulty and expense a vet was found who certified the cobras fit to travel, but professional photographers flatly refused to allow the snakes inside their studios, and my photographs did not fit official requirements. Manendra

Nath was also required to produce a wildlife certificate allowing him to catch and keep snakes which he did not have and could not quickly obtain. Time ran out and so did Manendra Nath's opportunity to visit Switzerland.

Perhaps the singing of devotional songs should not be included under the heading of entertainment, although a great deal of enjoyment is derived from listening to those Kalbelia men who have reached a peak of musical perfection in their singing and playing and are professional *bhajan* players. Anand Nath and Purajit Nath sing at all-night *bhajan* sessions but do not earn enough money from this to be able to rely upon it as their sole income. This applies to most Kalbelia entertainers. However artistically satisfying their work is, and however much money they may earn from time to time, few are able to survive solely on the money gained in this way and have to supplement their earnings by other work or begging.

### 5:3 MISCELLANEOUS

Apart from snake charming and begging, still the mainstay of the sub-caste, all Kalbelia men have several economic strategies, some of a cyclical nature, like agriculture, others sporadic, such as fly-posting notices for a fair, or construction labour. "Sometimes I go to Jaipur, Ajmer, Bombay and nearby villages to roam around as a snake charmer, but now I am living in these tents doing road works. My own house is two kilometres away in the Kalbelia Colony near Chandiwar village, but the road where I am working is just over there, quite near," (Kulya Nath, Chandiwar camp).

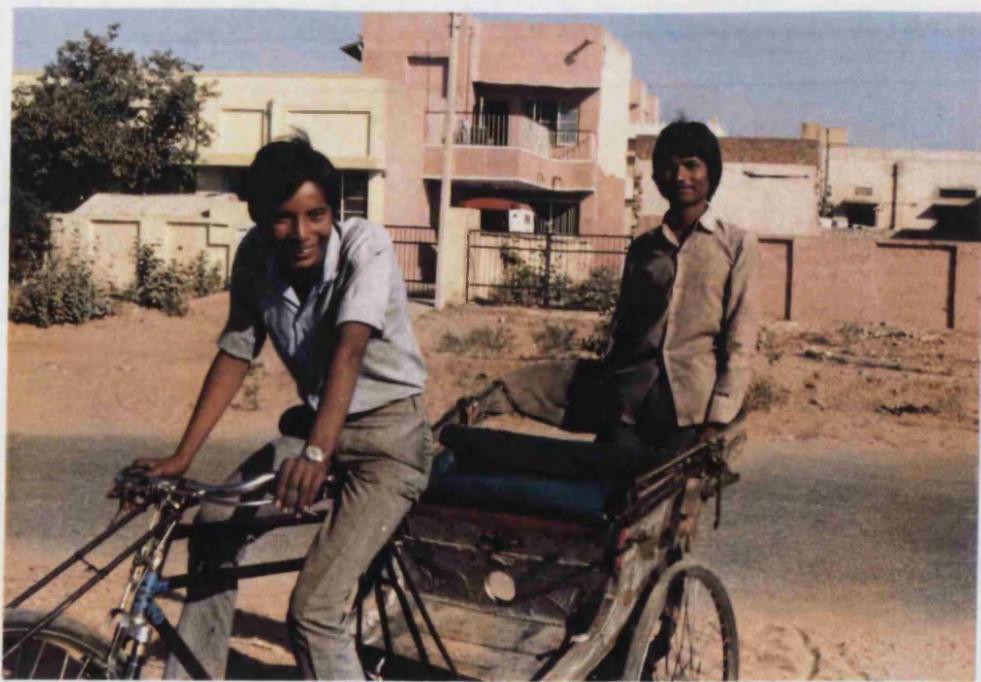
Giri Nath works as a plumber and construction worker. Chandiwar village where he lives is only a short bus ride away from the bustling town of Ajmer, and many men from this village are able to find building work there. Some are hired

by Kuvala Nath who supplies labour to the local construction industry, primarily from his own hamlet and sub-caste. Kuvala Nath is a healer and *guru* but, "I work as an architect, engineer, in construction, making roofs, pillars in iron, mixed cement and concrete, the modern way to make a house. I have done this as my daily work for thirty years and I have trained twenty to thirty males from my caste and also from other castes. I built this big Ram Devji Temple in our colony, and our stone houses."

A few Kalbelia men work as auto *rikshaw* drivers. Teenage boys say it is possible to become very rich in this way, but working as a cycle *rikshawala*, especially in the hot weather, is held to be hard and unpleasant, evidence of stupidity or inability to husband financial resources. But teenage boys resort to this work when other more pleasant means of earning money have run out and they urgently need to replenish their money supply, usually because of over-expenditure at Jaipur's many cinemas, and the irritation expressed by adult caste-mates at the squatter settlement, who object to indefinitely feeding feckless teenagers.

*Cycle-rikshaws* are hired out for about five rupees per day, payable when the *rikshaw* is returned to its owner at the end of a day or week. A new *rikshaw* is easier to pedal but costs more to hire than an old one. Fifteen year old Dari Nath always tried to work as a *rikshawala* at night when it is cooler, from a pitch outside Jaipur's railway station, where he could ask higher fares. This was a gamble because other *rikshawalas* have the same idea and there is strong competition for the smaller number of people about after dark.

Thirteen year old Vibhu Nath fiercely resented working as a cycle *rikshawala*, which was all too evident because he glowered and demanded outrageous fares. After half a day, he



Working as a cycle rikshawālā

dumped the *rikshaw*, but let everyone believe he was earning as a *rikshawala*, and ran up a bill at a local eating stall. At the end of the week the *rikshaw* owner came to the *kachchi basti* demanding his *rikshaw* and the hire money. The *rikshaw* was found, although damaged, and his caste mates had to loan him money to pay for the damage to the *rikshaw* and the week's hire charge. Then the eating-stall owner arrived and demanded settlement of his account...

Agriculture has long been another economic strategy the Kalbelias pursue. Even when they were nomadic, and permanent settlements were the exception rather than the norm, Kalbelias worked for farmers. Children, usually boys up to fifteen years old, herded cattle and goats. Now Kalbelias benefit from the small plots of land granted by the Indian government to encourage nomadic castes to settle and build houses. But this land is not sufficient for farming, and many Kalbelias have settled in areas where land is poor, mainly due to lack of water, not unusual in the desert state of Rajasthan. Wells provide drinking water but not much more, and the little agricultural land there is usually belongs to long-established local families from sedentary castes. At present there does not seem even a remote possibility of each family or even of one family in each Kalbelia hamlet being able to farm their own land and rely upon it as their sole economic strategy.

But a few Kalbelia families have been able to buy a little land. About one kilometre away from the main Kalbelia hamlet at Kanoda village, a group consisting of four brothers, their wives and children, own thirty-five *bighas* (about twenty-two acres) of agricultural land. I estimate that this land helps support upward of one hundred people. However, all are primarily economically dependent upon other occupations and spend much time away from the hamlet. For example, two men, Harita Nath and Nabhoga Nath work as snake

charmers in luxury hotels in Jaipur, and Harita Nath is also a courageous remover of snakes from houses. They are occasionally engaged as folk dancers or musicians in an entertainment programme. Harita Nath returns to his village from the Railway *kachchi basti* in Jaipur to help with the harvesting. He says he would prefer to be a farmer all the time, since no one values the occupation of snakecharmer anymore, but the land does not yield sufficiently for this to be possible.

Irrigation is by means of an electric tube well and irrigation ditches. In the cool of the evening when water is less likely to be lost through evaporation, the ditches are opened to allow water to flow along them, then closed off with a few shovels of earth, the water diverted into each ditch in turn. This is the only village where an electric tube well is installed and where some crops, peanuts, sesame, tomatoes, potatoes and cauliflowers were grown despite the drought. In a good season the land provides enough crops for the residents of the hamlet to sell a little to local shops, but in recent drought-ridden years, the Kalbelias have had to augment their own supplies with purchases from the shops.

In the main Kalbelia hamlet near Kanoda (there are two Kalbelia hamlets near this village), Jatin Nath lives in a small mud hut near what must at times be a wide river, although after four years of drought it was dry and trees grew in the river-bed. No agriculture had been possible for several seasons. Drinking water was available via a hand pump but was not sufficient for irrigation purposes. His neighbour, Raju Nath said "I have a little agricultural land, but I have to go begging with pipe and snakes. I want my main occupation to be agriculture." He was expressing a common longing: enough land to support himself and his family without the need to beg.

In the village of Ramaipura ten and a half *bighas* (about six and a half acres) of agricultural land is owned by two sets of brothers who are cousins. Irrigation is usually by a diesel pump set, but no crops have grown for four years because of the drought, and the deep irrigation ditch which runs past the Kalbelias' hamlet has turned into a sandy gully. In good years the main crops are wheat, barley, millet, peanuts, peas, beans, tomatoes, and cauliflowers. The Kalbelias in this hamlet operate the hotel snake charming monopoly and so have a quite dependable source of income, and Biman Nath, senior among the brothers, works with a foreign business man, buying Indian and Tibetan clothes, jewellery, paintings and souvenirs for sale abroad, and sometimes he himself travels abroad on business.

When the opportunity arises, Kalbelias do agricultural work for farmers, for part of the crop. Jyoti Nath, a college student, grows grass as cattle fodder for a neighbouring farmer. Some Kalbelia women do occasional agriculture work for neighbouring castes, and a party of Kalbelia men from Marwar region annually go to Gujarat, where part of the group dig peanuts for a Gujarati farmer, while the rest work in a factory. "We enjoy the good food there - five or six vegetables in a *thali*, (metal plate). Some grain storage vessels there are as big as a man!" (Bhadra Nath).

But the long drought had affected farmers badly. Crops were not planted, and in Marwar cattle were dying for lack of water. Consequently there was less agricultural work than usual available for the Kalbelias. But this was not a topic touched upon very often. They regard their involvement with the agricultural cycle as of relatively minor importance compared to their other economic strategies.

There is some evidence that some Kalbelias are moving toward more conventional modes of earning a living, although this is not an easy process. Even with a good education, regular jobs are extremely difficult to secure. Two Kalbelia men are graduates, one working in an office, the other as a sub inspector in the police force. Others are applying to join the police, some work as lorry drivers. Some young men are enrolled as college students and there are one or two mature students.

#### 5: 4 Women's Work

Although it is the man's duty to work, or beg, and bring home necessary goods and cash, some women earn money too. "A few months ago I learned to sew on a machine at a nearby hotel and now I have a sewing machine at home. I make and embroider *ghaghra* (skirt) *choli* (short blouse) and bags," (Bindu). Women work outside the domestic sphere if the opportunity arises: "I am living in this tent away from my house in Chandiwar because we are breaking stones behind those hills for road works. I make food in the early morning, then I work on the road. There is a great drought in this area and I have to walk two kilometres to get water and then another two kilometres back to the tents. We will stay here one more month and then return to the village. It is harder work in these tents than it is in the village," (Lokavya).

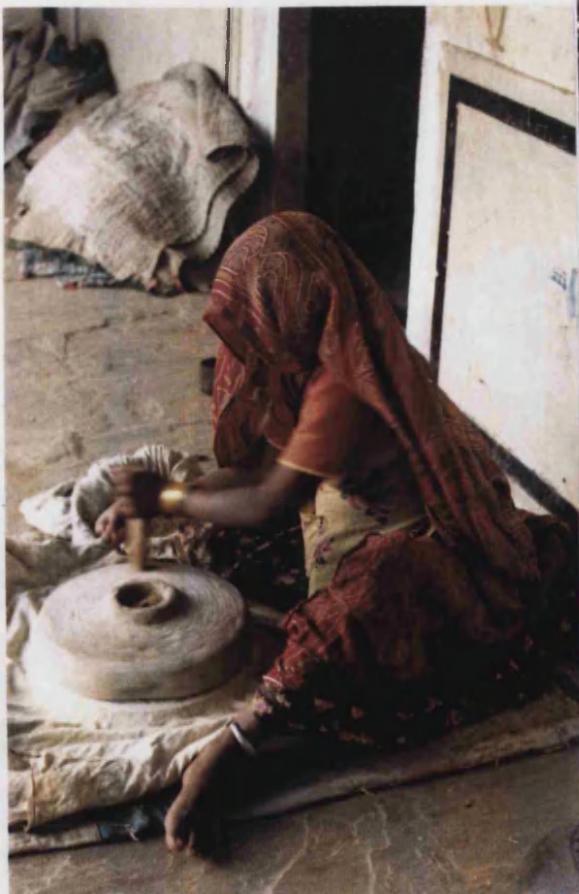
Children accompany their mothers when they are working, and Kalbelia men also work on the same project. This affords women protection from sexual harassment from the overseer or outsiders, thought to be a risk every woman encounters once she ventures outside the domestic sphere. As mentioned in the section on snake-charming, some Kalbelia women also beg, although this is unusual.



Sewing



Caring for animals



Grinding



Only three Kalbelia women catch cobras.

Kadru and Tejini and a few other Kalbelia women work as midwives both to their own caste and to other castes, although they avoid attending the births or treating Untouchables such as Harijan (sweeper) or Dholi (drum beater). Arrangements are made in advance for the Kalbelia midwife to attend a birth, and she is informed when labour commences. As soon as she hears her services will be required, she refrains from eating. When labour is well advanced she goes to the house. These midwives say they are competent to deal with minor complications, but if they recognise labour is not progressing as it should, they inform the woman's relatives that a doctor should be sent for or the mother taken to hospital.

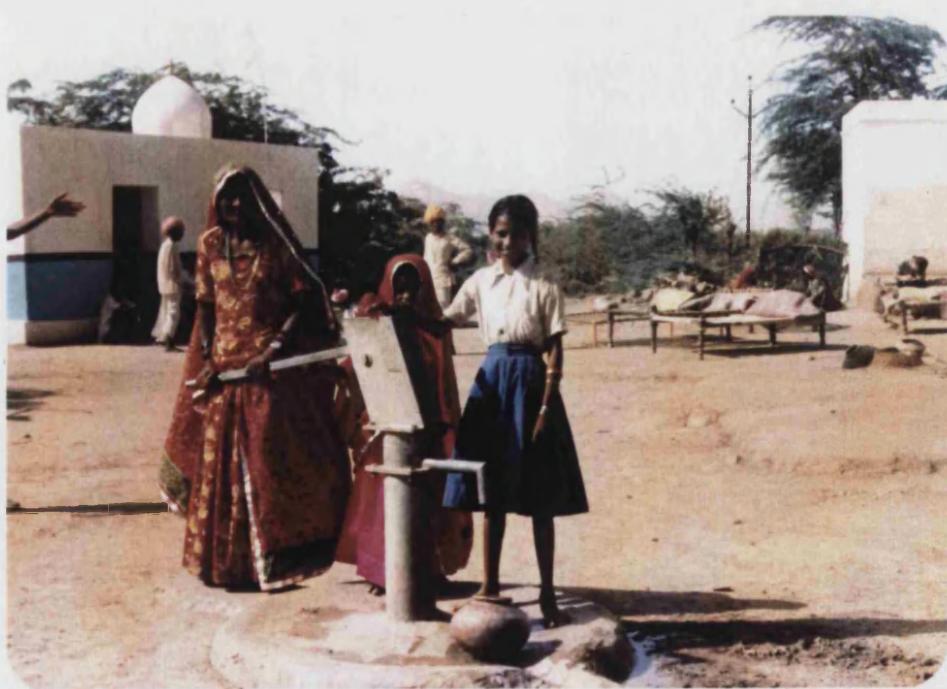
When a birth is imminent to a Kalbelia woman, her husband is banished from the hut or tent and waits outside. "In our caste males are not present at births and not too many women, just one or two," (Tejini). "Once the baby is born the husband can come in!" (Hemanya Nath).

After the baby is born, the midwife baths at the house of the mother, and returns home where she takes a further bath. Childbirth is considered both a spiritual and a physical pollution, and baths are necessary to purify the midwife so she may cook food and do kitchen work at home.

The village of Shivapuri where Kadru now lives, legally made over to her a plot of land to encourage her to leave her previous village where she and her family lived with other Kalbelias. Now she works as midwife and treats minor ailments in Shivapuri where she is building two stone houses, one for herself, husband and unmarried children, and the other for a married son and his family. They are the only Kalbelias in that village. Female villagers struggle up the rocky, dusty hill and wait patiently until she has time to consult with them. They pay her the respect of wearing



Cooking is outside, except  
in rainy weather.



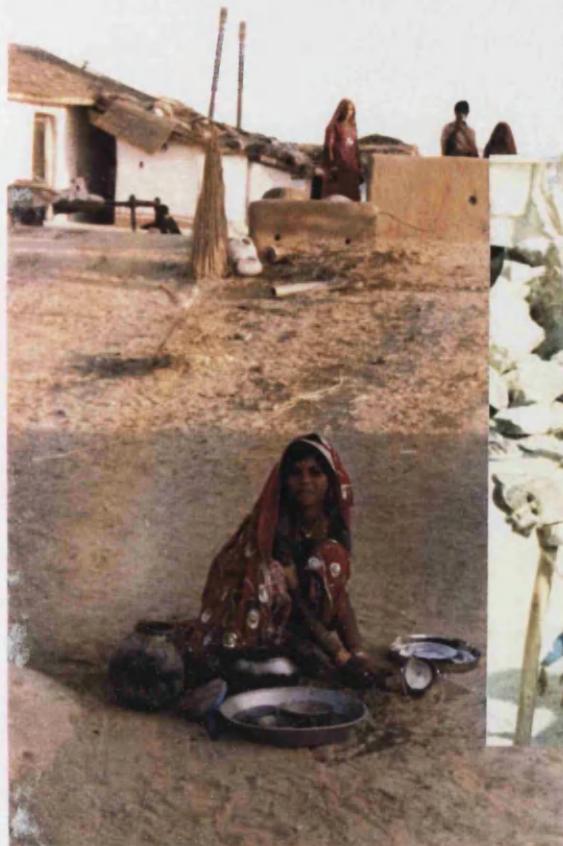
Kalbelias have built houses on  
Government grants of land.

fresh, clean clothes when they come to see her although people are mostly Rajputs in that village, a high caste.

Kadru's sister Tejini also works as midwife in her village of Devghar, a few miles away, and if competent males are absent, both Kadru and Tejini can catch and remove cobras from houses. Kalbelia women who do this are exceptional: I met just one other women, Lokavya, who is interested in snakes and can catch them.

Most women prefer to occupy themselves with childcare and domestic tasks and rarely entertain for money, beg, or work in road construction or as medical advisers, let alone catch poisonous cobras. The men say "Kalbelia women usually stay at home and spend their time idly." The women too, say, "We do nothing, just sit!" This is an understatement, but domestic work, with the exception of fetching water from distant wells, is not onerous. The extreme temperatures of desert Rajasthan make frequent rests and avoidance of manual work during the heat of the day a matter of survival rather than laziness, and people pass as much of the day as possible lying on cots and trying to sleep. Trees are few, and for most of the day there is no shade. Although awnings are fixed up, they provide little relief and the huts are simply too uncomfortably humid to sit inside. There is also the persistent hot wind which blows sand and fine dust into eyes, hair, mouth and clothes, and adds to the extreme discomfort of broiling day-time temperatures which feel as if they are more than any human body should have to withstand.

So the main activity is between five and seven in the morning, before the day gets really hot. The women make chay (tea) in the clay cooking place outside the hut, and the family rouses from sleep, drinks chay and eats left-overs from the previous evening's meal. Chay is made only in the



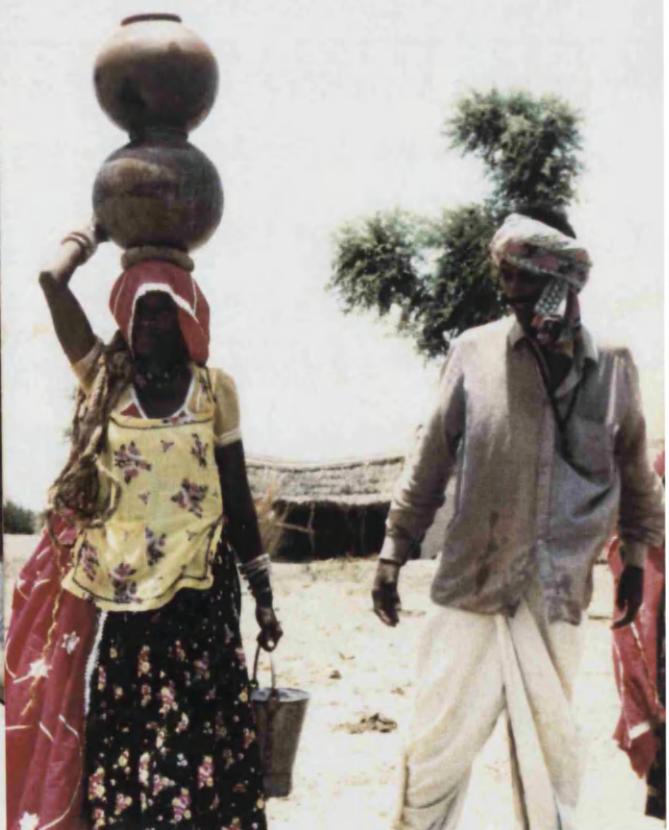
Dishes are cleaned with sand



Child care.



Spreading smooth mud outside the hut.



Fetching water.

#### WOMEN'S WORK

early morning and after the evening meal. During the day it is too hot to light a fire, but if people want to drink more tea (considered an extravagant and unhealthy over-indulgence), a boy goes down to the village chay stall and brings back several glasses of chay in a metal carrier.

The women sweep their huts and the smooth mud area immediately adjoining, and in the relative cool of the early morning fetch water from the well if this is some distance from their home. They wait until most of the men have left the hamlet before they wash themselves and their children, concealing themselves behind huts, washing in bits, covering themselves with their *odhani* (short veil). Women wash their own and their small children's clothes and spread them on thorn bushes to dry. Husbands and teenagers, both male and female wash their own clothes.

If the family owns a cow, the woman milks it and sets aside some of the milk for curd. Those who have goats take them to the jungle to graze. Women collect wood for cooking fires, and later sit and slowly pick over their grains, throwing out tiny stones, or pass the hottest time of the day trying to sleep. If men are working nearby in the fields, their wives take them food at lunch time.

Kalbelia women make quilts from pieces of carefully washed rag stretched out on a frame and sewn together with fancy stitches through several layers of cloth. At first I wondered why they bothered because none of these quilts ever seemed to be used, yet they had huge piles stored inside their huts. When the cold season arrived, I discovered why. I was surprised to see Kalbelias swathing their heads in woollen scarfs, wrapping themselves in blankets and generally complaining about the low temperature, which I thought pleasantly warm. But at night, the temperature really drops and then every quilt is needed because

Kalbelias sleep outside their huts, even on cold winter nights, because the huts are too small for the whole family to fit into. When I went to stay in villages with my children in the winter we were asked to bring quilts with us because there were never enough to go round, and we usually spent part of the night lying awake shivering, sorry when dogs and goats were sternly discouraged by the Kalbelias from sharing the cots with us. It became clear why even rags are stored in padlocked storage bins or trunks: they are destined to be turned into much needed winter quilts.

Evening, and darkness, comes at about six o'clock and in the hot season the temperature drops marginally, enough for fires to be lit and the evening meal of chapatis and dal (lentils) and perhaps a vegetable to be cooked. Dal is cooked in brass pots, taken on and off the fire with forceps. A chapati is prepared by making a little round of dough and patting it between two hands, flipping it backwards and forwards until it is the right size and shape, then cooked on a fragment of earthenware pot, heated over the fire. A woman first serves food to her father-in-law, mother-in-law, and husband and his unmarried brothers, then she and her children eat.

Kalbelia women are not expected to earn money, and their contribution in the domestic sphere is recognised as important to their families. Kalbelias are not rich, but do not need to send their small children out to work or beg. It is common in Rajasthan to see quite small boys scavenging or working in shops and cafes or begging in public places.

Much of the Kalbelias' work is seasonal or sporadic, and they are in competition with people from other castes also looking for work. But Kalbelias benefit by having a broadly based risk-spreading economic strategy encompassing a range of services to the mainstream community, with the

ability to appeal to rural, urban and tourist populations. They have a mixed dependence on market forces affecting employment and the surplus patrons to donate to them, and are able to stay with relatives in villages and squatter settlements. They are even willing to live in tents in order to move wherever work or economic opportunities are to be found. Their reputation as *tantriks* and snake charmers together with their other economic strategies and the spread of their patrons over a wide spatial area, ensures that even in times of shortage, Kalbelias have continued access to nutritional and economic resources.

## CHAPTER SIX

### KINSHIP AND MARRIAGE

This section of the thesis encompasses kinship, preparations for marriage, especially brideservice and bridewealth, and marriage in the various forms recognised by the Kalbelias, including elopement, remarriage after the death of a spouse or divorce, and widow inheritance. The last part of the section deals with childbirth and care.

#### 6: 1 MARRIAGE

The Code of Manu, a collection of laws based on custom, precedent and the teachings of the *Vedas* (M. & J. Stutley, 1977: 182), recognized eight marriage rites, Brahma, Daiva, Arsha, Pragapatiya, Asura, Gandharva, Rakshasa, and Paisaca, (Manu III, 21; 34 cited in Tambiah 1973). These are repeated in other codes and institutes, eg. Gautama, Narada, Vishnu, Kautilya etc., (Kane, vol. II, pt 1, 1941: 516, cited in Tambiah 1973). The first four, the Brahma, Daiva, Arsha and Pragapatiya, comprise the 'gift of a (virgin) daughter'. The Brahma and Daiva forms specify decking her with costly garments, ornaments and jewels, the Arsha form allows the bride's father to receive 'a cow and a bull or two pairs' from the bridegroom, which is not considered to be a sale of the daughter. The Pragapatiya rite is a gift of a girl without material transfer either way, (Tambiah, 1973: 69). Kalbelias aspire to the Pragapatiya form of marriage and some claim to have been married in this way, but the usual form of marriage is the Asura, 'When (the bridegroom) receives a maiden, after having given as much wealth as he can afford, to the kinsmen and to the bride herself, according to his own will, that is the Asura rite,' (Manu, III, 31; cited in Tambiah, 1973: 69).

Marriage with dowry is more acceptable and prestigious for the high born:

'No father who knows (the law) must take even the smallest gratuity for his daughter; for a man who, through avarice, takes a gratuity, is the seller of his offspring,' (Code of Manu, III,51, cited in Tambiah, 1973: 68).

Baudhayana, a traditional shastric authority, declared:

'he who gives his daughter by sale sells his merit', and recommended Asura and Paisaca marriage to Vaisyas and Shudras for they "do not keep their wives under restraints, they having to do the work of ploughing and waiting upon other varnas," (Kane, 1941: 505; 522, in Tambiah 1973: 69).

Manu declared only the brideprice and other inferior forms as lawful for the Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaisyas (merchants and husbandmen) and Shudras (unfree servants) and denied them the superior gift type of marriage, (Tambiah, 1973: 69). The remaining tenuous forms, free romantic union, forcible abduction and seduction are even more condemned by Manu, (Tambiah, 1973: 69).

Despite dowry being the highly approved pathway to marriage, in north India:

'Bridewealth is sometimes the custom and at other times resorted to in case of "emergency"' (but in south India) 'bridewealth... is much more widespread... the very wealthiest members of the community often openly and proudly give bridewealth'. This appears to be more often the case when Brahmins are not present in the village to an important degree', (Mencher 1966, cited in Miller, 1980: 112).

Despite the Brahminical evaluation of 'bridewealth' payment as tantamount to the selling of a daughter for profit and therefore reprehensible (Tambiah, 1973: 68-91), the Kalbelias customarily use the Asura rite of marriage, and as I describe later in this section, other forms of marriage

are also recognised. Furthermore, Kalbelias also demand a period of brideservice from a prospective son-in-law, negating the more usual north Indian higher status of the son-in-law and his family to his affines.

#### 6:2 KALBELIAS' KINSHIP SYSTEM

Before explaining how Kalbelia marriages are arranged, I will describe the way Kalbelias reckon their kinship system which is of importance in selecting possible marital partners, while excluding others as incestuous.

Kalbelia kinship terms are more or less identical to standard Hindi and to those given by Ruhela for the nomadic blacksmiths, the Gaduliya Lohars, (1968:32-5). The Kalbelias in the Delhiyale area say they originate from two main *gotras* (patrilineages), Chauhan and Dehran. Dehran is said to have twenty-two sub-*gotras* who must not intermarry. Chauhan is said to have either twenty-one or twenty-three sub-*gotras* who must not intermarry, but Dehran's sub-*gotras* can marry into Chauhan's sub-*gotras* and vice versa. Other Kalbelia regions also have main *gotras* from which they count their descent. Panyar is the name of a main *gotra* in Marwar, (Biman Nath). In fact the exact number of sub-*gotras* is not known and the list I collected for the Delhiyale region does not total forty-three or forty-five. (The *gotras* are listed in Appendix III).

Sub-*gotras* are known by nicknames because of some remembered incident or some memorable family member. A sub-*gotra* of the Dehran main *gotra* is called Manani after one of their members, a famous *panch* called Mana Nath Sanpera. And the Dariyale sub-*gotra* was nicknamed after a person in their family who was well known for always using a *dari* (rug) while sitting. The same system is in use among Kalbelias in the Marwar and Mewar areas in Rajasthan, the nicknames

differing according to regional language and local memories of people and incidents which cause a particular branch of a family to gain a nickname, (Bhuji Nath and Nanda Nath).

After marriage a woman continues to be known by the name of her own sub-gotra, which is the same as her father's, but her children's sub-gotra will be that of their father's, her husband. The Kalbelias avoid four sub-gotras when looking for prospective marriage partners for their children: Father's (which of course is Ego's sub-gotra), Father's Mother's, Mother's, and Mother's Mother's sub-gotra. Therefore this ban on intermarriage refers to a lineage depth of three generations: Ego, Ego's parents, Ego's parents' parents, although of course the ban on intermarriage applies to the whole lineage of any individual, regardless of depth. For example, a Dehran-Manani may not marry another Dehran-Manani however many generations removed from a common ancestor.

An example of this could be Mangal Nath Manani, whose main gotra is Dehran. His sub-gotra is Manani.

CHAUHAN (main gotra)  
sub-gotras of Chauhan

1c Chauhan

2c

3c

4c

5c

6c

7c

8c

9c

10c

11c

12c

DEHRAN (main gotra)  
sub-gotras of Dehran

1d Dehran

2d Manani

3d

4d

5d

6d

7d

8d

9d

10d

11d

12d

13c	13d
14c	14d
15c	15d
16c	16d
17c	17d
18c	18d
19c	19d
20c	20d
21c	21d
22c	22d
23c	

Mangal Nath Manani is 2d (Manani sub-gotra of the Dehran main gotra)

His Father is also 2d

Mangal Nath Manani's Father's Mother was from the Chauhan main gotra, say sub-gotra 6c.

Mangal Nath Manani's Mother is also a Chauhan, say the 10c sub-gotra.

Mangal Nath's Mother's Mother was from the Dehran main gotra, say the 6d sub-gotra.

So when Mangal Nath's parents look for a wife for him, they exclude the Dehran main gotra and its sub-gotras, because that is Mangal's main gotra. If they look to the Chauhan main gotra in the Delhiyale region they will not take a wife from Chauhan sub-gotras 6c or 10c because Mangal Nath's paternal grandmother came from 6c, and his maternal grandmother came from the 10c sub-gotra of the Chauhan gotra. They can take a wife from any of the other Chauhan sub-gotras.

They could also look outside the Delhiyale region to Marwar or Mewar where they have a free choice because there has been no intermarriage with the *gotras* there for three generations. If there had been intermarriage, they would apply the rules as above.

This is the general rule, and on the whole, the practical reality among the Kalbelias. But there are occasional infractions, evidenced by "incest" cases brought before the *panchayat* (see Chapter Eight), where the rules of avoiding intermarriage with the specified *gotras* have been ignored. A family will claim there are no suitable marriage partners available for their children. Actually it seems they prefer not to go to the trouble of bringing a boy from one of the other regions of Rajasthan, when they may have to forego brideservice, or of bringing a girl from another region, whose parents will demand a large amount of bride-wealth. The participating families in these marriages are outcasted, but the matter is rectified by the payment of a fine imposed by the *panchayat*, after which the families are reinstated into the sub-caste. Presumably these families consider that the payment of a fine to the *panchayat* is a more satisfactory and cheaper option than looking further afield among the Kalbelia sub-caste for suitable marriage partners. Perhaps one or two of these cases may arise each year.

They could have pursued another strategy: "Kalbelia men can marry with Chabdiyale and Chakkivale, (basket-maker women and grinding stone maker women) but they (the other two sub-castes) avoid only two *gotras* when they are marrying among themselves. They have the same names for their *gotras* as us, and we Kalbelias should still avoid all four *gotras* when thinking of marrying our sons with women from these two sub-castes. We won't marry our girls to their boys because of the religious difference. Their *guru* is Gorakh Nath and

our *guru* is Kanipa. And our girls do not know how to make baskets or grinding stones. If they agree to change their religion or to believe in Kalbelias' religion we may agree to marry our daughters to the *Chabdiyale* or the *Chakkiyale*," (Nanda Nath).

"We Kalbelias do not give our girls in marriage to *Chabdiyale*. They have a different religion to us..." (that is, they are followers of Gorakh Nath rather than Kanipa) "...and they don't invite the Brahmin at the time of marriage. They don't invite outsiders to officiate. Because the Brahmin is not there, the bride and bridegroom cannot be instructed about the rules and regulations of life and duty and marriage, like the stories of Brahma or Shiva. They marry according to their own procedures, and they usually drink a lot of *sharab* (alcohol) and make scenes and quarrel. After the marriage ceremony the boy and girl go to a hut or tent, eat something and have sex together in public and everyone there enjoys eating the food and watching the couple have sex." (I had no opportunity to judge the veracity of these assertions). "We think they are lower than us because of their actions and doings and they accept they are lower than us in the hierarchy of Jogi Naths," (Abhi Nath).

Although the Kalbelias' *panchayat* gave permission over forty years ago, this strategy of taking wives from the *Chakkiyale* or *Chabdiyale* sub-castes has been pursued only by a single group of brothers who come from one hamlet.

Of course this option applies only to Kalbelia men. So far, Kalbelia women have not been married into the other two sub-castes. But a Kalbelia woman married a man from the carpenter caste. He was incorporated into the Kalbelia sub-caste and given a new *gotra* name. However, this is the only case I recorded. There was also a boy from an unknown caste

background who was adopted into the Kalbelia sub-caste some generations ago. There are now twelve nuclear families bearing the new *gotra* name he was given by the *panchayat*. The two cases expand the number of *gotras* and in time, the number of marital partners available to the Kalbelia sub-caste.

### 6: 3 ARRANGING A MARRIAGE

Marriages are arranged for sons and daughters of any age when a suitable partner is found. The girl's family make the first approach through a mediator, usually a mutual friend, or a relative who suggests the possibility of marriage to a member of the boy's family. In a marriage which took place between Harendra Nath from Marjipura near Jaipur, and a girl from the Gordwar (Mount Abu) area, the mediators were the Harendra Nath's maternal uncle and the girl's maternal uncle. The bride and groom did not meet before their marriage, and their parents were unknown to each other. A boy's family may let it be known they are interested in getting their son married in the hope a girl's family will approach them. Everyone is said to eventually be married unless they are physically or mentally handicapped.

"Before a girl is seventeen or eighteen, her mother is considering her marriage. A girl should be married (reside with her husband's family) by the age of eighteen to twenty years unless she has no father or mother. Then she should be married early. But the girl herself, whatever her age, should never bring up the subject of her marriage. She is not informed that her projected marriage is under discussion or who the boy might be and she will never suggest she should or should not be married into a particular family. She is told who the boy is only after it is all settled. At no stage and in no case can she disagree, even if the man

has no arms or legs or is handicapped in some way. Her parents' decision is final," (Tejini).

This is the official version of a daughter's absolute obedience, and acceptance of her parent's plans. Kalbelia girls are socialised to be obedient, and objections to a proposed husband are rare, but if a girl has any reason to dislike the boy, perhaps because of gossip she has heard, or from remembered childhood encounters, she tells an aunt or uncle and they inform her father. Kalbelias are kindly parents to both daughters and sons, and do their utmost to secure their children's happiness and well-being, but it is unusual for girls to object or try to make conditions. If a boy states he does not wish to marry just yet, his parents accede to his decision. Generally speaking, Kalbelia males choose to marry, but Kalbelia females are married whether they want to be or not. Most boys regard it as a step up in status to be married or engaged. In one case where a boy refused to marry, his younger brother was married to the girl instead. His peers suggest the older unmarried brother has strong objections to brideservice, and indeed any work at all.

Both boys and girls accept fairly stoically that they, girls especially, usually have little say in the choice of their marriage partner. Induratna commented, "A husband is just any kind of man you have to marry," and Manendra Nath said, "If a man's wife dies he doesn't mourn. He just says 'I'll bring another.'" This is not to say that many couples do not feel warmth and affection for each other, but this is a bonus, and it is accepted that perfectly satisfactory marriages can exist with each partner merely doing no more and no less than their duty.

I asked what would happen if on meeting after the wedding ceremony, the couple found they disliked each other.

"They might feel there was something wrong because they are unfamiliar with each other's behaviour, and in the early days there might be difficulties. Other people will say to them 'You are married, so you *must* like each other.' They will try to like each other, they have no choice," said the *sanperins* in Harjipura village.

A boy and girl, each six years of age live in Harjipura and play together. Their wedding ceremony was planned to take place soon, although the children did not even know they were engaged. "When they are married, that's the first they will know of it!" After their marriage they will continue to live in the same village with their own families, playing with each other and other children, until years later when the girl's family finally inform the boy's family she is mature and ready to live with her husband as a wife. It is not unusual, and not considered an inferior marriage, for a boy and a girl living in the same village to be engaged or married, and still living with their respective families. But after the girl is about ten years old, she veils herself in front of her actual or future husband and tries to avoid him when she sees him around the village.

When marriages are arranged between a boy and a girl living in different villages much stricter avoidance is practised. "My young son's wife-to-be is living in another village. When I go to that village to visit her father I will not take my son with me. He will never go to that village and the girl will never come to our village before the marriage takes place. My son and the girl will not be allowed to meet. I myself have never met the girl and don't know her name. She is seven years old and my son is five years old. A few years difference in their ages does not matter. This marriage was suggested by the girl's father who was on a visit to my village. He spoke to my older brother

who told me about the girl. I already know the girl's father. We have been friendly for some time and have visited each other so I don't need to make any enquiries about the family." (Rajata Nath).

Some young men willingly accede to becoming engaged to girls some years younger than themselves. This means they can avoid the responsibilities of marriage and parenthood until the young girl reaches maturity and her parents inform the boy's parents she is old enough to be married and live with her husband. This works well if the boy's parents are willing to pay cash in lieu of brideservice, but if not, a boy can find himself engaged and doing brideservice for many years until the girl is adult.

The need to get a daughter married is also a reason for her *not* to be well educated. If she is educated, it is thought necessary to find an educated husband for her, which is not an easy task. School is also seen as a possible threat to an older girl's moral reputation. Manendra Nath, whose small daughter attends school in the squatter settlement in Jaipur said, "Parents are afraid their daughter will lose her reputation in society and be difficult to marry. If a girl becomes pregnant, then the boy should marry her, *must* marry her - he cannot refuse! The girl should not be ashamed or hide her crime." For many parents this equation of education with pre-marital pregnancy is a dire possibility.

Girls' families look for a son-in-law with varying degrees of thoroughness. No one likes to emphasize the detective work or the enquiries made, not so much into the boy's character but the reputation, circumstances and standing of his family, to ensure that their daughter will be treated well and can live happily after her marriage. Manendra Nath said he was looking for a husband for his

niece (her parents are dead), but he did not have any particular boy in mind. He would find out which families have sons who are not married, but who are interested in marrying. Then he will observe the family and the boy without anyone knowing, and make seemingly casual enquiries among people who know them. Then after discussing the boy with his older brother, they may approach the boy's parents.

"It is important the family doesn't realise it is being observed, because then they will mend their ways. No one bothers about the character of the boy because that will be discovered during his brideservice. What is important at the early stage is the reputation of the family," (Manendra Nath).

Sometimes enquiries reveal the boy and his family to be already embroiled in an engagement unlikely to culminate in marriage, with the *panchayat* still to decide the financial settlements before the matter is finally laid to rest and another marriage can be arranged. The boy's family also make discreet enquiries if they do not know the girl's family, for they want to be assured by someone they trust that her family has a good reputation.

There are generally held views on what constitutes a good son-in-law. "If he is earning ten rupees a day but spending twenty rupees, he will not be a suitable son-in-law. Neither should he be a *sharabi* (drunkard) or taking opium. We won't ask at first about the boy himself but we will ask people who know them 'Is that family good, happy?' We will ask about the characteristics of the family members, if they are quarrelsome or gossips," (Giri Nath).

Although girls are supposed to take no part in choosing their future husband, older women have a clear idea of the obligations of a husband. "A husband has duties and

restrictions. He is the one who daily brings the food and other provisions from the market. It is also his duty to earn money, and if his wife asks to visit her parents, then he has to arrange all that and escort her there, or arrange for a male to escort her. A husband should consult his wife before buying big items such as a bicycle or a transistor radio. A bad husband does not spend much time at home and is not interested in his family and does not care what his wife thinks. He may be a sharabi (alcoholic)," (Bindu).

"But a wife should be understanding if her husband is unable to earn any money once or twice in a month," said Abhi Nath, a young man, recently married.

"Yes," agreed Bindu, "Mutual understanding should be fostered between a man and his wife so they can deal with events as they happen and there are no misunderstandings."

Marriage negotiations are undertaken with keen interest by adults. Teenagers are vaguely aware of restrictions as to *gotra* applied when a marriage partner is being sought, but do not expect to take an active part in the discussions. "My parents arranged my marriage. I was only told they were looking for a beautiful girl from a family with good characteristics, prosperous, all working, and with no divorces in that family. My parents preferred to look in our Kalbelia sub-caste, not Chakkiyale or Chabdiyale sub-castes. My wife is a Kalbelia from Marwar. I did twelve months brideservice for my wife," (Nanda Nath).

Kalbelias are fond of socialising, and frequently visit relatives or go with friends to other villages when an older member of the community may notice a teenage male visitor with approval, and consider him as a prospective husband for a girl of their family. Dari Nath, a fifteen year old boy was flattered to be asked by his friend's aunt if he was

free for marriage. He had to inform her he was already married, although his wife was only ten years old and still living with her own parents.

Bhadra Nath said "In Gujarat where I worked digging peanuts, the girls don't marry before they are twenty years old and the boys don't marry before they are twenty-five years old, which is good."

"But these ages would be very late for us because we do not live beyond forty or fifty years old," commented Manasi Nath.

Manasi was immediately contradicted by Bhadra: "Our people are not dying prematurely - except in Manasi's village!"

Although there are venerable Kalbelia men and women, many people said their parents had died while they were still children. Bhadra himself was brought up by his stepmother and her third husband after his own father (her second husband) died while he was under five years of age.

A late marriage shortens the time a couple have to reproduce and to arrange for the continued well-being of their family, by arranging their sons' marriages so they can continue the family line and care for their parents in their old age should they be fortunate enough to attain it. In the case of a daughter, however young the girl, parents try to ensure her settled and secure future by marrying her into a family who in the event of her parents' death, will have ultimate responsibility for her well-being. These are important reasons why boys and girls are engaged and even married long before they are capable of understanding the concept. And of course, their young age makes it less likely

that they have any opportunity to go against their parents' wishes.

Orphans are the immediate responsibility of relatives who arrange their marriages, if this was not already done by the parents before their death. When a child's father dies, the child's elder brothers, or paternal uncles if he or she has no older brothers or the brothers are not mature, undertake the marriage negotiations.

"My father died when I was eight years old and because there was not enough money I had to stop attending school. After a few years my mother and brothers arranged my marriage and after I married I earned money by doing construction work and snake charming. Now I have three children. My wife is an orphan and her marriage was arranged by an aunt and uncle," (Rajata Nath).

Sahara Nath asked my opinion of Komal Nath. Without his knowledge Komal Nath was being "observed for a relationship." Sahara Nath's wife had noticed the boy was intelligent, and they were considering him for marriage with their niece for whom they were responsible since her parents' death. I knew the young man's family were also in the first stages of marriage negotiations with another family, but neither match took place. Some time later after more proposed matches, Komal Nath said, "All these girls are mature and ready for marriage, but I'm not yet ready for marriage."

#### 6: 4 KACHCHI SAGAI

Once two families have agreed an engagement should take place between a son and daughter, a date is arranged for the boy and his family to go to the girl's village to celebrate the *kachchi sagai* (engagement to be engaged). On this occasion the boy may get a brief glimpse of his unveiled

future wife, but only the briefest of glimpses is permitted. It may not happen at all if an opportunity is not provided for him by the girl's family, but the women of the boy's family party are allowed to see the girl unveiled. The boy's family bring festive foods such as sweets, gur (sugar), coconut and fruits, and there is singing and dancing. The girl's father gives a *pan* (betel leaf, lime etc. in a leaf) to the boy, and the girl's mother puts a *tilak* (a protective sign) on the boy's forehead.

#### 6: 5 BRIDESERVICE

The Kalbelias call brideservice *sos* or *har*, which they say means the bridegroom has sacrificed each and everything for his bride. Brideservice follows *kachchi sagai* and precedes the official engagement when both families finally agree the couple shall eventually marry.

During the period of his brideservice, the boy lives with the girl's family for at least a year, sometimes longer. They say that this is so that they can be sure he is a good worker and has a satisfactory character and that their daughter will be able to live with him happily after their marriage. Brideservice is the most common method of approaching engagement and then marriage, although Manendra Nath said "We are trying to change this tradition now we are settled in villages and children are going to school. Anyway, boys don't like having to live with the girl's family." A boy during his brideservice is in a similar position to that of a new wife when she first lives with her husband's family: both are on display and in an inferior and therefore vulnerable position.

The kind of work a boy does during his brideservice is to shepherd his in-laws' sheep, herd their goats, and look after the donkeys, or to hunt or to prepare vegetables for cooking. He has to do any work the girl's family demand of

him, including working outside the village for wages, perhaps doing construction work or conveying baggage, or roaming the streets with a cobra and *bin* (snake pipes) as a snakecharmer. The boy is expected to give at least half of his earnings to the girl's parents, keeping only half or less for himself. He may give them all he earns in an effort to impress them, for he is trying to show he will be a good provider for their daughter. But this money is evidential only: at the end of the brideservice the money is returned to the boy's family.

The boy and girl are not permitted to talk together during this period because there is a possibility he may be rejected as a son-in-law. Purandhi said, "I had no contact with my husband during his brideservice. He lived with my parents and gave them everything he earned. I was always veiled before him and we never spoke. I was aware he was in my village to do brideservice but I knew there was a chance that he would not be permanent because my parents had to decide whether he would be my husband or not. I was informed only after it was all settled by my parents. During that time I did not meet him or even observe him!"

I was at a loss to understand how she could avoid meeting anyone who was living in that small hamlet for a whole year, but she was adamant that this was the case. Later I realised the Hindi word "*milan*" implied a deliberate meeting, an assignation, and it was this that she was denying.

At the end of the period of brideservice with all its duties and restrictions, the girl's parents calculate the money earned by the boy and given to them, plus the value of any work done for them. This amount is returned to the boy's family whether or not the boy is accepted or rejected as a future son-in-law.

Brideservice is a stressful experience for a boy and the girl's parents may say that he is not a hard worker or is disrespectful. In their presence a prospective son-in-law should not sit on a cot or chair or smoke a *biri*, a cigarette or *hugqa*. Neither should he look directly at them, face to face. If he attempts to speak to the girl, this can be another reason to reject him. There are many other sources of tension: "It is difficult to take a bath because most washing facilities are in the open and the parents-in-law would be able to see, so the son-in-law must bath somewhere right away from them," said Nanda Nath, remembering his own brideservice.

All the time the boy is in his prospective in-law's village he must wear the traditional Kalbelia garments, an ochre or orange coloured *pagri* and white *dhoti* as a mark of respect which should, with other behaviour, ideally continue all the time his in-laws are alive but, "If after marriage a person ignores these customs it is impossible to do anything about it. And if a father-in-law and his son-in-law are travelling together in a train or bus they have to sit together and smoke together. It depends on the situation," (Manendra Nath).

If the girl's parents decide the boy is unsuitable, his parents may appeal to the *panchayat* because they do not agree their son should be rejected, or to settle the amount of money owed to their family for his work during his brideservice. This procedure also formally states the marriage will not take place and that the parents are free to arrange other marriages, (see Chapter Eight, where a case is discussed where a boy was rejected by the girl's parents after his brideservice).

In practice, brideservice quite often does not culminate in formal engagement leading to marriage. Bhadra

Nath, a young man of eighteen years old, told me of an engagement his parents arranged but which he managed to break. "I was informed before the kachchi sagai took place, but at that time I was young and could not say no. I was staying with one of my older brothers in the village where his in-laws lived. I attended the local school and the girl was also attending school and I was teaching her Hindi, so I knew her quite well. She was nine or ten years old and I was fifteen.

I started to do brideservice for her parents but I wasn't happy with the situation but didn't know how to escape. After we were engaged, I didn't speak to the girl any more and she was taught not to speak to me or meet me. She could pass the bag of salt to me but she could not speak and she was always veiled in front of me, although before our engagement she hadn't been veiled and we had spoken.

In front of my future in-laws I could not sit on a chair, or look at them face to face because I was as a ghost to them. I could not smoke a *biri* or *huqqa* in front of them, and I should not wear trousers, only a *dhoti* and always cover my head with a *pagri* or some other covering. If my prospective mother-in-law or father-in-law was sitting on a cot, then I too could not sit on it. All these restrictions were another reason to break the engagement. Could not sit on a cot, should not wear trousers, only a *dhoti*! And I felt they gave me very hard work and they asked too much.

After two years of brideservice, I became ill and weak, and my mother took me back to our village. When my parents told the girl's family I was going to Gujarat with another brother and some other men, they had to let me go because I was too weak to work for them anyway.

While I was in Gujarat I decided I definitely didn't want to marry that girl because of all the restrictions of brideservice and the hard work her parents demanded which I thought unreasonable. I had nothing against the girl herself except that she was very young and I realized I could be doing brideservice for many years. I wrote a letter to my brother who lives in the same village as the girl's family saying he should break off my engagement somehow, or I would never go to that village again. My brother is illiterate, so Dari Nath read my letter to him, and the contents came to the notice of the girl's family and they were very annoyed. I was glad they were angry with me and broke off the engagement! After this my family paid money to the girl's family, six rupees for something, three rupees for something else. I don't exactly know all the amounts of money and what they were for, but they were fines imposed by the *panchayat* because I broke the engagement. They have not compensated me for the work I did for them during brideservice, but whenever we ask for it they will have to pay.

When I returned to my mother's village from Gujarat, my mother had been talking to another family who had a pretty and mature daughter. I myself asked her to marry me and she agreed and so did her mother. Then I came to Jaipur and didn't go back and she married someone else!

I don't intend to do brideservice again. Three months ago I was offered an opportunity to marry a girl in Harjipura village and I went there with my older brother to stay with his wife's relatives, but then one of the males said he would provide another girl for me..." In fact his parents came to Jaipur and indignantly forbade these parentally unauthorised negotiations to proceed. "...but now I have decided to marry one of the basket maker girls who is a dancer in the music programme where I am working. Masterji who is in charge of all the performers (a man from the Bhopa

caste) has promised to pay all the expenses if I do this. I have tried to marry according to my parents' choice, now this is my choice. I don't think they will be annoyed with me." I was sure they would be furious, and later Bhadra dropped the idea of this marriage.

Thirteen year old Vibhu Nath has done brideservice for no less than three different girls. "And one girl was older than me! But I left all three. When I was eight years old my parents got me engaged to a girl. This girl had no parents, only an older brother who was always drinking *sharab* (alcohol) so my parents decided that girl would not be suitable. Now that girl is married to my mother's sister's son, because his two previous wives died, one in childbirth, and the other of tuberculosis. She already has one child and is expecting another!

After this, my parents found another girl for me, so for five or six months I did brideservice in that family. But although my family agreed I should marry her, her family were wanting more and more brideservice and pretending they would marry the girl to me, but they would not fix a marriage date. So we have broken that engagement legally by applying to the *panchayat*, and the girl's family owe us one thousand, two hundred and one rupees for the work I did for them during the brideservice, which they haven't paid yet. Now Mada Nath is doing brideservice for her.

Then I started to do brideservice for a third girl but it came to nothing and now my younger brother Dev Nath is engaged to her. But he is still young, only ten years old, and so he can't do much work for the girl's family and a month ago this was the cause of a quarrel between her family and mine."

Brideservice should ideally culminate in *pakka sagai* (formal engagement) and marriage. "I did brideservice for my wife for twelve months. In her parents' village I worked as herdsman with donkeys, goats and sheep, and I roamed the streets as a *sanpera* (snake charmer). We married in the Jaipur *Sabzi kachchi basti* and my wife's parents gave her some ornaments and household goods as dowry. When I first married, sometimes we lived in Harjipura village where my mother and some of my brothers live, and sometimes with my wife's parents who had moved from their village to the *Sabzi kachchi basti*. Now we have six children, and two days ago I was allocated a government plot of land at Krishnapura Marg, where we have been living in a tent for two or three years," (Nanda Nath).

Brideservice does not give the boy an absolute right to marry the girl for whom he is performing brideservice and, although it is hoped the brideservice will lead to marriage, it is a separate thing from marriage itself. Interestingly, the Kalbelias' meaning of the term is that the groom has given up each and everything for his prospective bride. As his earnings are not retained by the girl's family, this does not then, refer to money. But it does refer to his freedom. The boy lives away from his natal family under stringent conditions, yet brideservice does not equal marriage, and no rights are acquired in the girl. A Kalbelia marriage does not exist until the appropriate ceremony has been performed in public and in front of witnesses. Unlike the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard, 1951), Kalbelias do not recognise marriage in stages. Furthermore, in the most prestigious form of north Indian marriage, a virgin is given, along with her dowry, to her husband's family as a completely free and sacred gift for which no return whatever should be accepted, and it follows that the son-in-law is the guest par excellence, an honoured visitor to his wife's parents' home. Nothing must be accepted from him, while wife-givers are

inferior to wife-takers and under constant on-going obligation to provide endless gifts, (Parry 1979: 88, 238; 301). Yet the way Kalbelias conduct their brideservice contradicts this ideology.

#### 6: 6 PAYMENT IN LIEU OF BRIDESERVICE

Most boys do not relish the prospect of living and working on probation with their future bride's family for a year or even longer, although this is the most common prelude to engagement and marriage to girls of the Kalbelia sub-caste. But apart from marriages arranged by parents along the lines of *kachchi sagai* ("engagement to be engaged"), followed by brideservice, followed by *pakka sagai* (formal engagement), followed by *shadi* (marriage), there is a variation: Payment in lieu of brideservice.

When a boy marries a girl from the *Chabdiyale* or *Chakkivale* sub-castes, a sum of money is paid to the girl's family in lieu of brideservice. Some families, if they can afford to, come to a similar arrangement even when their son is to marry a Kalbelia girl. This is in order to avoid the interruption to their son's education which brideservice usually entails when the boy goes to live in the girl's village. Some parents are merely indulgent.

It is typical of teenage boys to say with more hope than certainty, "I can pay money instead of doing brideservice. Now I am used to wearing pants and shirts in villages, and in the bride's family I cannot sit on cot or chair in front of her parents and we cannot sit face to face." or "I won't do brideservice! I have told my father I can't wear *pagri* and *dhoti* all the time because I want to stay at school."

Biman Nath, the head of the family who runs the hotel snake charming monopoly, has made over the entertainment

rights in one hotel to his son's prospective in-laws in lieu of brideservice. When his son's future wife's family first worked as snakecharmers at the hotel, they paid one thousand, two hundred rupees commission each year to Biman Nath's family. But when Makunda Nath's brideservice was discussed Biman Nath said, "My boy is studying so he won't do brideservice. If you want money instead of brideservice you may do the hotel work without paying me. The marriage will be when you decide and my boy will come only on the day of the wedding."

Kalbelias say that the purpose of brideservice is, among other things, to check that the boy is able to earn well. I suggest that this is why payment in lieu of brideservice is possible. The payment proves that the boy's family have money, can earn money, and guarantees that the girl will be properly provided for. The money is retained by the girl's family, but they forego the chance to closely observe the boy's habits and behaviour, and may not even meet him until the wedding.

Payment in lieu of brideservice is separate from and in addition to bridewealth described later. It has arisen since Kalbelias have acquired permanent homes, and with the possibility of marriage with girls from the *Chabdiyale* or *Chakkiyale* sub-castes. The interruption to a boy's education may become a reason for the boy's family to make a payment in lieu of brideservice, but many girl's parents will continue to prefer brideservice because of the opportunity to satisfy themselves as to the character and earning ability of their daughter's future husband.

#### 6: 7 BRIDEWEALTH

The Kalbelias say *rit* literally means tradition, but they use the word to mean bridewealth, or brideprice. The

boy's family pay bridewealth to the girl's family, as well as their son doing brideservice.

The role of brideprice, or bridewealth as Evans-Pritchard suggested it be better termed (1931: 38), has been the subject of debate (Gray 1968: 259). Raglan asserted bridewealth to be essentially a commercial transaction with women being bought and sold (1931: 75), but Goody shows brideprice is wealth for, not to, the bride. This wealth passes from the groom's kin to the bride's kin, corresponding to the movement of rights over spouses, usually women. In contrast, dowry is part of a familial or conjugal fund, passing from the girl's parents to their daughter when she becomes a bride, sometimes to the husband (at least for safekeeping) or to both spouses jointly, (1973: 6; 17).

"...bridewealth is more commonly found where women make the major contribution to agriculture, whereas dowry is restricted to those societies where males contribute most," (Goody, 1973: 52).

Berland attributes the high bridewealth paid for women of the Kanjar caste, traditionally non-pastoral nomads, to their economic contributions made by begging and selling toys, plus a shortage of females because the prettiest girls are sent to brothels where they fail to keep in touch with their families, and therefore are unavailable to the Kanjar community as brides, (1982, 128-132).

It is the prime duty of Kalbelia men to earn money to keep their wives and family, and Kalbelia women never work as prostitutes, although this may be thought of them by outsiders who do not differentiate between distinct Gypsy-type peoples, some of whom do utilise prostitution as an economic strategy. Kalbelias' bridewealth payments are not exorbitantly high, possibly mirroring the fact that their

women's financial contribution gained by working outside the home is expected to be at best, low and sporadic. In societies where girls must have a large dowry in order to be married, (see section on dowry below) they may be regarded as a financial burden. Among Kalbelias, the boy's family give money to the girl's family. Yet despite this girls are not regarded as financial assets. "Kalbelia girls are always menial, lower than men since they cannot earn well because of being illiterate," (Manendra Nath).

Rajaraman characterises bridewealth as 'positive' when it is compensation to the bride's family for the production loss they suffer on her departure in respect of child rearing and household work, but 'negative' when it is in respect of the cost of maintaining her. However, the bridegroom and/or his family can recoup the cost of the bridewealth 'from the productive contribution over time of the woman', (Rajaraman, 1983: 276-7).

'Devolutionary rights are held exclusively by the corporation and its members. Anyone leaving it, therefore, is to be paid out for their past contributions (i.e. labour) and the renunciation of further rights,' (Comaroff, 1980: 14).

The Kalbelias reject these notions, although they say dowry is the girl's share of her natal family's property. As I show below, she does not wholly renounce further rights.

In the Delhi area, Kalbelia bridewealth is fixed at one thousand and one hundred rupees, (in 1988 this converted to £55.00 sterling). Some years ago bridewealth was traditionally one hundred and ninety silver rupees, but now these silver rupees are not available so the amount has been converted into modern currency. In the Marwar area bridewealth traditionally was one hundred and two silver rupees, but nowadays the amount has been converted into five hundred and forty rupees, (£27.00 sterling). In Mewar,

bridewealth was one hundred and two silver rupees, now converted to three thousand modern rupees, (£150.00 sterling). I was not given any reason for these traditional amounts not converting on an equal basis into modern rupees. It is possible the amount quoted was what an outsider to the area was forced to pay as bridewealth (see below), and the customary amount within the area is lower, more in line with other amounts quoted.

Although each regional *panchayat* has decided the amount of bridewealth to be paid within their area, when brides are sought by families from other areas, perhaps because the boy's family are having difficulties finding him a bride, or because of the necessity to avoid infringing the exogamy rules, the girls' families may ask for more than the local rate. "If a Marwar boy is going to marry a Mewar girl, then the Mewar family will ask, 'How much money will you give us?' In this case they can ask for more money. If a *Delhiyala* wants to marry a Marwar girl, then they can also ask for more." It also goes against the custom of the girl's family initiating marriage negotiations.

A boy's family may also have to pay higher bridewealth if they seek a bride from the *Chabdiyale* or *Chakkivale* sub-castes. The girl's family demand a higher than usual amount of bridewealth, possibly because it may create a shortage of marriageable girls available to their own sub-caste, and because they are aware the boy's family must be having difficulty finding him a wife, since his family would almost certainly prefer him to marry a *sanperin*. The Kalbelias tend to disparage the other two sub-castes, the basket makers (*Chabdiyale*) in particular, so it may be partially in retribution that *Chakkivale* (grinding stone makers) and *Chabdiyale* exploit the situation to their financial advantage.

When I suggested to Nala Nath who is unmarried, that since he has several married sisters for whom his family had received bridewealth, he could marry using this money, he vehemently denied it: "I cannot use my sister's money for such a purpose!" he said. I was unaware when I made this suggestion, that when a boy does brideservice for his prospective wife's family, he is earning money or performing services for his prospective in-laws, the cash equivalent of which is returned to his family at the end of his brideservice. Kalbelia bridewealth, although mediated by the boy's family, is actually earned by the bridegroom himself. This indicates that the amount, fixed by their regional *panchayat*, is hardly crippling, since a teenage boy is able to raise the amount through his own efforts. He does not depend on money brought into his family by the bridewealth of his sisters or provided by his parents or other family members.

But the elders among the Kalbelias do exercise control over younger males. Although the young man himself does brideservice and while doing it, earns the money used to pay bridewealth and therefore has economic power, young males of the sub-caste are under the formal authority of their fathers and elders when it comes to contracting a marriage. It would be inconceivable for a family to consent to a young man doing brideservice for their daughter without agreeing this with his parents. Furthermore, the money a young man earns during brideservice and turns over to his prospective in-laws, is not returned to him at the end of a successful brideservice or in the event of a breakdown in the marriage negotiations, but to his parents. The Kalbelia sub-caste keeps tight control over its members (see chapter eight) and in the matter of arranging a marriage, young Kalbelia males are under the control of their parents or guardians.

"This bridewealth money can be used for anything. Sometimes a girl's parents don't take money according to religion but if they do, it can be used for any purpose. There is no traditional use for this money," (Nala Nath). Bridewealth is not ostensibly made over to the couple as a basis of their conjugal estate, and the boy's parents have no right to demand or even expect the girl should be accompanied by a dowry (see below), that could be construed as a return of the bridewealth. Nor is a daughter's bridewealth used to supply the bridewealth of her brothers, who in any case, may all be married long before she is, if there is a great disparity in their ages.

In the case of *gharjayai* where, in the absence of sons in a family, a man lives with and cares for the parents of his wife in their old age, on the understanding that on their deaths he inherits the family property, bridewealth is not required by the girl's father. Bridewealth serves to affiliate children to their father's lineage or to the lineage of the givers of bridewealth, but the *gharjayai* and his offspring and his wife are effectively members of the father-in-law's household, although the *gharjayai*'s gotra is taken into account when his children's marriages are planned.

Brideservice too, is dispensed with in the case of *gharjayai*, although perhaps the commitment that lasts for the duration of the lives of the wife's parents can be argued to actually be a form of on-going and continuous brideservice.

Evans-Pritchard suggests that bridewealth payments may be viewed as a technique for creating and maintaining new social relationships between persons between whom there are no well-defined patterns of behaviour, (1951:96). This theory is only partially applicable to the Kalbelias'

payments in lieu of the traditional brideservice. The payment may appear to be only a larger than usual bridewealth payment, but extra payment usually obviates the creation of close social relationships. Such payments in lieu of brideservice are most often made by Kalbelia families who wish to take a bride from one of the two lower sub-castes or a Kalbelia bride from a different region. Therefore the groom has little contact with his bride's natal family, either before or after the marriage. Payment in lieu of brideservice nearly always denotes distance. Physical distance when the bride comes from another region of Rajasthan, or social distance, when the bride comes from the inferior Chakkiyale or Chabdiyale sub-castes. However, it is true that a social relationship, albeit a distant one, is created.

Kalbelia women do not enjoy economic independence or ostensible power or authority. They have no way to acquire money before marriage and few opportunities after. The Kalbelia woman's small dowry presented to her by her family the morning after her marriage and the gifts made to her by her husband and his family are the first items she owns in her own right. That Kalbelia women cannot or are not allowed "to earn well", is a reason put forward by Kalbelia men for the low status of Kalbelia women among the sub-caste. But Kalbelia women are usually the prime movers where marriage is concerned. Usually it is the women who are alert for suitable husbands for the girls of their family, among male visitors to the village. Although males undertake formal negotiations, it will be a woman, the mother, aunt or other female relative who informs a girl's father or guardian when a girl is physically and mentally ready to live with her husband and take up the duties of marriage. The girl's husband and his family may not demand that the bride comes to live with them. They have to wait until informed that her family deem her sufficiently mature.

The Kalbelias are not generally hypergamous.

Traditionally there is no hierarchy within the sub-caste and families are considered equals. Wife takers are not superior to wife givers, for instance, (but the few marriages with girls from the other two sub-castes are hypergamous - at least from the Kalbelias' point of view. The ideology of equality would not seem to apply in these cases). Kalbelia men and women marry comparatively young, widows may remarry, and divorce and remarriage is tolerated. Kalbelias do not practise sibling exchange marriages, and as yet, payment in lieu of brideservice is not widespread. If it eventually supersedes brideservice then possibly payments may spiral, since brideprice is usually only substituted for brideservice where a family is wealthy enough to pay it because their boy is earning very well locally, or is staying on at school or going to college and is expected to earn well later. Although a few brides have been obtained from the two lower sub-castes of *Chabdiyale* (basket-makers) and *Chakkivale* (grinding stone makers) and payment was made in lieu of brideservice, this seems to be confined to a small group of brothers in one village only, and has been permissible for less than forty years.

While discussing a Kalbelia marriage I had attended, a young Kalbelia man referred to the bridewealth as having purchased the bride. This was emphatically denied by older Kalbelia men present. Whereas Rajput dowries are ostentatiously displayed, but bridewealth considered to be a demeaning and under-the-counter transaction flatly contradicting the ideology of *kanya dan* (the gift of a virgin), and bridewealth is explicitly a commercial transaction to which the verb *bechna* ('to sell') and the noun *mol* ('price') is applied, (Parry, 1979: 243), Kalbelias talk as openly of the amounts passing from the parents of the groom to the parents of the bride by way of bridewealth as they do of the bride's dowry, given in public view by her

family and friends the morning after the wedding. In the eyes of senior members of the Kalbelia sub-caste and their young women, bridewealth is not considered to be demeaning. Some young men who have endured a period of perhaps onerous brideservice actually earning the bridewealth, may view it differently if it revives memories of an unpleasant or difficult period of their lives.

Formerly a prospective father-in-law who broke faith by marrying his daughter elsewhere ran the risk of violent retribution (Cave-Browne 1857: 172, in Parry, 1979: 245), but British rule deprived the bridegroom's family of such redress. This allowed a father greater freedom to explore the market, and dispose of his daughter to the highest bidder, (Parry, 1979: 245). In such an event, Kalbelias would certainly resort to their *panchayat*. I assume the Mians did not have a similarly effective *panchayat* system, or powerful sanctions other than violence.

#### 6:8 DISCUSSION OF BRIDeweALTH AND BRIDESERVICE

The Kalbelias customarily utilise both brideservice and bridewealth when arranging their marriages, but Collier and Rosaldo argue that bridewealth and brideservice societies are distinct and separate, (1981:278). The Kalbelia system of organising marriage would seem to refute this.

Groups in which gifts of labour by the groom to his in-laws are the expected form of marital legitimization, Collier and Rosaldo call 'brideservice' societies. Here, adults control the distribution of their produce, and on-going relationships depend upon free and continuing gifts and services through which co-operating persons organize the distribution of food, (1981:278). However, gifts of labour from the groom to his in-laws are not the expected form of marital legitimization among the Kalbelias. Neither do they

maintain relationships by co-operating with other people to organize the distribution of food by means of continual free gifts and services.

'In "bridewealth" societies, goods given on marriage are seen as payment for rights to a woman's labour, sexuality, or offspring...' (Collier and Rosaldo, 1981:278).

Although the bridewealth of the Kalbelias is formally paid by the groom's parents or guardians, the sum paid to the girl's family is actually earned by the prospective groom during his brideservice. But Collier and Rosaldo's information suggests that the groom presents gifts of valuables acquired through the labour of someone other than the groom himself, (1981:278), and that the acquisition of marital prestations typically places the groom in a relationship of debt to senior kinsfolk, who provide young men with the prerequisites for launching their adult careers, (1981:278). Although the Kalbelia groom earns his own bridewealth, he is nonetheless indebted to senior kinsfolk since he lacks the necessary authority to marry without their help. It is unthinkable that a Kalbelia girl's family would consent to enter into marriage negotiations solely with the boy, even if he approached them with money in hand. A marriage comes about through the negotiations of senior generations of the boy's and girl's respective families: their parents with the help of other senior relatives, or if the parents are dead, their older brothers or guardians. This holds true even when a mature man is seeking to remarry after the death of his first, or even second, wife. And the function of brideservice is to favourably impress the girl's parents or guardians, rather than the girl herself, who supposedly has no say as to whether the boy is accepted or rejected as a suitable husband. Therefore a Kalbelia groom is indebted to senior

kinsfolk who exercise their authority on his behalf. They do not, however, supply him with bridewealth.

'In bridewealth, but not brideservice societies, gifts can be given in lieu of labour, and indebtedness is often repaid by work: failure to give gifts may be seen as negating a marital arrangement...' (Collier and Rosaldo, 1981:278).

Certainly, failure to pay bridewealth would be seen as negating a prospective Kalbelia marriage, since bridewealth is paid in full before the marriage ceremony. But unless there is prior agreement, brideservice has to be performed before, and in addition to, the payment of bridewealth.

'Brideservice, unlike bridewealth societies, stress affinal bonds in the organization of productive relations. No person works for another...' (Collier and Rosaldo, 1981:279).

Since a Kalbelia boy works for the family of his prospective bride during brideservice and pays bridewealth, the above does not hold true among the Kalbelias. A Kalbelia boy formally works for prospective in-laws during his brideservice in order to demonstrate that he will be able to support a wife and family, and that his ways and habits are acceptable to the girl's family. Once bridewealth is paid and the marriage ceremony has taken place, there is no formal obligation for him to work for his in-laws ever again. (But once a girl is married, she has an obligation to work for her in-laws).

'...although predictable patterns of local co-operation grant men considerable freedom, there is an enduring assumption that young men on marriage, will share a good part of their produce with members of wives' natal groups,' (Collier and Rosaldo', 1981:279).

If they live close by, many Kalbelia sons-in-law and fathers-in-law do work together and help each other, but this is a matter of personal preference, not prescription, and a Kalbelia man is under no formal obligation to give to his wife's natal group.

'Brideservice gifts are not payments, but proofs of equality in status, and what people readily negotiate has less to do with obligation than the recognition of others as peers,' (Collier and Rosaldo, 1981:279).

The Kalbelias have an ideology of equality among adult males, yet by performing brideservice, a Kalbelia boy temporarily adopts an inferior role. Payment of bridewealth restores equality.

'...marriage is a male achievement and the logic of social relations permits men as "achievers" of women, to attain a public position not generally enjoyed by their wives,' (Collier and Rosaldo, 1981:280).

Kalbelia girls and women appear uninterested in their prospective marital partners, although this may be institutionalised modesty, (see above). Their attitude contrasts noticeably with the speculations of teenage boys on the marriage negotiations they hope or know their families are conducting on their behalf. At the weddings I attended, brides appeared resigned, almost bored, whereas their grooms were beaming and happy. A Kalbelia wedding day is the groom's big day. His wedding clothes are much finer than his everyday clothes - he looks like a prince! But the girl's wedding clothes scarcely differ in appearance or quality from her usual clothes. Comments by young Kalbelia men show that they regard females, other than their own mothers and sisters, as similar and interchangeable, but perceive marriage or even engagement to be a marker of self-worth and adulthood. Kalbelia women do not experience a

commensurate change of status until the birth of their first child.

'...marriage marks, in general, a decline in female status and autonomy,' (Collier and Rosaldo, 1981:284).

Since Kalbelia females have little autonomy and low status in the eyes of their society, they experience little difference in that respect when they first marry. Within their natal families they are loved daughters and sisters, but they go to their husband's family as unknown daughters-in-law. However, there is a willingness and determination on the part of her husband and his family to positively welcome a new daughter-in-law, and because of the Kalbelias' custom of much visiting round the villages, the new bride is not cut off from family and people she previously knew. Her husband will take her with him to visit camps and other villages where her relatives and friends live or are visiting. As if these informal safeguards were not enough, the day after the wedding in one marriage I attended, the boy's family were publicly told very clearly, "Treat our girl well or there will be trouble!" Divorce is also possible, so a Kalbelia wife is not as defenceless as women from some other castes may be. I never heard of a Kalbelia wife pushed to her death on a cooking fire, or divorced because of barrenness. Kalbelias live closely together and are peaceable, and sub-caste pressure on a husband and his family to behave well, coupled with ease of observation and communication with family and friends, gives a new wife protection. Her natal family would speedily learn of any ill-treatment or unhappiness, for there is no veto on members of her natal family visiting her husband's village, and they are likely to go there frequently. Therefore the marriage of a Kalbelia female does not result in a decline of her status, but there is now a formal obligation for her to carry out domestic duties for her husband, and his

parents, when they are living together. This could further reduce any autonomy she enjoyed before marriage.

'...at the same time that young men need wives, young women do not perceive themselves as needing husbands - and so marriage is cast overwhelmingly, as a matter of a man's establishing claims to the moral commitment and daily services of some particular bride. Furthermore, men establish these claims, not by providing for their wives and children, but rather by distributing produce to senior in-laws, so as to win support and commitment from those who most influence wives,' (Collier and Rosaldo, 1981: 285).

Broadly, this is true for the Kalbelias, although a prospective groom does not distribute produce to prospective in-laws to be utilised by them, but earns money or performs services to demonstrate that he is capable of supporting a wife and family. The money earned during brideservice by a prospective son-in-law is returned to his family at the end of the period. Any work or labour done for the in-laws themselves is calculated and the appropriate remuneration in cash paid to the boy's family.

'A newly married man is distinguished from bachelors by having direct, privileged access to both female sexuality and the products of female labour; marriage, to a bachelor, is a necessary and desirable attainment,' (Collier and Rosaldo, 1981: 283).

Upon marriage, Kalbelia males gain adult male status and the sexual services of a wife, but whereas before marriage (and brideservice) they could be looked after by their mother and sisters, after marriage they are obliged to earn sufficient money to support a wife and family - quite a responsibility. Nonetheless, most appear eager to be married eventually.

'A newly married woman, on the other hand, appears to have no more privileged access to male products than her single sisters, and sexual access to a husband often fails to compensate her for the loss of personal and sexual

freedom she enjoyed when still unattached,' (Collier and Rosaldo, 1981: 283).

Kalbelias say young girls do not have to do any work until they are married, but in fact they do domestic work and have little personal autonomy, unlike young Kalbelia boys who appear to lead a life of untrammelled freedom after leaving school and before commencing brideservice. To a Kalbelia woman, marriage implies more domestic work, and usually entails leaving her family to live as a newcomer with her husband and his family in another village or camp. Kalbelia girls are not allowed any sexual freedom before marriage, so marriage is a gain in that way. But a Kalbelia girl is fed and clothed before marriage by her father, or if he has died, by her guardians or brothers, so marriage brings only a small immediate material advantage to her, by way of her dowry, which is regarded as her personal property, (see below).

'...the organization of sexual privilege, together with the more strictly economic need of all men for a wife and hearth, means that marriage marks a critical transition in the life career of a man... he becomes a settled and responsible adult... As a man with recognised interests to protect, he can... expect to be heard in public gatherings,' (Collier and Rosaldo, 1981: 284).

Theoretically, any Kalbelia man can speak at a *panchayat*, but in practice only older, married men speak.

With his 'basic needs... provided, he can devote his time to building the exchange networks that enhance social influence and prestige,' (Collier and Rosaldo, 1981: 284).

Once a Kalbelia man is married and living with his wife, he is no longer free just to amuse himself, for it is incumbent upon him to build and maintain a social network within the sub-caste, if only to ensure that his own

children will be acceptable to other Kalbelias as marriage partners.

'Independent married men, who in important ways need nothing, cannot readily be coerced by leaders to obey. It seems no accident, therefore, that men in brideservice societies seem reluctant to assume authority over others. Lacking power and at the same time fearing violence, they are hesitant to make excessive claims. The equality of independent men thus becomes a public virtue...' (Collier and Rosaldo, 1981:295).

The Kalbelias say, 'Among us, all (adult males) are equal,' but because of the need to maintain a social network among the caste, plus the possible threat of outcasting, there is an element of coercion in Kalbelia society. (See Chapter Eight).

'Men in egalitarian societies do not display a desire for dominance, but do display a considerable drive to achieve parity...' (Fried, 1967:79, in Collier and Rosaldo, 1981:290). This 'emerges both as description of the stance of a successful married man and of the kinds of actions apt to be required before his marital independence is achieved. Because the equal status all men hope to earn is based on marriage, men must be able to assert and to defend their claims to women. And so marriage, by defining what men in brideservice societies can desire, shapes what men are apt to fight for, and how they enter into and resolve disputes,' (Collier and Rosaldo, 1981:290).

"You fight over land," a Kalbelia elder told my Brahmin colleague. "We fight over our women!" Most of the cases heard by the Kalbelias' *panchayat* involve disputes concerning women, (see Chapter Eight). The consensus of opinion among Kalbelias is that 'everyone is married eventually' and for someone not to be married implies a lack of equality. I was told of only one Kalbelia male considered unlikely ever to be married: a young man born with very short arms. A girl's parents would suspect that he would be unable to properly provide for a wife and family, or that he might engender deformed offspring. In other beggar groups,

(see Chapter Four) children have been deliberately physically handicapped in order to make them objects of pity and therefore more effective beggars (Bennett, 1931:217, in Schak, 1988: 46-7), but in the Kalbelia sub-caste, although this man fits the bill as an appropriate object of charity likely to attract donations, he is not considered to be a suitable prospective husband. This could also be because the traditional and ostensible occupation of the Kalbelias is not begging, but snakecharming - which should include the capture of highly dangerous cobras.

'...in brideservice societies... the exchange of women is usually accomplished by moving men around,' (Collier and Rosaldo, 1981:300).

A Kalbelia male goes to the village of his prospective bride in order to do brideservice. However, this is usually but a prelude to the man eventually moving the woman away from her family and village to his own.

'...that it is (characteristically) men who move comes to support a view that men, far from being passive pawns of women who remain at home, are the initiators of affinity. Because men, on marrying, assert their independence by approaching foreign households and establishing separate hearths, their circulation acquires an active cast, and they are seen as the people who 'make marriages' by forging new relationships with other men, (Collier and Rosaldo, 1981:300).

In fact, Kalbelia boys are vulnerable during brideservice when they live with the family of the girl in her village. At this stage, the boy has far more to lose than his prospective bride. He could spend a year or more working for her family, who may then reject him as a husband for their daughter. This rejection holds him up to ridicule, accusations of disrespectful behaviour, or of being an inadequate worker and money earner. The girl, on the other hand, is in her own home, surrounded by her own people. She

gives nothing, neither sexual nor domestic services, not even conversation. If her family reject the boy, this does not reflect badly on her, since it is Kalbelia men who ostensibly accept or reject other males. The prospective groom is cast in the role of supplicant.

'Men, we found, leave their maternal homes early in life and spend much of their teenage years as relatively unanchored bachelors, (Collier and Rosaldo, 1981:316).

Because the Kalbelia sub-caste had not been cultivators of their own land, their livelihood lies almost entirely outside what is nowadays their home environment. Therefore, to entertain or work, and certainly to beg, they must go further afield, since to solicit alms from their neighbours would cause irritation to the other castes among whom they presently live harmoniously. Kalbelia parents therefore allow teenage sons to come and go fairly freely in order that they may gain the experience necessary to be able to survive and earn outside the family sphere. Most teenage boys take advantage of this by having a marvellous time free from parental constraint, with only themselves to maintain, and able to return home to recuperate whenever they choose. But later,

'Men... must attach themselves to senior men in order to enjoy the services of women, achieve symbolic proofs of creativity and prowess, and ultimately... win a wife... they must establish a relationship with future in-laws who accept them as the husbands of their daughters, in order to secure desired conjugal ties. Marriage for a man is a prerequisite to adult autonomy and status; and although conflict surrounding this status makes it seem that wives are earned through shows of force, adult autonomy depends... on the assumption of obligations and responsibilities vis-a vis those affines best equipped to influence potential wives,' (Collier and Rosaldo, 1981:316).

A Kalbelia male wishing to marry does not have to compete for the attentions of the girl with other males, and

a show of force would not endear him to her family. But he has to be confident and assertive enough to be able to earn money outside the hamlet, and physically strong enough to do the tasks the girl's family demand of him during his brideservice. Therefore his period of adolescent freedom away from his natal family when he learns to maintain himself, stands him in good stead when he performs his brideservice.

'Only when marriages are secure do men begin to appear free of such obligations... so... only older men are likely to be seen (as able to) guarantee the welfare of their households and co-ordinate co-operative bonds. These older married men... are apt... to benefit from the support and services of newly married young couples,' (Collier and Rosaldo, 1981: 317).

Although a Kalbelia man may benefit from the services of a prospective son-in-law, brideservice arrangements are likely to break down in acrimony if the boy complains of exploitation. Then the girl's family could have difficulty in getting another family to enter into marriage negotiations with them. There are inbuilt bounds to exploitative behaviour, mainly because Kalbelias live closely together, largely outside their huts or tents. Almost everything takes place in full view of the community and is observed and commented upon.

'...the only power any man can claim is an ability to influence another's actual or wished-for wife; thus a man whose marriage is secure need obey no other,' (Collier and Rosaldo, 1981: 317).

When Kalbelia parents look for a groom, their first enquiries are to establish whether a boy's family is satisfactory, rather than about the boy himself. And since daughters, unlike sons, may not acquire marital partners from outside the sub-caste (but see Chapter Eight), a married man is not independent of other Kalbelias. In the

context of parental duty, both he and his family must be acceptable to other Kalbelias to ensure that in due course, all his children are married. Therefore, even a securely married Kalbelia man cannot afford to entirely disregard the customary expectations of his sub-caste.

It is possible that since Kalbelias are now more sedentary than formerly, brideservice will come to be seen as an inconvenient interruption to a boy's education or threat to his career. Brideservice may then be superseded by payment in lieu, perhaps taking the form of a greatly enhanced bridewealth payment. However, at present, payment in lieu of brideservice is still uncommon.

Although Collier and Rosaldo have argued that brideservice and bridewealth societies are distinct and separate (1981:278), the Kalbelias customarily utilise both brideservice and bridewealth. Therefore they fit Collier and Rosaldo's definitions imperfectly. In addition, the Kalbelias are far from being part of a society which is non-class or non-rank (Collier and Rosaldo, 1981:278) – they are part of the Hindu caste hierarchy. Additionally, their lack of day-to-day, gift-giving and food distribution outside the domestic group suggests a society different from those discussed by Collier and Rosaldo.

#### 6:9 DOWRY

Because brideservice or bridewealth can be contrasted with marriage systems where the bride's dowry (*dahej*) is of paramount importance, it is appropriate to discuss the subject here, rather than later in the narrative when the Kalbelia bride's dowry is presented in public, the day following the sacred marriage ceremony.

In north India, a 'Dowry Wedding' implies the bride's side are the givers and the groom's the receivers... the

less the groom's side gives, the 'better' the wedding. In south India, reciprocity is more often characteristic of marriages in which dowries are given, (Miller, 1980: 112-113). In Kalbelia marriages there is no hierarchy of wife-takers over wife-givers. A Kalbelia daughter is given her share of current material goods as her dowry when she marries. This is because she is expected to physically move away from her natal family and to live and travel with her husband and his family. However, she continues to retain rights of visitation and periodic presents of *mayra* (clothes and ornaments) from her natal family's estate, when she gives birth and on other occasions. Her children also receive *mayra* from their mother's brother, at the time of their marriages.

After the death of both parents, Kalbelia family property may not be finally shared out between the sons until every one of their sisters is married. Even then, brothers are duty-bound to continue to fulfil the obligation of *mayra* to their married sisters and their offspring. Although a Kalbelia daughter does not directly inherit anything on the death of her parents, she and her offspring have continuing claims on her natal estate, and the dowry she received on her marriage does not extinguish further claims.

Tambiah posits that in India where dowry is respected but bridewealth is considered degraded and immoral, money received as bridewealth tends to be converted back to dowry by the bride's parents, who give it to their daughter to form the nucleus of her conjugal estate:

'...by and large... dowry in India and Ceylon stresses the notion of female property (*stridhanam*) and female rights to property in a way that is not true of bridewealth situations... dowry connotes female property or female rights to property which is transferred at a woman's

marriage as a sort of pre-mortem inheritance,' (Tambiah, 1973: 64).

But Caplan points out that:

' "dowry" has become an indigenous term... and is applied to two analytically distinct sets of transactions... to the traditional items such as jewels, cooking vessels or other household goods and clothes which accompany a bride to her conjugal home. In general these remain her property, (Caplan, 1984: 217).

"Dowry" is also used to refer to the "gifts" which a bride's parents make over to the parents of the bridegroom, or to the bridegroom himself, to enjoy as they or he please(s), (Caplan, 1984: 217).

Van der Veen terms this transaction as 'bridegroom price': 'These transfers may involve such modern consumer items as refrigerators, scooters, motor cars, and even houses, but most frequently... are... cash... to be alienated from both the daughter and her natal unit,' (1972: 44, in Caplan, 1984: 217-8).

'The custom of bridegroom price violates and differs from the classical notion of dowry (*stridhan*)... It cannot have the connotation of a daughter's "portion" of the household estate, since it is alienated from her... and actually diminishes her rights to and share in the family's property... The bridegroom's parents, to whom it passes, generally do not hold it for the benefit of the young couple, but utilise it to acquire husbands for their own daughters, or regard it as recompense for resources already expended on the latter,' (Caplan, 1984: 230-1).

Kalbelias say "A dowry is not asked for but the girl's parents can give it to her if they wish." Dowry does not form any part of the premarital discussions with the boy's family. Most Kalbelia families give their daughters a small dowry the day after the wedding ceremony, when it is publicly presented before the wedding guests. It comprises, most importantly, heavy silver anklets, a few clothes, and

some household goods such as earthenware pots, and perhaps a string cot. This represents the girl's share in her natal family's property, although she retains rights of visitation to her natal home, and other future prestations. The silver anklets in particular, are expected to remain her personal property until her dying day (see Chapter Seven), and I never heard of any *panchayat* case or even talk of disagreement concerning a woman's dowry. Therefore the Kalbelias' notion of dowry (*dahej*) is the traditional one of jewellery, cooking vessels and household goods, and does not coincide with the other transactions outlined by Caplan or Van der Veen (1972:44 cited in Caplan, 1984: 217-8; 230-1).

Tambiah suggests that bridewealth is used to provide part of the dowry (1973: 71), but Kalbelias do not acknowledge that they use it for that purpose. If a woman returns to her natal home after divorce, her family is adjudged to be still in possession of her bridewealth and are required to return it to the husband's family (see Chapter Eight). There is never a similar demand for the return of dowry from the ex-husband or his family, since this is the woman's personal property and remains in her keeping, and is nothing to do with her husband or his family.

This lack of conflict over dowries may appear surprising in view of the substantial nature of dowries reported for many other castes. For example in 1987, Roop Kanwar, a young Rajput bride of only a few weeks, became *sati*, that is, (supposedly) voluntarily burned to death on her husband's funeral pyre in Deorala village in Sikar District, Rajasthan. *Sati* is against the law but still occurs infrequently. Roop Kanwar's dowry was forty tolas of gold (one tola is equal to ten grams), fixed deposits of thirty thousand rupees in her name, a colour television, a

cooking range and a refrigerator, (The Women and Media Committee, 1987:5). This is not an unusually large dowry among the better-off castes in Rajasthan, where dowries are substantial and remain in the hands of the husband and his family even if the circumstances of the young bride's death are suspicious. I was told by several people (not Kalbelias) that Jaipur has a high number of 'dowry deaths': the wife is deliberately pushed on to the cooking fire and burns to death. Her widower and his family retain her dowry and the man is free to marry again and receive yet another dowry. Compared to other castes, the dowry of a Kalbelia bride is meagre and does not give rise to conflict with her husband's family.

#### 6: 10 FORMAL ENGAGEMENT

After brideservice is satisfactorily completed and *pukka sagai* (formal engagement) agreed upon, the prospective bridegroom and his family visit the girl's village taking gifts of fresh and dried fruits, coconut, and *gur* (boiled sugar cane). The girl's family present new clothes to the boy, and the groom's parents give a present of fifty-one rupees to the girl's family. The girl's father makes a *tilak* on the boy's forehead. He puts *sindur* (vermillion) on a silver coin and presses it to the boy's forehead. This puts the engagement on a formal footing.

At the beginning of marriage negotiations, an astrologer may be requested by the parents of the girl and boy to compare their two horoscopes, drawn up according to the minute, hour and date of their births. Babies are named according to syllables associated with the hour of their birth, so the first syllable of the name is a permanent reminder of the approximate time of birth, even if a detailed horoscope was not drawn up. Therefore the astrologer knows the day and month of birth by the Hindu Calendar, and the hour of birth by the subject's name. He

compares the natal charts of the girl and boy and checks there is no insurmountable incompatibility or problem that would prevent a successful marriage. The first letter of both names should be in harmony. If they are not, (or it can be falsely stated they are not), this can be used as a device for calling off the marriage, if for some reason one or both sets of parents do not wish to proceed.

Not all Kalbelia parents bother to consult an astrologer at the early stages, but after brideservice is completed and the couple formally and publicly engaged to be married, an astrologer is asked to discover the auspicious date and hour of the wedding ceremony according to the names of the bride and bridegroom. If at this late stage the astrologer discovers the first syllables of the couple's names are incompatible, he temporarily changes one or both names just for the duration of the wedding ceremony, which apparently overcomes the problem. Then the astrologer tells the fathers when they should establish their shrines to Ganesh the elephant-headed God, usually seven or five days before the wedding ceremony. The astrologer is paid for his services according to the ability of the families, perhaps fifty-one rupees or one hundred and one rupees.

The girl's family and the boy's family worship Ganesh in shrines in their separate villages. Brahma was the Creator of the world but Ganesh is considered to be the first of the Gods after Brahma, and in particular is thought to be the most intelligent. The gods had become conceited, and each claimed to be the most important, so Brahma said whichever god should go right round the world and be the first to return to him would be the most important. So they started to race on their vehicles. Ganesh's vehicle was only a tiny mouse, but he was clever. He just went round Brahma saying that since he was the Creator of the world, he must be all the world. Brahma judged him to be first, and so

Ganesh is the first god to be worshipped when starting some new enterprise or activity. Hence his worship before a marriage takes place.

During the period of setting up the shrine and worshipping Ganesh, relatives living in the same villages as the bride and the groom invite them to eat food with them, and there is singing and dancing in the separate villages.

When a person, male or female is going to marry, their mother's brothers bring *mayra* comprising clothes and ornaments. Clothes are the most important part of the gifts which comprise *mayra*, but if only clothes are provided it is known as *kachchi mayra*. If both ornaments and clothes are provided, it is *pukka mayra*.

After the worship of Ganesh gifts may be given, and each family tie a *kangan*, a coloured thread with an iron ring threaded upon it, and some other items, such as a shell and a little red bag, containing wheat, rice, *nim* leaf and *supari* (betel nut), to the boy's wrist and the girl's leg. A special massage of the bride and groom, each in their respective villages, is carried out, using groundnut oil, *haldi* (turmeric) and flour, to make the skin soft. This massage takes place every day, commencing from the worship of Ganesh to the wedding ceremony, and sisters and younger brothers under ten years old massage the bride. On the day of the marriage, the massage is of *ghi* instead of groundnut oil. From the date of establishing Ganesh's shrine, the bridegroom should not take his usual daily bath, only the massage. Some men said they had continued to take their daily bath, notwithstanding tradition.

Before the groom sets out to the bride's village he spends time mentally preparing himself for the coming change in his life. He sits in a hut or tent set aside for the

purpose and has several attendants with him. Either the groom or one of his attendants carries a sword (traditionally of iron) because any state of purification has attendant dangers, and the sword protects against demons. The groom must not go outside the house or tent until he goes to his bride's village, and he is visited by relatives and friends who present him with coconuts and auspicious sums of money, always an odd number, such as eleven, twenty-one, fifty-one, one hundred and one rupees, which give a notion of increase:

'A gift of cash is generally given in an odd-numbered sum. The odd number is both a blemish... and an auspicious promise of an attempt on the part of the giver to complete the gift at some later time... the giver, rather than saying, "this is it," says, "there is more to come" - the gift itself is a promise of a future gift to rectify the imperfect gift... a "completed" cash gift (that is, an even-numbered sum) is smug in its declaration that it cannot and need not be bettered... The rule of incompleteness implies process, movement, change, transformation, and the perennial potential for continuity. Above all, it marks the flux of life. It is antistasis, antiterminal, anticonclusive, and antideath, (Daniel 1984: 134) Incompleteness is like a blemish or fault. A blemished or defective object does not invite the evil eye to itself as readily as an unblemished one would. Or stated differently, a blemish or defect draws the eye (and the evil eye also) to itself and thereby spares the unblemished part of that object from being affected by the evil eye,' (Daniel 1984: 132).

Women relatives sing songs in admiration of the groom, extolling his virtues, his good looks and the prestige the bride will gain by marrying their boy. They also sing admiringly about the boy's relatives. Folk and film music is played and sung, and danced to by the women if there are no male outsiders to the family there. There is nearly always one man who brings along a stuffed brassiere and woman's outfit, and dances women's dances with another man, if one can be persuaded to dance with 'her'. At Holi, some Kalbelia men dress up and dance in public as women, to earn money.

(see Chapter Four in this thesis, and Nanda: 1989, on the *hijras*).

Parents, brothers, sisters, other relatives and friends accompany the groom to the bride's village where the wedding ceremony is to take place. The inclusion of females in the *barat* (groom's party) may seem odd when literature on North India is considered. Vatuk reports that among the Gaur Brahmins of Uttar Pradesh,

'brothers, male cousins, and adult nephews of the bride are the usual representatives of the "girl's people" ... since once the marriage agreement has been made, her female kin and senior males of her family - particularly her father - are barred from visiting and accepting hospitality of those to whom they have promised a bride,' (Vatuk, 1975: 160). This is because 'marriage is explicitly conceived as the gift of a woman from one kin group to another: its central rite is significantly termed *kanya dan* ("gift of a virgin"), and to make this gift is a father's most sacred obligation... and she is a gift which among Gaurs may not be reciprocated, either by another woman or by material offerings,' (Vatuk, 1975: 159).

A Brahmin friend said when his father-in-law stays at his house on his annual round of visits to each of his married daughters and their husbands, he pays in full for his stay at each son-in-law's house, thereby avoiding even the slightest possibility of accepting something from a son-in-law to whom he has given *kanya dan* - a daughter in marriage.

'In giving one's daughter in marriage one acknowledges the superior status of the chosen son-in-law; an asymmetrical relationship is thus established between the kin groups of bride and groom... kin of the wife are perpetual "donors" to kin of the husband, not only in the context of the wedding ceremony itself, but, at least ideally, forever afterwards,' (Vatuk, 1975: 159-60).

This is not the case with Kalbelia marriages. Their ideology is posited on the notion of adult male equality, and their system of marriage does not militate against this.

When the groom's party arrives at the bride's village, they are formally greeted. "We meet them outside the village. The women sing, and we garland the groom's party and put a *tilak* on their foreheads." Then they are invited to set up their tents well away from the bride's hut and continue their own pre-wedding celebrations, dancing and singing, generally entertaining themselves and the bridegroom.

When wedding arrangements were discussed, the bride's family stated how long the celebrations were to last and how long the guests were expected to stay. Large numbers of guests come to weddings, and providing several meals for one hundred and fifty or more people is no small undertaking. Wedding foods of *halaya*, a special sweet dish made from *ata* (flour), *ghi* (clarified butter), honey or sugar, raisins and coconut, as well as savoury dishes of *dal* (lentils) and *sabzi* (vegetables) are prepared in specially hired cooking pots so large that pits have to be dug beneath them for the cooking fires. The bride's family hire cart loads of blankets from a local supplier, but guests also bring extra blankets or quilts with them, especially in the winter months when nights are extremely cold in Rajasthan.

The day before the marriage ceremony, the boy's family send cosmetics such as *kajal* (black eye-liner), nail polish, a mirror and comb to the bride. Tambiah suggests these toilet articles can be interpreted as symbols of sexual rights and intimacy (1973: 121). A gold or gold plated wedding ring, often with a design of a *nim* leaf, is also sent. A married woman puts her wedding ring safely away and does not wear it on everyday occasions. The bride also

receives a bracelet which helps tie her veil to the groom's handkerchief during the main wedding ceremony.

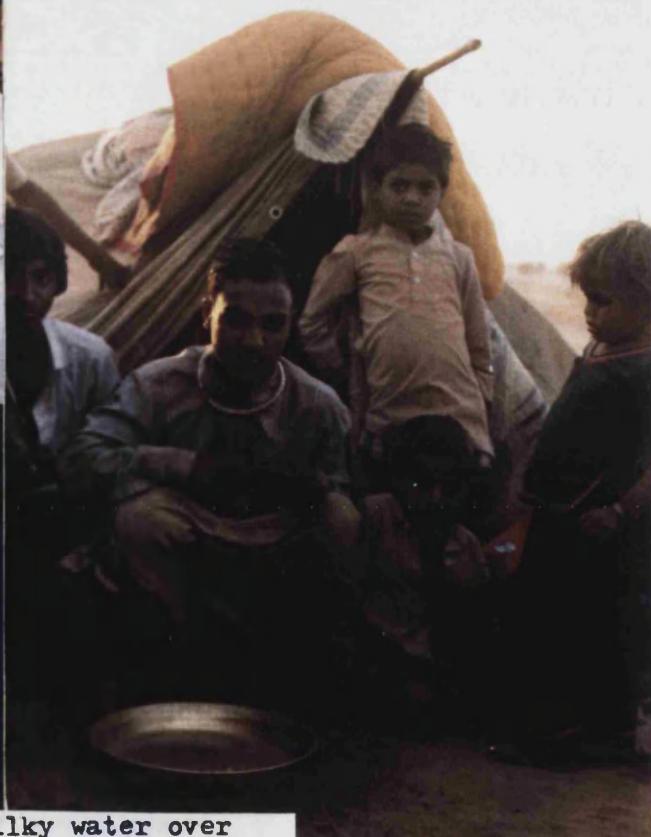
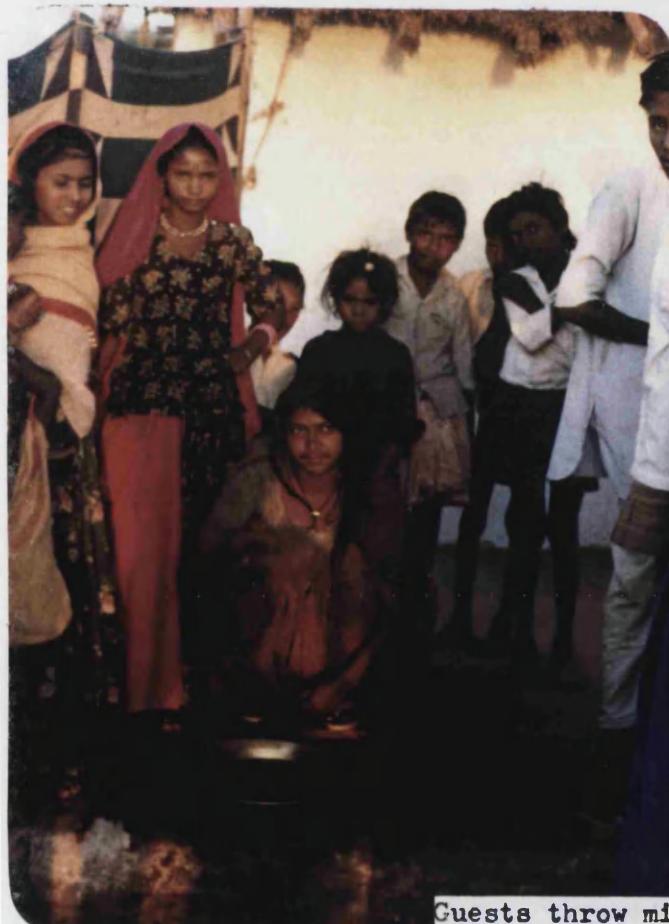
On the day of the wedding the groom receives visitors in his tent (or hut if he and his bride live in the same village). A picture of Ganesh is prominently displayed and visitors remove their shoes when entering the groom's tent and they do not smoke or eat there. The groom's hands have been decorated with henna, and he holds a handkerchief over his mouth until he leaves his new bride's village. This is said to be an old tradition: once in the Kalbelia caste there was a bridegroom who was exceedingly ugly and he spoke haltingly, but he was going to marry into a rich family, so his parents told him to keep a handkerchief over his face so he should not reveal any abnormalities.

After being visited in his tent or hut, the groom crouches outside on a plank of wood so his feet do not touch the ground, wearing only a scarf and *dhoti* and with a red line painted down his forehead and nose. Before him is a bowl of white-coloured liquid containing water, flour or milk, a silver ring and fruit. Presents of money are given directly to the groom who passes it to an attendant, who counts it and writes the amount down in a book. This money is later given to the parents of the groom. Then guests throw the milky liquid over the bridegroom's head seven times, hoping to find the silver ring. In fact the silver ring should not be found, for this is a playful gambling game to encourage guests to part with a few rupees.

Later the bridegroom takes the traditional bath helped by his sisters and other family members, and dresses in his wedding clothes in view of his wedding party. The groom's clothes are often hired for the occasion. A Kalbelia groom's wedding dress consists of a new white *dhoti*, pink or cloth of gold shirt, and orange or gold turban wound round with



A dancing girl entertains a  
Kalbelia bridegroom and guests



Guests throw milky water over  
the bride or groom, hoping to  
find the silver ring in the bowl

gold cords (*sehra*), with a paper cockade at one side, embroidered red or green slippers, and a garland around his neck made from gold tinsel and tied with various denominations of *rupee* notes. From time to time the groom's party tie on extra notes retrieved from presents given earlier. The groom continues to carry a sword to keep away demons, and he carries this until he returns to his own home.

Singing and dancing take place before the bridegroom for his enjoyment and the pleasure of his guests. The dancer is often a man dressed as a woman, who dances amidst bawdy jokes. One dancer squeezed the stuffed breast of his bra and said "*Dudh pio!*" (drink milk!) which everyone thought hilarious. Members of the audience played the *bin*, and after some vehement refusals, the 'woman' eventually prevailed upon another man to dance with him. Sometimes a professional dancing girl, usually from the *Chabdiyale* (basket-maker) sub-caste, is engaged to dance, accompanied on the *bin* and finger cymbals. My research assistant said the girl dancer (or man dressed as a woman) represents a courtesan who traditionally taught the groom the arts of love before the wedding, but see Nanda (1989) on the traditional role of *hijras* on these occasions. The Kalbelias say the dancing is only for the diversion and happiness of the guests. The dancer waves *rupee* notes over and around the groom to wish him happiness and good fortune, and is given some token payment by the groom's party.

Male guests and small children dance. Girls who dance in front of male guests are under eight years old, because Kalbelias do not like their women to dance or sing in the presence of unrelated males. At weddings, Kalbelia women dance with each other some distance away from the men. Weddings give unmarried girls an opportunity to show girls from other villages new songs and dances. "At this time they

are growing up and have time to make up new songs and dances and then other people copy them." Kalbelias compose *bhajans* (devotional songs), secular songs and dances, as well as enjoying traditional and popular music from films and radio.

Wedding preparations for the bride are also proceeding at the other side of the hamlet. Kalbelia brides do not spend the last few hours before their wedding weeping, as reported for girls of other castes, but look stoical, not happy, not sad. The bride is massaged with turmeric and oil to make her skin soft. Then she sits outside her house under a specially hired canopy and has the milky liquid thrown over her as described for the groom. Again, money is given to her attendant who notes it down in writing. Then the bride takes the traditional bath, helped by members of her family. She dresses in front of her family's guests, but no members of the bridegroom's family must see her. She wears a red coloured outfit of *ghaghra* (skirt) and *choli* (short blouse) and *odhani* (short veil), covered with a second *odhani* wound round with gold cords (*sehra*). She is so completely covered from head to toe that nothing can be seen of her face or body.

#### 6: 11 THE WEDDING CEREMONY

Unless there are special circumstances (see below), marriage ceremonies always take place at night when the god Brahma is believed to be present. At the auspicious time suggested by the astrologer, the bridegroom and his family walk from their tents at the far side of the hamlet towards the bride's house where a Brahmin priest is waiting by the sacred fire.

While approaching the sacred fire, the groom stops to break a coconut with his feet, and in front of the *toran* (ceremonial archway) outside the bride's family's house touches a strategically placed cot seven times. This is a

salute from the groom to his bride's father. Kalbelias say this ritual is peculiar to their sub-caste. Then the groom taps the eye or beak of a wooden image of a bird perched on top of the toran with his marriage sword. This signifies he is determined to reach his goal of asking for his bride. With this knock he is regarded as a member of his bride's family, but she is not a member of his family until she has walked seven times round the sacred fire later in the ceremony.

The bride's mother comes out of her house to greet and welcome the groom. She places an earthenware pot in front of him and the groom places one rupee and twenty-five paise in it. These token amounts denote misfortunes transferred to the Gods (Kakar 1984:66; cf. Daniel, 1984: 131-5). Then the bride's mother advances up to the bridegroom three times, holding a *thali* (large metal dish) with a traditional decoration of wickerwork, flour, lighted candles and green leaves, which signify auspiciousness and goodness. The groom puts one rupee and twenty-five paise into this *thali* without speaking or showing the money.

The groom takes up his position by the sacred fire for the ceremony of seven nuptial rounds, and is joined by his bride who sits at his right. The main ceremony round the sacred fire lasts about an hour. Because it is held at night, the temperature is cooler and more bearable in the hot season, but in winter, the nights are extremely cold. Many guests at the ceremony, apart from the bride and groom and their parents and the Brahmin, smoke local cigarettes and during the winter months, huddle under blankets in the freezing night air.

The sacred fire is made from cow dung and kept blazing by frequent liberal additions of *ghi* and coconut, a sacrifice as well as a means to keep the fire burning

brightly. White sweets covered in *ghi* are also burned. A triangle and a square made from straw is filled with rice, wheat, and other items symbolising the five main crops, and earth, symbolising all the five elements contained in the body, fire, air, water, earth and sky. Thus the marriage ceremony contains all the elements of the whole of creation.

The Brahmin first worships the god Ganesh, then recounts in Hindi, not a local or regional dialect, heavenly stories connected to married life, such as the occasion of Lord Shiva's marriage. This is intended to be a moral guide to the young couple, informing them how they should conduct their lives, and especially telling the groom that he must respect his elders. Each time the Brahmin says the name of God, one of the men drops a five paise coin into a clay pot placed beside the Brahmin. There are some differences in this discourse between one marriage and another, and it is addressed only to the bride and groom and the girl's parents, although the boy's father and the rest of his family as well as other guests can hear.

When the Brahmin has finished speaking, the bride's veil is joined to a handkerchief draped over the groom's shoulder in which is tied one rupee and twenty-five paise. Henna is put on the outside of the bride's veil, and a flat round of henna in the palm of the bridegroom's hand. A woman pulls the bride's hand from beneath her veil and clasps her hand in the groom's so the henna goes on both their palms. The bride traditionally may do nothing on her own, she is guided throughout the ceremony.

Wheat, rice and other crops are placed between the bride's and groom's hands, and their hands are tied together, and they make conditions and promises to each other. In a marriage I attended, the bride said, "I am your life partner, whatever is to be decided, we shall both



Bride and groom by the sacred fire, with the Brahmin priest



Groom and bride do the rounds of the sacred fire.

A Kalbelia groom traditionally keeps his mouth covered until he leaves the bride's village after the wedding ceremonies.

decide together. My opinion should be considered. If you are annoyed with me, please do not scold me in front of my friends. As many rights as you have, I have those same rights." The bridegroom's conditions were, "In my absence you should not go out without my permission, and you should obey me in all ways as are written in our books," (the *Vedas*). Each accepted the other's conditions, similar in every Kalbelia marriage. In another marriage the bride made similar requests, and the groom gulped and said, "I agree!" He did not make any conditions of his own.

The couple process around the sacred fire seven times. First, the bride takes the lead with the bridegroom tied to her, and she goes round the fire three times. She is so swathed in veils that this is a hazardous undertaking, so she may be guided by a younger brother or cousin. The groom takes the lead for the remaining four rounds of the sacred fire.

After the first round of the fire, the boy steps on a rock strategically placed, then the girl. Kanitkar describes marriage ceremonies which differ somewhat from those of the Kalbelias', but he quotes 'Oh my wife, ascend this stone and assume firmness like a rock. Resist thine enemies and overcome quarrelsome persons,' (1984:120). Stepping on the rock may have a similar meaning in the Kalbelia ceremony. They themselves did not have any explanation for it.

Before the seven rounds of the fire, the bride was on the right side of the groom, but after the seven rounds of the sacred fire the bride sits on the left hand side of the groom, "Because after marriage the bride is half of life and on any formal occasion she must always be on the left side. According to the Hindu religious system, the body is divided vertically into masculine and feminine halves. The right side is the masculine side, the stronger side, because most

people are right handed, and the left side is the feminine side," (Manendra Nath). After seven rounds of the sacred fire, when the bride sits on the groom's left side, she is his wife.

Then the groom passes through the toran (ceremonial arch) which symbolizes that he has left the bride's house. The bride's relatives weep, because the girl will soon leave, supposedly for ever. But that night after the ceremony, she stays in her own house and the groom stays somewhere else, in a tent, or at the house of a friend, but not with his bride.

The morning following the marriage ceremony, people are awakened by radios playing and dogs barking. The bride's family gather up blankets hired for the occasion, ready to return them to the local supplier. If there is a chay stall nearby, the groom and friends go there to have breakfast, the groom still wearing his wedding clothes and sword, and holding the handkerchief to his mouth.

At some time during the morning, the groom unties the thread on the bride's leg, and the bride unties the groom's thread from around his wrist, and they tie the threads to a leg of the cot touched seven times by the groom on his way to the bride's house the night before. No one could suggest why this is done.

Weddings are occasions when large numbers of Kalbelias meet together and men sometimes take this opportunity to hold an informal panchayat. No-one wants to spoil the happy atmosphere of a wedding, so contentious topics are avoided. The occasion of one marriage can be an opportunity for families gathered there to set in train other matches.

Later, the groom sits on a mat outside his bride's house and while women from her family sing, his mother-in-law approaches him, two pots balanced on top of each other on her head, a plant symbolizing auspiciousness in the top pot. She has come to worship the groom as her son-in-law, who responds by putting some money into the pot to show respect. The bride's mother makes a *tilak* with *sindur* (vermilion) and a few grains of rice on the groom's forehead, and gives him a model of a boy, expressing a wish that the new couple will have lots of sons.

The bride's sisters present a *thali* (large dish of food) to the groom, usually including *halava* (a celebratory dish made from flour, *ghi*, honey or sugar, raisins and coconut). He eats it and shares it with four other people who pretend to be snatching it. It is light-heartedly noted how much of the food the groom eats, and how much the other people eat.

After this ceremony, the bride's family present her with a dowry of household articles, clothes and jewellery, usually heavy silver anklets (*karia*), and some money. These items remain her personal property and her husband has no right to any of his wife's dowry, which is her pre-mortem share of her natal estate. She has the right to return to her natal home for long visits, and to receive gifts from her natal family upon certain occasions. Her right to gifts continues even after the death of her parents, when her brothers inherit the obligation to continue to make presents to her, hence a sister's visit to brothers on the occasion of *raksha bandhan* to remind them of their duty. Friends of the family from other castes may also give gifts. If a potter is a friend of the family, he would probably give some pots.



A member of the groom's party  
demonstrating his huge appetite!

Once the dowry and other gifts have been presented to the bride, each member of the groom's family party is given a small amount of money as a ceremonial farewell from the bride's family. The bride's family may also distribute cups of coffee and cigarettes and provide a meal, such as *halaya*, (flour and sugar wedding food) *dal* (lentils), and vegetables.

The informal and jolly proceedings continue and the man dressed as a woman dances again with a male partner. The women from the bride's family sing songs for and about the bridegroom's party, naming people in them, and there is ritual bawdy joking from the women of the bride's family to the men of the bridegroom's party. The women say the men of the bridegroom's party cannot sing well because they have eaten lots of food and smoked too much, or conversely, that they do not eat much, they have very small appetites.

When the bridegroom's party is finally ready to depart, the fathers of the bride and groom bid each other formal farewell, and the bride's family accompany the bridegroom's party to the end of the village. If the bride is mature, she accompanies her husband, either to his parents' village, or if government grants of land are available, to a new settlement, or wherever her husband is staying, perhaps in a camp somewhere, or in one of the squatter settlements. While travelling with the groom's party on the bus or train to the groom's place of residence, the bride remains veiled and never speaks.

Sometimes a couple live in the bride's village. A government grant of land means Kalbelias own their small hamlet outside the main village of Jhakari and have built one-room stone houses for their families. Being within a bus-ride's distance of Jaipur means economic opportunities are greater than in rural Marwar, where Bhuji Nath's natal

family live. His wife Purandhi explained, "We are living in the same hamlet as my family but in a separate hut, with separate cooking."

Some new brides visit their husband's village for only a few days, and then return to their own family. This is because she is still considered young, and it has been agreed before the marriage that she would return home for a few months. Harendra Nath, recently married, was to visit his wife in her parents' village in the Mount Abu region to which she had returned after her initial visit to his village, celebrate *Dipavali* there (the Festival of Lights), and bring his wife back with him to live at Harjipura.

If the bride and groom are still children, the girl remains with her own family until they inform the boy's parents she is mentally and physically mature, and able to undertake household work associated with marriage. This is not usually before a girl is fifteen years old and sometimes later. The boy's family cannot insist on the girl coming to live with her husband before the girl's family themselves decide the time is right.

"My father-in-law has three daughters and my wife is the youngest daughter. She is ten years old. My mother-in-law wanted to marry all her three daughters at the same time, and so my father agreed I should marry at this time. My wife lives with her parents in Sundargarh village near Jaipur. She will not live with me for another five years at least, when she will be fifteen years old. Decisions about her life depend upon her father and mother at this time, because I am not there. She has no duties to me and I have no responsibilities to her until we live together. I am earning money and spending, not saving anything! And I have no objection to her playing in the evening with the other

girls and all that. But I must avoid going to my wife's village and I must not try to meet her otherwise my wife's parents would object," (Dari Nath).

If the girl's family is suffering financial hardship or if her parents die, she may be sent to live with her husband's family immediately after the marriage, although if they are young, sexual relations will not take place until the couple have reached maturity. Manendra Nath and his wife grew up together in this way after their childhood marriage, and she did not avoid him or veil herself in front of him, in fact, "We fought all the time!" he said feelingly.

When a girl stays in her family home for some years after marriage, when her husband and his family are informed they may take her to their village, there is a ritual called *muklaya* (the first calling of a girl from her family). The girl's family invite relatives and friends and set out a feast. The boy attends the party with his parents, and after everyone has feasted they take the girl away with them. The boy's family are responsible for meeting all expenditure on this occasion.

The bride arrives at her husband's family's house, and her mother-in-law is supposed to be very eager to see her face, ostensibly for the first time. At this moment, the bride asks for a gift from her mother-in-law, a gold ring, a gold necklace, and money, perhaps fifty-one or one hundred and one, or even one thousand and one rupees, to unveil her face. She can ask for whatever she wants and although she may not receive as much as she requests, she will definitely receive some gift from her mother-in-law. And the bride shows respect by touching the feet of her husband's senior relatives such as his parents, elder brother and elder brother's wife. They give her money which she keeps for herself. The occasion is celebrated with singing.

At the bridegroom's village, the bride and groom are alone together at last, and the groom may unveil his bride. The groom's handkerchief with the one rupee and twenty-five paise inside it, and the girl's *odhani* which were tied together during the wedding ceremony, are not untied until the couple visit the groom's family's God or Goddess (like Bhaironji or Mataji), at the regional temple. The girl's family and the boy's family may worship different gods, but after marriage the bride and groom go to the boy's family's God or Goddess. "After I was newly married I went to Bhaironji's temple at Betchipura. We took a tent with us," (Nanda Nath).

Now the bride has embarked upon married life, she unveils before her husband but veils herself in the presence of her mother-in-law, father-in-law and husband's older brother and any other people, male or female, older than her husband. Purandhi reported, "I veil myself before all older males, my mother-in-law and older brother's wife. I must not talk to unrelated males of my own age," and Manendra Nath said, "My wife can talk with her father-in-law but wearing a veil, not face to face. And the same goes when she talks to my older brother, but to my younger brother she can speak unveiled."

The new role as married man or woman brings specific ways in which a husband and wife address each other and newly acquired kin. Kalbelia husbands and wives address each other as "jogi" and "jogini" or as 'tu', the second person familiar denoting intimacy, also used when addressing a deity, children, or to show contempt. Before a married couple have a son, a husband addresses his wife by her name, but once a son is born, a husband addresses his wife as (son's name) *ki mataji* (mother of), and the wife addresses her husband as (son's name) *ka pitaji* (father of). If someone else, male or female, asks a man his wife's name, he

will tell them, but a wife will say her husband's name only to other women.

A man addresses his father-in-law as *beyaji*, a father-in-law his son-in-law as *jayai* (son in law) or *beta* (son). A man addresses his mother-in-law as *maji* (respected mother) and she addresses him as *jayai* or *beta*. Kalbelia kinship terms are almost identical to those listed by Ruhela, (1968: 32-5).

According to tradition, when a wife prepares food, her husband eats first and then she can eat. "My mother-in-law never ate food until her husband had eaten. If he did not return home for five days, she would not eat for that time, except for milk and *chay*. My mother-in-law used to be quite fat, but my father-in-law often went away from home and she became very thin. But my wife wouldn't wait! If I am late she eats before I return. I eat with my mother or my sister but not with my wife, that's the way it is in my family and some others. But there are no strict rules and regulations nowadays and husbands and wives can eat together if they wish," (Manendra Nath).

#### 6: 12 OTHER TYPES OF MARRIAGE

Elopements occasionally take place, perhaps when the boy has done brideservice but the girl's parents have rejected him as son-in-law, but the girl and boy have decided together (in itself against the rules of no contact), that they wish to be married. They run away for a few days and when they return, the elopement forces her parents to accept the match. The couple are married according to the *nata* ceremony, (see below).

Gopal Nath fell in love with a girl while he was still at school, but his father had already arranged a marriage for him. He and the girl discussed running away together and

hiding somewhere for several nights, but in the end Gopal Nath could not bring himself to do this. Apart from incurring the wrath of his father, he knew he would lose his good reputation at school and in the village, so he accepted the marriage arranged for him. The girl with whom he was in love also married a boy according to her family's wishes.

Kalbelia society's attitude towards a couple who have eloped is "If the boy and girl are from the same *gotra* and therefore not eligible to marry each other, we will fine both their families and put them out of caste (see Chapter Eight), but if they are not from the same *gotra*, once they are found they will be married to each other."

After elopement or when a boy or girl have had sexual relations, the normal ceremony performed at night when the god Brahma is presumed to be present and with a Brahmin priest presiding, is not performed because for the sacred fire ceremony the body should be virgin and pure. Instead, the girl carries an earthen pot with a green plant, *supari* (betel nut) and some coins, to a tree or bush, where the *nata* ceremony takes place during the day. There is no water in the pot, for unlike the sacred fire ceremony where oaths are taken with fire and water, the *nata* ceremony excludes both these elements. The boy waits under the tree with a white cloth on his shoulder. He takes the plant from the pot and his cloth is tied to the girl's *odhani* and together they circle the tree seven times.

Although they are not allowed a sacred ceremony, they are regarded as married, and treated just as other married people. Bridewealth is payable and the girl may be given dowry by her family. "This *nata* ceremony is only performed if their sexual relationship becomes known in society. If it does not become known, they have the normal sacred marriage

ceremony because they are not going to publicize their wrong-doing." (Manendra Nath).

The *nata* ceremony is also performed for a second marriage after the death of the first spouse, or remarriage after divorce, but if a man is marrying a second wife who is virgin, although he is presumably not virgin, the virgin bride is entitled to the sacred fire ceremony.

Polygyny is not particularly prestigious among Kalbelias, but a man may have more than one wife, often sisters. But he cannot take second or subsequent wives if the women concerned do not like each other and do not agree to the polygynous marriage. A second wife is usually taken only if a first wife does not bear children, providing the man is wealthy enough to meet the bridewealth payments which may well be higher than usual. This is because the man will not be performing brideservice, and the girl's family know she will be subservient to the first wife, who rules the second wife and has the right to give her orders, no matter if the second wife has children and the first wife none.

'...a man has the option, either in the case of the barrenness of the first marriage, or freely in other castes (royal etc.), of taking other wives, either with full rite (necessary for the wife if she has not been married before) or with secondary rite (if the wife has already been married). Thus for a man there are supplementary or subsidiary marriages, with a corresponding hierarchy of wives, (Dumont, 1980: 114).

The first Kalbelia wife addresses the second wife by name, but the second wife addresses the first wife as "*bahin*", (sister). Although there is seniority between wives, there is no hierarchy or rivalry between their children:

"In the south (of India) there is a clearly marked status difference between the two sorts of marriage"

(primary and subsidiary marriages) 'and their issue whenever these are encountered in the same family. In the north on the other contrary, the difference is scarcely more than one of ritual and it is not passed on to their descendants,' (Dumont, 1980: 115).

Both Kalbelia wives are called "ma" by the children of the household, and both women address the children by name. The wives may breastfeed each other's babies. I was told of a man who had seven wives and only the last one had a child. It was commented that if he had taken the first wife to a doctor he need not have spent all that money marrying seven wives.

Remarriage after the death of a spouse is an option for both men and women, but a woman who marries again rather than remain a widow, is thought to have lost prestige and status by her remarriage. This echoes the view throughout Hindu society, although there is no similar opinion about the inferiority of a man who remarries after the death of his wife, either in the Kalbelia caste or in Hindu society in general.

'...the woman may, after her husband's death or even after divorce, contract another union, legitimate, but infinitely less prestigious, involving much less ritual and expense,' (Dumont, 1980: 114).

Most Kalbelia widows do remarry. Indeed, some women have remarried more than once after the death of a husband or after divorce. Kalbelias emphatically do not expect their widows to commit *sati* (burn to death on the husband's funeral pyre). The Kalbelias are not a very large sub-caste and practically speaking, it would be a waste of fertile women.

Widow inheritance is also called *nata*, and this refers to a younger brother taking the widow of an elder brother as

his wife, which is common. An older brother cannot take as wife the widow of a younger brother. The decision as to whether a widow becomes wife to her deceased husband's younger brother or returns to her own family, or marries a man from a different family, depends on the wishes of the woman herself, although if she decides she would like to exercise her rights to live with the younger brother as his wife, pragmatically much depends upon the attitude of her late husband's younger brother and his wife, if he already has one.

But considerable variations are possible. Kadru said "My mother arranged my marriage as my father was not alive at that time. I had five children, three daughters and two sons. Then my husband died and I remarried. I had no children by this second marriage but he already had children by a previous marriage. After two or three years I divorced my second husband. Now I have two sons and a daughter by my third husband and I also kept and raised the youngest son of my second husband (who died in the meantime) and his first wife."

When a man wishes to marry after the death of his first wife, his family go through all the marriage negotiations again with another girl's family. Bhuji Nath, whose first wife died in a bus accident, did a year's brideservice for his second wife's family, even although he had a small son from his first marriage (the child is being raised in the first wife's family). Bhuji Nath and his family paid all the usual expenses of marriage for a second time.

If a widow marries a man other than her deceased husband's younger brother, her new husband has to pay compensation to the woman's first husband's family for the bridewealth they paid to her family. Or a woman may forego remarriage after the death of her husband and become a full

time religious devotee. "I was married by my family when I was sixteen or eighteen and involved in normal household duties. After seven or eight years my husband died. My daughter also died. Now I am not interested in household work, only in God and attending devotional programmes," (Mukti).

When there are only daughters in a family, Kalbelia parents may arrange for a boy to marry all their daughters. He does not do brideservice, and neither is he asked for bridewealth. The 'house' son-in-law (*gharjaya*) lives with his wives' in their parental home and with their parents, earning and feeding all the sisters, and in their old age, the parents. Upon the death of his wives' parents, the *gharjaya* inherits the family property, (Nala Nath)

Manendra Nath said, "Actually *gharjaya* means he has not to do brideservice and he will not be asked for bridewealth either. If the other sisters are not married he will look after them - he is marrying all of them."

Tambiah holds that in these cases, the son of the daughter is considered to be the son of her father, not of her husband (the *gharjaya*) thus producing an heir to continue the line (1973: 79).

"The son of an appointed daughter" is a justly famous concept in traditional Hindu law, which highlights the fact that in the absence of male issue the daughter becomes the link in the chain of continuity.

In the case of the appointed daughter the classical formulation was that she was appointed in order that she might raise a son for her sonless father. The daughter so appointed resided uxorilocally with her father's family, and her son was considered the son of her father (and not her husband's). Thus an heir was produced to continue the line. The logic of the operation was something like this according to some commentators. The appointed daughter herself was considered equivalent to a son, and therefore her son was equivalent to a grandson. As the merits of a son and

grandson are equal (e.g. in offerings made to ancestors) the latter ranked as a son.' (see Manu IX: 127-36; Vasishta: XVII; Mayne 1883: 543 in Tambiah, 1973: 79-80)

Therefore the *gharjayai*'s inheritance of the property of his parents-in-law is only a temporary guardianship, since his sons, who inherit after him, are considered not his sons, but his father-in-law's sons. Tambiah suggests adoption (see below) as an alternative solution to finding a male heir, usually of a brother's or daughter's son (1973: 84). Adoption of a daughter's son would genetically amount to the same thing as the *gharjayai* solution, although socially a *gharjayai* relinquishes his status as a father in return for material gain, because normally a son-in-law does not inherit his father-in-law's property even temporarily, and neither does his son. In addition, it may be suspected that in order to care for his wife or wives' parents, the *gharjayai* may be neglecting the care of his own parents.

The institution of *gharjaysi* is well known in North India, but involves only the marriage of one daughter to the *gharjavai*. Yet the Kalbelias appear to say that in their sub-caste, a *gharjayai* marries all the daughters. This would fit with their custom of polygyny, but is unusual in the north Indian context.

A man from a different area alleged: "Delhiyale marriages used not to be properly managed. If the eldest brother was married, the younger unmarried brothers could have sexual relations with his wife. Kalbelias in other areas complained about this practice at the *panchayat*. When Delhi-yale visited villages in other areas they were fined three silver rupees because we discovered they were indulging in this practise. It happened because in times past it was very difficult for Delhiyale to find wives because there were too many persons of the same gotra. And

because of this, if there were more than two daughters in a family, they used to bury their girls at the time of birth." This scandalous practice of several brothers sharing one wife still takes place, he claimed. "The men who do this thing never speak out against this practice in the *panchayat*, but sometimes it becomes known because the girl or her family complain. Sometimes neighbours are bribed not to make public what is going on." My queries were met by a denial that these things ever take place nowadays, but later I heard of one family where this was said to be happening. The husband was far from complaisant about his younger brother having sexual relations with his wife and tried to persuade the younger brother to take a wife of his own, but he refused, saying he preferred things the way they were. Although rights of privileged sexual access have been reported all over north India (see Berreman, 1962), this is now disapproved of, and unusual among the Kalbelias. I was unable to ascertain if this practice had been very common in former times.

#### 6: 13 DIVORCE

Divorce is unusual but not unknown among the Kalbelias. A woman who is unhappy in her marriage goes to her parents and they try to persuade her husband to mend his ways, but if the couple cannot be reconciled, the girl's parents ask the *panchayat* for a divorce.

Divorces are granted on the grounds that one party has in some way injured, or is failing in his or her duty to the other party. Barrenness in a wife is not a reason for divorce and may be dealt with by taking more wives. A wife's adultery gives the husband grounds for divorce, but adultery is not considered a fault in a man, although his wife can complain to the *panchayat* who may fine him. If she is determined to divorce him because of his adultery, the *panchayat* may eventually agree.

Wife beating is another reason for a woman to seek a divorce. This usually happens after a man has been drinking alcohol, a practise discouraged by the Kalbelias who regard drunkenness with disapproval. But beating can also be a strategy used to try to discard a virtuous wife. "My maternal uncle wants to divorce his wife and has been beating her for a long time, but despite this she stays with him because she is living in his house and she has no family left who can offer her a place to go," (Nanda Nath). In a situation like this, other caste members object to blatant ill treatment, but hesitate to intervene in another person's private domestic situation.

Divorced people, both men and women are eligible to marry other partners once the divorce has been recognised by the *panchayat*.

#### 6: 14 CHILDBIRTH AND CARE

After marriage most Kalbelias expect to be parents of large numbers of children, preferably sons. The Kalbelias of Rajasthan are only a small sub-caste and therefore, with their high infant mortality rate, if they do not have more than two children per couple, the sub-caste could soon cease to exist. Some women hinted they would prefer not to go through quite so many pregnancies: "Women suffer more than men. All the time they are pregnant they are suffering," said Induratna. Family planning techniques are known and utilised by some couples. Jaipur and other areas in Rajasthan have government family planning posters prominently displayed and contraceptives can be bought in medical shops or from *panvale*. But in the absence of state welfare benefits and the emphasis on intra-familial help and assistance, most Kalbelias feel the more children, especially male, the better. Hopefully at least one or two will survive to care for their parents in their old age. "I had an elder sister who married and after a few years she

had a son but the son died, and soon after my sister also died. Three of my brothers and sisters also died. Now there remains only myself and one sister," (Dala Nath).

Nanda Nath's wife had given birth to a child every year since they married, but only two weeks after proudly telling me about his six children, the youngest child died. His brother, Rajata Nath said three children were enough. His wife had given birth to five children but two had died. After I left the field the youngest child died and another baby born subsequently also died. Out of their six children, only two have survived. And a large number of Kalbelias are brought up by relatives because their parents have died.

Many Kalbelia couples hope to add to their family with a new baby each year until they reach the point where they feel their family is complete. After giving birth to three healthy sons, Bindu had a sterilisation operation after her husband received advice on family planning from a doctor. "I have three sons, and now because I have had an operation I will not have any more children."

If a woman from an outlying village intends to give birth in a Jaipur hospital, a few weeks before the expected date of delivery she stays with relatives in the city, or she and her husband and other children camp in a tent in the vicinity of the hospital. Some time before her fourth baby was due, Induratna left her house in Jhakari village and came to Jaipur in preparation for a hospital confinement. She stayed in a tent with her husband and three older children in the Railway *kachchi basti*. After giving birth in hospital, Induratna returned to the *kachchi basti* with the new baby to recuperate for a few weeks before returning to her village.

"When a woman is pregnant she should not eat many spices, *ghi* (clarified butter) or cold *chapati*. *Chi* is harmful because oily or fatty things become stuck on the baby. If she eats much *masala* (spices) the baby will become hot. Cold *chapati* will make the baby feel uncomfortable. A pregnant woman should eat lots of fruit, tea without milk or sugar, meat, eggs and vegetables, especially green vegetables," (Manendra Nath). But Induratna has no objection to *ghi*: "In the last few months of pregnancy the mother should eat extra food, *ghi*, biscuits, wheat, butter, sugar, coconut and sweets."

Two or three weeks before the baby is due the expectant mother does not work or go out in the hot sun, but rests on a cot in the coolness of a dark room. If the birth is at home she is attended by one or two women, usually one of whom is her mother-in-law. Her husband and other males are excluded from witnessing the actual birth.

As mentioned earlier (Chapter Five), several older Kalbelia women work as midwives and healers to women of their own caste as well as other castes. "After delivery I wash the baby and immediately give him or her to the mother. If all is not well with the child I try to help. Sometimes I blow in the baby's ear to make it cry. If there are complications which I am unable to deal with I ask for a doctor to attend, or I go with the mother and other members of the family to the hospital," (Kadru).

"My daughter's daughter's recent delivery was not complicated. During her pregnancy she was given good food so she should be healthy and fit, and the birth should not be dangerous. I helped her with the birth and now she is feeling well. She had a daughter," (Tejini).

When a baby is born in hospital, the hospital disposes of the after-birth, otherwise it is buried under the mud floor of the hut where the baby is born. If the floor is *pakka* (made of cement) it is buried outside the house in the ground somewhere.

"A Brahmin is asked to come the day after the child is born and do the horoscope and name the child at the same time. The Brahmin has an astrological book and from this he can tell which sound the baby's name should begin with, according to the hour and date the baby was born. He suggests five names for a boy baby and four names for a girl baby, and a name is chosen from those suggested, usually by the paternal grandfather. The first name the Brahmin mentions is usually accepted unless it is similar to the name of someone else in the family," (Tejini). Other informants say the Brahmin only tells the family what the initial sound of the name should be, and does not suggest particular names. The Brahmin also selects an auspicious date when the child is formally taken out and shown the sun.

Relatives from nearby villages are invited to visit and a dinner is held. Songs are sung and money given according to the ability of the guests, usually five or eleven rupees. The mother's brothers bring *mayra* (ceremonial presents) for the new baby and everyone else in the sister's family. Clothes are the most important items. The father of the new baby may pay for some *gur* (boiled sugar cane) to be given to each family in the Kalbelia hamlet. Kalbelias say there is no difference in the way the birth of a girl or a boy is celebrated, although Induratna commented, "We are not annoyed when a girl is born, but when a boy is born we celebrate more."

The Solenki sub-section of the Barmanya *gotra*, known as *mata ki pujari* (worshippers of the Mother, the Goddess) perform unique rituals when a baby boy is born. Other Kalbelias commented this information was new to them. (The sub-section as well as *gotra* is inherited from the father).

"When the mother reports the onset of birth pains she does not take any food or water until the baby is born, because *mataji* will curse her. Mataji endows her with the ability to go without food or water until after the child is born. Once the baby is born, if it is a girl the mother takes food and water as she wishes. But if the baby is a boy, a member of the family buys *ghi* and eating gum and *gur* and wheat. When there is no sun in the sky and night has fallen, the woman's husband grinds these ingredients at some distance from the mother, perhaps at the door of the hut. The mother and other members of the family eat a tiny part of this food, then a hole is dug in the ground and the rest of the food is put into this hole as an offering to the Goddess. Then the family announce a boy is born and the mother can eat normally after this. *Mata ki pujari* section of the Barmanya *gotra* do not put bells on their children's anklets, although they can wear anklets without bells," (Bhuji Nath, Bhadra Nath). Although this explanation was not proffered, the offering of food may be a placatory sacrifice to a goddess who prefers girl rather than boy babies. It may merely be that the Kalbelias themselves prefer boys to girls.

The Jaki sub-section of the Barmanya *gotra*, also perform a unique ritual after a child is born. The baby is watched closely to see which side he or she first rests his or her head and a needle is used to pierce a hole through the central cartilage of the ear in the position that followers of Gorakh Nath wear their traditional Kashmiri glass ear rings. Ear rings are not inserted and the needle

hole closes up. This ritual is not carried out among other Kalbelia gotras. Again, no explanation was offered for this.

Babies are breast-fed on demand and held almost continually by the mother or father, older brothers and sisters. Both parents care for babies and small children, and there is much interaction between babies, small children, older children, and adults. At night babies sleep with their mothers. In the day-time small infants are carried in their parent's arms or laid in a cloth sling suspended from carved and ornamented wooden cradle supports. The cradle support can be slung over the parent's shoulder and the baby transported in the sling. Or the cloth sling is suspended from a low branch of a tree.

Sometimes tiny string cots are made for babies but a sling in a tree might be rather safer! I was visiting Maruga Nath's house, and his niece had left her weeks-old baby daughter on a tiny cot, completely covered by cloths against the sun. Dari Nath, one of the teenage boys visiting the village, did not realise a baby was in the cot, and before anyone could stop, him stepped on the edge of the cot! The tiny baby was flicked into the air and fell on her nose. Luckily she had been asleep and completely relaxed, and apart from an indignant yell when she hit the ground, seemed none the worse. Maruga Nath and Dari Nath hastily picked her up and returned her to the cot and covered her up with a conspiratorial air.

Within their own hamlets babies and small children are usually naked or at least bare-bottomed in the hot weather. A trip on a bus or guests visiting merits shorts and vest or T-shirt, or knickers and dress, and with the advent of winter weather, a full outfit of warm clothes, including a bonnet.

When children are not born to a married couple, both partners are thought to be equally to blame for the lack. "First they wait and wait. Then they make offerings to Gods and Goddesses. Yamita Nath and his wife have no child, so someone suggested he go to a doctor but instead they went to a village near Jaisalmer (near the Indian-Pakistan border) where there is a big pond. They were told to throw a coconut into the pond. Both husband and wife sat by the pond waiting for the coconut to float back. It returned on the waves of the pond, so they believe they will have a child. This was a long time ago and still they are waiting."

In cases like this it is permitted for a man to take a second wife. It is a solution resorted to often enough not to cause surprised comment, but some couples adopt a child instead. The child is adopted from within the caste, nearly always from relatives who may request 'as prospective heirs who now forego their rights,' (Tambiah, 1973: 115), that one of their children be adopted, "Otherwise that money will go out." The sons of brothers are considered to be sons to each of the brothers, and a brother's son was most acceptable for adoption since he was already a son to his uncle, (Tambiah, 1973: 80; 83).

It is not possible in a small closed community to wipe out a Kalbelia child's previous identity, and even although he calls his adoptive parents 'ma' and 'bap', an adopted Kalbelia child grows up knowing his or her history and gotra, an important consideration in a small inter-marrying sub-caste where knowledge of gotra is used to avoid infringing incest rules. There is only one case in living memory of a child from another caste adopted into the Kalbelia sub-caste, (see Chapter Eight). Now there are about twelve nuclear families descended from him and carrying the name the *panchayat* gave him when it was agreed he would be incorporated into the sub-caste.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### DEATH AND INHERITANCE

#### 7: 1 DEATH AND THE DISPOSAL OF THE DEAD

In times past, deaths, especially of young people, were often attributed by Kalbelias to supernatural causes. But now disease or old age is usually accepted as the reason for death. Illnesses are treated by allopathic doctors or hospitals, even although Kalbelia healers are consulted by people from other castes about illness and possession.

When it is realised someone is going to die, he or she is taken out of the house if at all possible, because even although the rules are no longer so strict on this matter, there is still a lingering feeling that if a person dies inside the house then it becomes impure. The dying person is laid on a mattress or cot, and all ornaments or precious things taken from their body. If it is hot weather, a tent is erected to provide shelter, and family members and neighbours and the doctor too, if he is able to help, stay with the dying person.

Whatever the cause of death, whether illness, old age or accident, the body is disposed of in a similar way, with some details changed according to the age or gender of the deceased. A relative strips and washes the body and wraps it in a *kafan* (shroud), bought from the market. Bindu said "I have my husband's name tattooed on my arm because when I die, if there is a single thread on my body my people will take it off. But his name, my husband's name will stay. That cannot be taken away!" The body is wrapped in a white cloth if the deceased is a man, a boy or an unmarried girl. In the case of a man, underpants are also made. A married woman is

wrapped in a yellow cloth, a widow is wrapped in a red cloth.

I was surprised to be told that a Kalbelia widow is dressed in red for her burial, since white is the usual colour quoted in the literature. Hershman reports that Hindu and Sikh Punjabis cremate a widow in white (1974:286), and the Doms in Varanasi who provide fire for the burning *ghat* dress the body of a married woman in a red *sari*, but that of a widow in white, (Kaushik, 1976:271). 'A married woman is decked like a bride,' (Das, 1976:253), but the association of the colour red with widows, at least while they are alive, is not unknown. In Mysore State, Havik Brahmins say "A widow who shaves her head and wears a red *sari* (the dress symbolic of widowhood) is pure..." (Harper, 1964:176), and among the Doms of Varanasi, 'the reintegration of the widow into the society of the living is completed on the tenth day... after bathing the widow was made to wear a white *sari* and red bangles,' (Kaushik, 1976:274). Kaushik suggests the Doms' custom of giving the widow red bangles on this day relates to their practice of widow remarriage: 'while widowhood is seen as irrevocable among the high castes, the use of red bangles... symbolizes the fact that the widow is permitted, even encouraged to remarry, often a close relative of the dead man,' (1976:274-5). Kalbelias do not expect a widow to wear only white and lead a life of fasting and self-blame because of her husband's death, and most Kalbelia widows remarry. Most Hindu funerals are cremations; Kalbelias bury their dead.

If a woman was pregnant when she died, her husband or husband's brother inserts a needle into her stomach. This means the child is also dead. Whether a baby is named or unnamed at the time of death is immaterial to the death rituals, but if the baby was born alive but dies before the umbilical cord is cut, one of the family members cuts it,

whereas if the baby is still-born, the umbilical cord and afterbirth is left attached to the child. The baby's father or the father's brother takes the dead baby to the burial place. No-one else goes with him and there is no procession, but relatives arrive to comfort the mother, although as they explained, it is difficult to mourn a death when there is no personality to be missed. But if a baby dies after living for a few days or a child of a few years old dies, all the adult males of the family and sub-caste living nearby (who are, in any case, likely to be related) go to the burial ground in procession.

Funerals are held soon after death occurs, but can be delayed until evening or even the following morning if relatives, especially the eldest son are expected to come from some distance away. But the funeral will not be delayed any longer than the day following the death. "If one of us dies, someone of our sub-caste is needed, otherwise the funeral will not proceed. But we live, eat, and work together so there is never any occasion when there will not be anyone available. Funerals only ever have to be postponed for eight or ten hours, after that people gather," (Bhadra Nath)

None of the dead person's relatives cook food in any of the houses until after the funeral. The son or son-in-law makes two flat rounds of *ata* (flour) and each round has two coins in it to ensure the dead person is provided with food to eat and coins to spend in the afterlife. One of these rounds is placed on the deceased person's chest and his hands crossed on top. The other round is put inside one of his hands. The body is placed on a stretcher and the ball of *ata* is removed from the first hand and put into the second hand, then the face and body covered with a cloth.

In their home villages the Kalbelias have their own places to bury their dead. In Ramalpura the burial place is near a small hill some distance away from the hamlet, and in Devghar village there is a tomb next to their Shiva Temple on the hill above the houses. But if death occurs in Jaipur or in a town, the deceased will be buried in the public burial ground, although cremation is the more common method of disposing of the dead among other Hindu castes.

Women wait in the village or camp while males accompany the body to the burial ground. The eldest son starts to dig the grave with iron rods, (because they absorb or contain inauspicious or evil influences), and then other relatives help. If the dead person had no son, his brother or some other male relative digs the grave, but not an outsider, no-one is paid to dig the grave. In the Delhi vale region, the body is buried in the *kafun*, but in the Marwar region this cloth is removed just before interment. The body is laid flat on its back with the head to the north, and feet to the south. A piece of gold or silver, according to the means of the dead person's family, is placed in the mouth of the deceased. In heaven, it is said there are houses of gold or silver and the dead person lives in one of these according to the coin in his or her mouth. Some people prudently ensure they have gold in their mouths at their funeral by having gold put into their teeth while they are alive. When the body is finally laid in the grave, relatives look at the face for the last time and say, "This is your place now. Whatever has been possible we have done for you. We hope you will get a good house, a good life." The eldest son starts to fill in the grave, and then other relatives help finish the burial.

After the burial is completed, a line is drawn around the grave with the iron rods used to dig the grave, because iron is considered to be purer than other materials. The

mourners next admonish the deceased, "Please stay here. Don't cross this line or tease or irritate any person." Then a man from a different *gotra* to that of the dead person points the iron rods towards the hamlet or camp where the mourners are to return. He stands by the iron rods until every member of the funeral party has first placed his left foot upon the iron rods, and then walked across them in the direction of the dead person's house. Then that person puts his left foot on the rods, steps across, and picks them up.

Before they re-enter the hamlet, squatter colony or camp, each member of the burial party baths in a tank or pond. After their bath every person scoops up water in their hands seven times and pours these scoops of water on the ground in the direction of the burial place.

At the entrance to the hamlet, camp or squatter colony, a man or woman from their sub-caste, gender unimportant, waits with cow's urine and *nim* leaves. The man with the iron rods places them at the entrance to the village or camp in the form of a cross. Each member of the burial party first places his right foot on this iron cross, and then enters the colony over these iron rods, the man who positioned the iron rods doing this last of all. In Marwar the iron rod is laid across the doorway of the deceased person's house, and the members of the burial party place their foot upon it, after which a family member throws water on them. In the Delhiyale region the waiting man or woman has his/her back toward the burial party, and faces the village, holding a branch of *nim* leaves in one hand and a pot of cow's urine in the other. The branch of *nim* leaves is dipped into the urine and shaken over the holder's shoulder thus showering the returning burial party with cow's urine. All are considered polluted until showered with the purificatory cow's urine.

After the purification everyone in the hamlet, men, women and children sit before the deceased's family house or tent in a circle, and the son or son-in-law makes a big *roti* (bread). Only one side is roasted. This *roti* is cut into pieces and everyone is given a piece, even babies. Then water is served and each person mixes the *roti* and water together into a kind of dough and puts it on the ground. Some goat or chicken is cooked with spices and a small piece given to everyone, and this is also put on the ground. This food is intended for the dead person. Then everyone returns to their own homes to bath and wash their clothes. Kalbelias do not shave their heads after a death.

"In Marwar they put dough on the ground where the person has died. This dough is totally smooth and plain. Not a single print or mark should be on it. The next day there will be a print on it which shows how the person will be reborn, as a human, a donkey, a snake or some other creature," (Bhadra Nath).

Until *tisra* (third day after the funeral) the mourners do not work or grind anything in their homes. On the third day, a female member of the dead person's family goes to a place some distance from the house, and cooks rice with *ghi* and sugar, and grinds something there. After this everyone may do their grinding in the normal way. An old custom which has been discontinued nowadays is that of breaking two earthen pots, a large one and a small one, in front of the cooking place at the deceased person's home.

On this day the family of the deceased person cook meat for all the people who attended the funeral. The eldest son or son-in-law, whoever was chief mourner at the funeral, first eats a little piece of the meat and then pieces are sent to all the other families who were involved in the

funeral. If any individual is vegetarian, they hang their piece of meat on a bush or put it on the grass.

Then members of the dead person's family go to the grave with *karish* (a mixture of rice, sugar and *ghi* mixed together) in an earthenware pot. The eldest son or chief mourner lights two sacred fires either side of the grave. On one sacred fire he puts the *karish*, piece by piece. On the other sacred fire he places the stretcher on which the dead body was carried to the grave, together with other polluted or unwanted articles such as the mattress or cot on which the person lay whilst dying and the clothes they were wearing when they died. These things were left here after the burial, and a Harijan (Untouchable) could have taken these things from the burial ground in the meantime, but if they did not, the articles are burned on the second sacred fire. In Marwar, some of the food cooked for the mourners is placed on the grave. A widow places her wedding bangles on her husband's grave. If the man was an opium addict, relatives place opium by the grave on the anniversary of his death, or at the festivals of Holi, Divali, *raksha bandhan*, but toys are not placed on the grave if a child has died. A wealthy family erects a professionally made memorial stone, but the grave of a poor person is unmarked.

Also on the third day, someone from the deceased's household goes with his *bin* and begs at a single house. It does not matter whether or not the people in that house open the door and give money, food or goods, or ignore the Kalbelia. This action signals normal work may resume, although customarily the people living in the village or camp or squatter settlement where the person died do not leave the settlement for twelve days.

In Hinduism, death is considered polluting, and so are some of the goods associated with the deceased person, which

are disposed of. In the past this has led to a considerable diminution in the wealth of that family. "If a person died unexpectedly inside their house we used to take out all things like cots, mattresses and quilts, and leave them at the graveyard. In Seekar district about fifteen or sixteen years ago, a woman died in her house. She was quite wealthy and was wearing all her ornaments when she died. Everything, ornaments and household goods were given to Harijans, and she was buried inside her house. This meant her family were also throwing away the house, because it couldn't be used any more. Three days later the woman's husband's brother also died, and it was said that it was due to all these things being thrown away. Now that family are poor, but the Harijan family given those articles are quite rich," (Manendra Nath). This custom has now been changed, (see chapter 8).

"There have been other changes in the last five or six years. If a person is dying and they are on a cot, they are left on that cot, they are not put on the ground. If a person died as a result of an accident, the rule used to be that all their ornaments should be given to Harijans, but in the Delhiyale region that is no longer the case, although in Marwar this custom still holds," (Manendra Nath).

No one could remember any instances of suicide among the Kalbelia sub-caste. "If anyone commits suicide they are very cowardly." Manendra Nath commented. "If a person has difficulties usually he will solve them or he will migrate from place to place in an effort to solve them. I have never heard of any of our people committing suicide."

#### 7:2 SATSANG AND NUKTA

On the night of the eleventh day after the death, there is *satsang*, a night of devotional songs and music. Friends and relatives gather to celebrate the life of the person who

has died. Friends and neighbours from other castes may attend. At the *satsang* I attended in Harjipura, some Qalandars, Muslim entertainers with bears and monkeys who live in nearby tents on the settlement, were present. I counted about one hundred people in the clearing, some from Harjipura itself, others from villages such as Kanoda and Chandiwar. Visitors went into the huts to greet relatives. Men gossiped, women cooked on little fires, children and puppies slept, goats complained of being tethered and dogs barked as usual.

The centre of the hamlet was lit by two tilley lamps, and a large open-fronted tent with a floor covering had been set up. A microphone, powered by car batteries was connected to loudspeakers perched in a tree, also utilised to partially support the tent. While people were assembling, greeting friends and relatives, lighting fires and cooking their meals, they were entertained by taped *bhajans* played over loudspeakers.

Later on in the evening, singers (including women, which is unusual) were accompanied by two harmoniums, drum, and finger cymbals. A traditional lament "The Wife's Song" was sung, although it was not the deceased man's wife herself who sang it. Although the immediate family of the deceased man were sad, everyone else was rather jolly.

The next day, the twelfth after the person's death, there is a *nukta*. Everyone is invited to a big meal and all the food at the *nukta* is believed to go to the dead person. On this day, the person who will take over the key roles of the dead person, for example, a son who takes over his dead father's duties to the rest of the family, is presented with a *chadar* (bed sheet). In the Marwar area, the person is presented with a *pagri* (turban). The presentation is made by someone outside the immediate family. Sometimes the *nukta* is

postponed for a year or more, because it is expensive for the family.

If an unmarried person dies, *nukta* does not take place, only *tisra* and *satsang*, and there is no custom of *tisra* or *nukta* for a dead child except in Marwar. A child, usually male, less often female, who had his or her own *guru*, has all rituals followed as if he or she were adult.

"It is believed after death that people divide into two groups. One group are those who in life believed spirit is material, is in everything, and takes every kind of form," (saguna, the One Great God, or Ishvara - Jagannathan, 1984: 36). "The family of this deceased person worship the goddess in one of her forms of Parvati, Kali, or Durga. They call the *guru* who knows about this belief and he carries out the ritual. He makes a model from grass of the person who died. Meat and wine is used in the worship, and during the ritual the dead person's sons or relatives pray that his or her condition is good, that they are reborn into a good family like a Brahmin family, or some other good family. Devotional singing continues all night. This ceremony can take place after twelve days or any length of time, but it is not the same as *satsang* on the eleventh night or *nukta* after the twelfth day of the death.

Food is served to everyone, and if anyone outside the family eats this food, whether they are from the Kalbelia caste or some other caste, they are supposed to carry out the same ritual on the death of anyone in their own family. If Durga was worshipped, they should also worship Durga.

The other group is called the *nirgun*..." (*Nirgun* Brahman: the Absolute - Jagannathan, 1984: 35) "and they believe spirit has no form, and it is possible to obtain *moksha*. If they are reincarnated, they only hope to be

reincarnated as a man or a woman. They do not always incarnate, but the next life incarnation is thought to depend upon the actions and occupation of the deceased person's previous life. There is no ritual carried out for these people. Most Kalbelias are of this group," (Manendra Nath).

### 7: 3 INHERITANCE.

When a man is old he divides his property equally among his sons. He first asks his youngest son what he would like to inherit, and the oldest son is asked last. If there is an unmarried daughter when her father dies, the property is not divided between the sons until she is married. If the man's wife survives him, all property goes to her for her lifetime's upkeep and all her adult sons are equally responsible for her care, the funeral expenses of their father, and any debts he has left outstanding. They are also responsible to care for and arrange the marriages of their younger unmarried brothers and sisters.

"Because my parents are dead, decisions about my school and future were made by Biman Nathji, my father's elder brother's son. He is responsible for me and my brother and sister while we are young. We have a *pakka* house in our village built by my father, and the property will be divided when my sister is married," (Manasi Nath). Manasi's parents died when he and his brothers were small. The eldest brother is married and his wife has just come to live with him. The next eldest son is married, but has not yet brought his wife from her parents house. Manasi, fourteen years old, is engaged, but it will be some years before he marries and his wife comes to live with him, and his sister, the youngest of the siblings, is not yet engaged to be married.

Property is ultimately divided after both husband and wife have died and the daughters are married. "When my

father died, my sisters were already married and all the property like the house and land (one of the few families who own any land) were divided between we three brothers. Women receive their share of the family property as dowry, when they marry," (Manendra Nath).

If a woman dies before her husband, her ornaments, some provided by her natal family as dowry or *mayra*, some presented to her by her husband, become his property. If a woman out-lives her husband, she may direct that the daughter-in-law who has rendered her most service shall inherit them after her death, in which case her son, the husband of that daughter-in-law pays all the funeral expenses. This is normally the wife of the son with whom the mother lives after the death of her husband. If she did not leave any instructions, her ornaments are divided equally between her sons, and so are the expenses of her funeral. The woman's daughters get nothing, contradicting Tambiah's notion that women's property (*stridhan*) is expected to be inherited only by daughters, (1973: 71). Disagreements over inheritance, if intractable, can be settled by the Kalbelias' *panchayat*, described in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### PANCHAYAT: THE DISPUTE SETTLEMENT SYSTEM OF THE KALBELIAS

#### 8: 1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I will illustrate how the Kalbelias' *panchayat* system of formal discussion and dispute settlement serves as an effective mechanism to articulate sub-caste boundaries, and preserves near-unanimity and a strong ethos of Kalbelia identity, in spite of a danger of fragmentation due to their tradition of nomadism, as suggested by Barth, (1987: viii).

The chapter is in two parts. The first section places the Kalbelias in Rajasthani society and briefly outlines their social and politico-legal relationship with other castes and the state in a legal pluralistic society. The second part deals with the Kalbelias own encapsulated system of consensus decision-making and dispute settlement

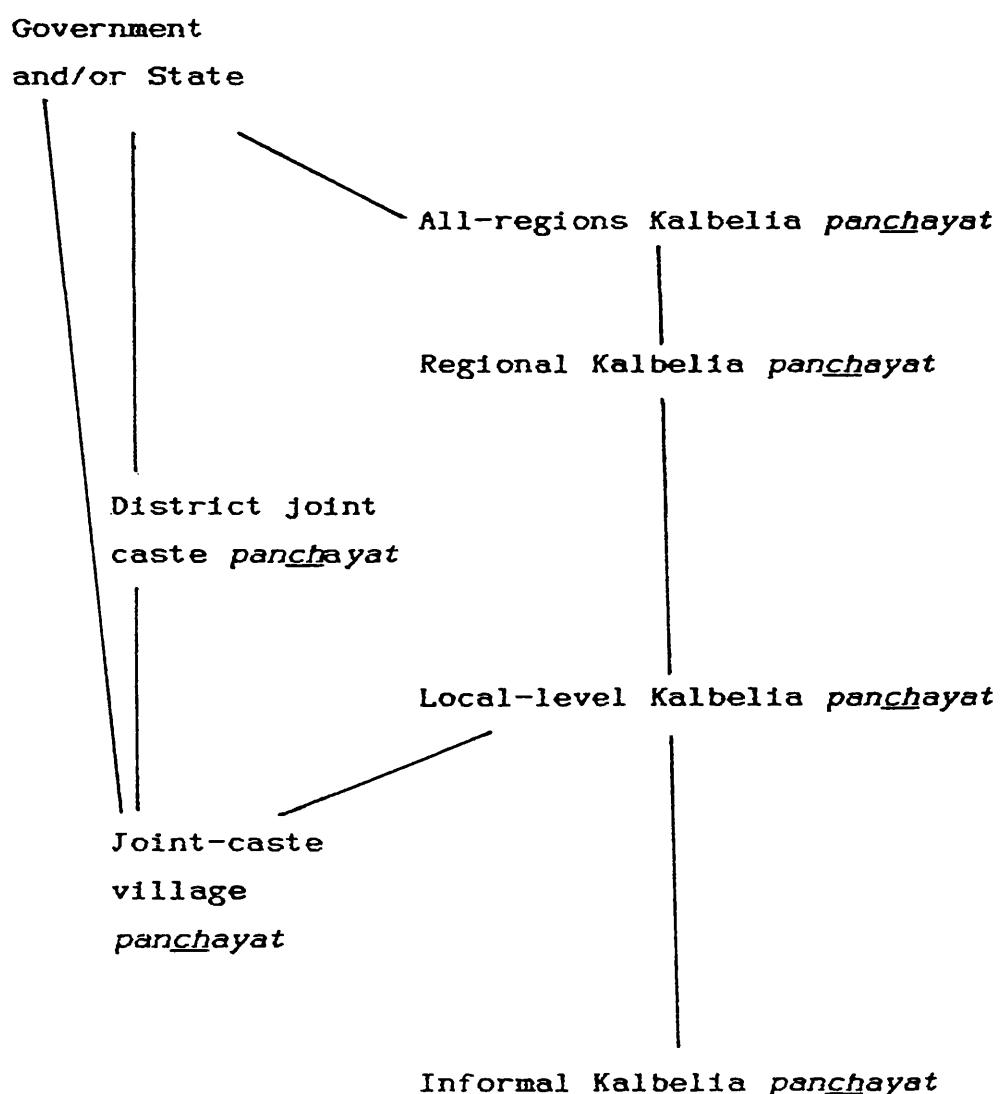
#### 8: 2 KALBELIAS' POLITICO-LEGAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER CASTES

Barth suggests that intermittent persecution makes it difficult to maintain collective policies and political co-ordination, (1987: X). This could be correct if persecution is of a savage nature but where it amounts to little more than pin-pricks of irritation, a sense of being outsiders makes people cling together. The Kalbelias' *panchayat* system is a cohesive force and a means of disseminating news and information.

"Settled people do not like nomads and do not trust them... (even although) in India and other parts of South Asia, many peripatetics have home villages to which they

## THE DISPUTE SETTLEMENT SYSTEM OF THE KALBELIAS

### 8: 1 DIAGRAM OF INTERACTIVE PANCHAYAT SYSTEM.



return," (Hayden, 1987: 270). This is the case with the Kalbelias, although I found no evidence that once in their home villages they were not trusted. Although nomadism is not valued positively by the sedentary population in India, in Rajasthan it does not provoke so much condemnation as it does, for example, in Britain. It is easily understood by Indians that a degree of mobility may be necessary to earn a living and that some occupational castes have been and still are to a certain extent, more mobile than others. Nomadism per se does not put a group outside Indian society. They are still part of that society and like other castes, do not usually impinge on physically adjacent castes by way of intermarriage. Therefore their physical proximity does not threaten to breach the integrity of other castes. This, I suggest, is one reason nomadic snakecharmers have been allowed to settle in or near rural villages without opposition. Furthermore, most of their earnings are obtained away from the village, so they enhance the local village economy with cash brought in from outside.

Each village or district has a *panchayat* which deals with matters affecting the villagers as a whole, perhaps a request to the state government to provide a school or to build a road. Representatives for such a *panchayat* are drawn from all castes living in the village, or cluster of villages, including the Kalbelias, who have the same right of expression and consultation as other castes.

A similar procedure is followed in the illegal Railway squatter settlement where Kalbelias, Bherua (house builders and construction workers), Mena (makers of alcohol "*kachchi sharab*"), Brahmins, Bhopas (Pir pictures and musicians) and Chamar (leather workers), Gujar (traditionally pastoral nomads), Bhat (puppeteers), Rajput (traditionally warriors), and Daroga (former guards of Rajput royal families) live in unauthorised occupation of railway property land. Jaipur

Development Authority attempted to eradicate the settlement several times by destroying the huts, which the squatters rebuilt.

The squatters formed a joint *panchayat* to make representations to the Jaipur Development Authority. Each caste first held a meeting among its own members to discuss the issue. Then the *panchs* (here they can be termed as representatives, but '*panch*' will become clearer later in the chapter) from each caste met together and exchanged views and agreed on a strategy. This joint caste *panchayat* represented all the people living in the Railway *kachchi* basti to the outside authorities, and has requested water, electricity, and the right to remain there or be given some alternative land. Hand pumps were installed although the other requests were not granted. Even although the occupation of the land is illegal and the *panchayat* not officially constituted, the relevant authorities in Jaipur agreed to meet the joint *panchayat* as representatives of the squatters.

Hayden suggests that as nomadic groups settle in villages and adopt sedentary occupations, relations between the nomad and the sedentary residents of the village will depend on the same factors that influence relations between completely sedentary villagers, and the nomadic aspect will cease to influence the relationship, (1987:273). It is easy to see how this comes about. Disputes between members of the same caste are nearly always dealt with by their own caste *panchayat*. It is only rarely that anyone insists on taking a grievance to the police or the judicial courts, because of the costs and length of time involved. Where a dispute arises between members of different castes, they may agree that a special *panchayat* be set up to deal with it, comprising *panchs* from the two castes, with a *panch* from a third caste there to see fair play and perhaps throw the

casting vote. Whether one party to the dispute is traditionally nomadic or not scarcely affects the matter once a permanent presence has been established in the village. Although Biman Nath has been requested to act as *panch* in disputes involving other castes, there have been no reports of any such cases involving their own sub-caste. These caste *panchayats* do not have any legal standing with the state judicial system. They have authority only as far as the parties to the dispute have asked for their arbitration on a particular matter, and when another caste is involved, the protagonists may prefer to ask police or state judicial authorities to take action.

Hayden further posits that even in home villages, nomads must still be required to submit to many demands from the settled people, (1987:284), but Kalbelias are not disadvantaged because of their history of nomadism or by their current partial mobility. The requirement to wash their own glasses at the tea-stall appears to be based on the hierarchical demands of the caste system, and other low castes in the village face similar demands, although such discrimination is now illegal under national law. Furthermore, there appears to be no malice behind these requirements, which result from Hindu concepts of purity and pollution, and I saw much friendly co-operation between Kalbelias and members of other castes in their home villages. In one instance a Rajput had encouraged Kalbelias to settle down near his village. This was said to be because of a personal friendship between the Rajput and a Kalbelia. In Marwar there is social visiting between Kalbelias and a Rajput family whose house is next to the Kalbelia settlement, and an agricultural caste family who live on the other side of the main road allow Kalbelias to use their water during the hot weather when the Kalbelias' own supply often dries up. There is an economic factor here also, since Kalbelias can be counted upon to help the farmer at harvest

time, but they actively maintain friendly relations by visiting each other on an almost daily basis and Kalbelias are given huge glasses of milk to drink although they have to wash up their own glasses at this man's house, too.

Away from their home villages, where individual Kalbelias are known, they are accepted and liked, or at the very least conceded to be no worse than anyone else. Problems may arise when there is no personal relationship between a Kalbelia and a member of a sedentary caste. Nomadism, or apparent placelessness, can sometimes be enough to confer all sorts of dangerous or untrustworthy attributes on an individual or group, (Liegeois, 1986: 87-141). If Kalbelias realise they are unwelcome somewhere, perhaps when they are out begging, they simply walk on. Where it is impossible to remove themselves immediately, they attempt to allay fears, or behave with dignified indifference. They are peaceful people, who prefer to resolve problems by polite discussion, and I never saw them react with abuse or threats of violence, apart from one occasion when a Kalbelia flourished his basket of cobras at an extremely vocal following of small but aggravating children. Neither do they show any fear or apprehension of others. They normally have little contact with the police, who say they are not considered to be a criminal group.

### 8:3 KALBELIAS' OWN PANCHAYAT SYSTEM

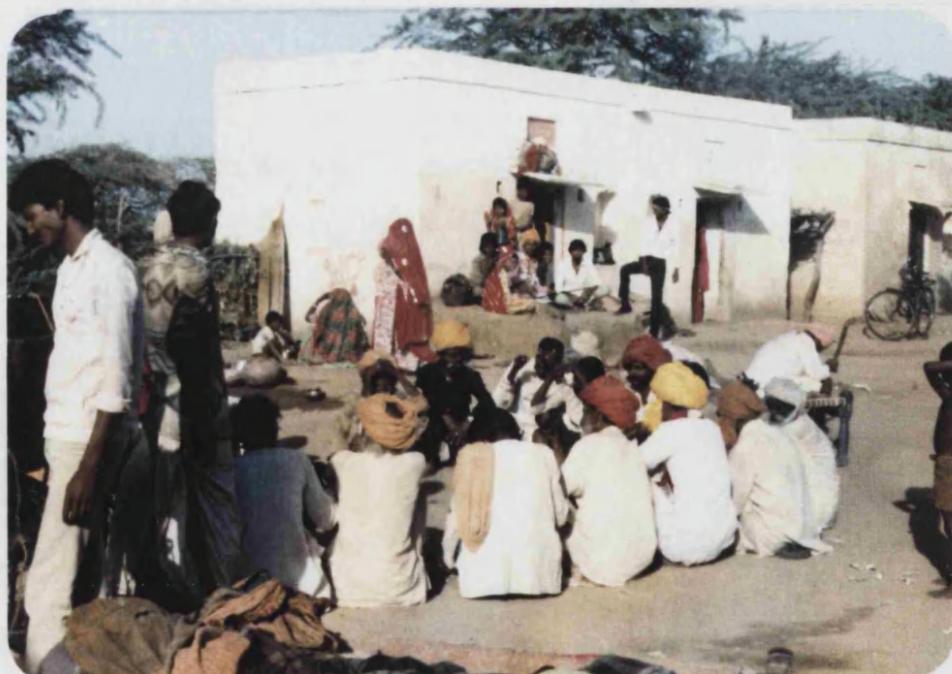
Social life is sustained by shared values internalised by actors in the social unit. The shared values of the Kalbelias' sub-caste provide them with harmony within the group and a clear identity as against outsiders. Their normal behaviour is rule-governed, and social life is lived within a universe of beliefs and rules derived from their traditions, and as Naths, although religious specialists per se are not involved in the politico-legal process. The Kalbelias have their own *panchayat* and employ dispute

settlement procedures within their own sub-caste so that grievances may be discussed, solutions offered and sanctions imposed and malefactors punished. But before a matter is taken to a *panchayat*, Kalbelias can employ other strategies to resolve difficulties.

They may ignore the situation, or facilitated by their mobile work strategies, even physically withdraw from it. Physical violence is rarely resorted to and is likely to be quickly quashed by scandalised onlookers. Bi-lateral self-help, where the two sides to a disagreement settle the matter between themselves, is another option. Personal differences are usually dealt with by any of these options, but more serious matters require mediators who act as go-betweens. To be successful, mediators are not too closely identified with either of the protagonists or their supporters, and are thus able to preserve a certain detachment which allows them to be fair and acceptable to both parties. On the other hand, they should not be too remote. A successful mediator understands the world as the disputants see it.

Mediators do not take away the decision-making capacity from the disputants and have a better chance of bringing a reconciliation where the interests of the two parties are not too divergent and there is an incentive to settle quickly. If the parties are intransigent over what is considered by Kalbelia society to be a comparatively trivial matter, the antagonists' will elicit disapproval and their position in the community will become difficult, hence a real motive for settling small disagreements quickly.

If the mediatory procedure fails, the next step brings a shift in locus of power away from the two antagonists and the private personal sphere, into the privileged social realm, where it will be discussed in *panchayat* and very



Ad-hoc panchayats are often held the day following a wedding.

likely commented upon by members of the sub-caste beyond the immediate household, neighbours, camp or hamlet. I say 'privileged social realm' because Kalbelias, notwithstanding disputes or criticisms they may voice among themselves, show a loyal and united front in the company of people from other castes.

The authority of the *panchayat* occurs as a result of an invitation (by letter or personal visit) from the disputants to arbitrate, although in cases where the consensus is that the offence is serious, the *panchayat* acts as an umpire handing down an imposed decision, probably of outcasting, the ultimate sanction. There would have to be considerable outrage among other members of the sub-caste for a *panchayat* to be convened without the invitation of the principals to a case. It is almost unheard of for Kalbelias to take their grievances into the public realm of the state judicial system - which takes private shame or problem into the public domain. Furthermore, it is slow, costly and may not take into account the mores of Kalbelia society.

Any male member of the sub-caste, whether they are concerned with a specific case or not, may attend a *panchayat* to listen and speak, but there is differential access to the *panchayat* in that women cannot set a case in motion for themselves. A male relative has to do this for them. Neither do women attend *panchayats*, and their husbands or male family members do not formally convey their views or opinions unless they are directly concerned in a case. Then, although it is possible a woman could attend and speak on her own behalf, it is more usual for her father, husband or brother to represent her. This is not to say that Kalbelia women do not know what is going on. A *panchayat* is frequently convened on an ad hoc basis in a village or camp, upon such occasions as marriage, or after a night of devotional singing, to discuss the caste's disabilities in

society and how they may be overcome. Women are close by and can easily hear what is said.

Anyone without money would not be able to call a *panchayat* to settle their grievance, although this was never said to be a problem, because cases always involve families. Individuals may be poor, but a family group between them can always scrape up the money if they feel the case is justified.

The *panchayat* comes to decisions based on precedent and consensus. The punishments and sanctions applied to a miscreant are usually borne not just by the individual, but by his or her family also, because the family is held to be jointly responsible for the conduct of its members. The individual hardly exists in the eyes of the *panchayat*, which can impose fines or direct financial compensation to be paid. These financial transactions, as most other financial transactions within Kalbelia society, can be considered evidential because they mark a change of status.

The ultimate sanction is outcasting, which would be a serious matter in Indian society, and result in misery and despair if it were invariably permanent and irreversible. In the Kalbelia sub-caste, it nearly always means that no one will share a *huqqa* or *biri* (cigarette made from rolled tobacco leaf) or a meal with the outcaste individual or his family. This period of social isolation usually lasts only a few weeks or months until a fine fixed by the *panchayat* is paid, and it is shown that the prohibited behaviour has ceased, or the guilt has in some way been purged. The re-admittance to caste is marked by a formal ceremony. The outcaste family invite the *panchs* and other sub-caste members to eat a meal with them. Once this meal is eaten together, then the miscreants are deemed to be fully rehabilitated and members of the sub-caste once more. Very

rarely, an individual's behaviour is considered so reprehensible that they are not readmitted to the sub-caste with their family, (see case below).

A *panchayat* usually hears disputes only where both sides are willing. That both are willing is shown by the elaborate formal arrangements and the deposits paid by both sides. The Kalbelias do not have people who are authorised to arrest or overpower miscreants or enforce decisions against them. It is conceivable that in a case which outraged Kalbelia society, an individual's or group's misdeed may be discussed in their absence and a sanction such as outcasting applied with the consensus of the rest of the sub-caste. But that is a situation where the miscreant is having something done to him; he is not required to fulfil some obligation decided by the *panchayat*. However, all Kalbelias know that if they should be so foolish as to become involved in wrong-doing which results in them being dealt with by the state judicial system, or even going to prison, then this is by no means the end of the matter. "Even if the case has already been heard in the State Court with the police involved, until our *panchayat* has heard and decided on the matter, it is not finished as far as we are concerned. Our *panchayat* deals with all wrong-doers," (Dala Lal).

#### 3:4 REGIONAL PANCHAYAT

The Kalbelias occasionally convene an inter-regional *panchayat* representing all areas in Rajasthan in order to discuss important matters which affect the sub-caste as a whole, such as changes to the rules of inter-marriage with other sub-castes, changes in their way of life, such as living in villages instead of tents, and the abandoning the consumption of certain foods.

About forty years ago there were several big formal inter-regional meetings to discuss the suggestion that the sub-caste should cease their nomadic lifestyle, settle in villages and make arrangements for their children's education. Manendra Nath's father who was sirpanch at that time suggested these changes inspired by a Rajput friend. After discussion, the Kalbelias agreed to settle in villages. "Some Rajas and Maharajas helped by providing land to Kalbelias at the time of Independence. About half the people benefited in this way and they worked hard in the villages and acquired more land," (Manendra Nath). Further grants of land have been made to the Kalbelias by the State Government.

After a few years there were further inter-regional meetings to discuss the changes. All Kalbelias had agreed to settle in villages, but not everyone agreed to the changes in eating habits, so it was decided to continue to live in villages and send the children to school, and to allow the old eating habits to continue for the time being. After three years another panchayat was held where it was agreed by all to cease the hunting and eating of low-status foods such as eagle, wolf, dog or pig and drinking "too much alcohol." This would increase their acceptability to the sedentary castes they were now living among, and over time, would enhance their status, (see Davis, 1976: 19-23). Alcohol consumption is not now approved by the sub-caste, although one or two individuals are known to indulge occasionally.

A further insight into the importance of eating habits in the eyes of the Hindu caste hierarchy is offered by Hayden. A large gathering of nomadic Nandiyale who travel in Maharashtra and entertain with trained bulls, camp once every three years in Wadapuri village. Although nomads and meat-eaters, they had been considered to be a 'clean' middle-ranking caste in the local hierarchy, below the

Maratha, the dominant agricultural caste, but above the untouchable castes of Mang and Mahar. But their prestige was lowered and they were eventually disbarred from using the village well when the scale of their twice-yearly pig sacrifice to their threatening ancestor-god Ram Mamma escalated to the point where all the families were each sacrificing a pig and alcohol in Wadapuri village during the course of one week. This involved hundreds of pigs being brought to the village by the truck load, and sacrificed in a field in public view. Villagers were aware of the amount of pork being consumed by the Nandiyale and considered they were engaging in improper behaviour for a clean caste. Hayden commented, 'this seems to be the reverse of the behaviour Srinivas (1966: 1-45) called Sanskritization, in which lower castes attempt to improve their ritual status by adopting the customs of higher castes,' (1987: 274-80) - usually vegetarianism, or at least only the consumption of mutton or goat. The exclusion from the village well and other incidents at this time gave the panchayat of the Nandiyale a great deal of work.

The Kalbelias' big inter-regional panchayat is a forum for discussion until unanimous or near-unanimous agreement is reached on important matters affecting the whole sub-caste, rather than for the settlement of individual cases, and is not very often convened.

#### 8:5 ONE REGION PANCHAYAT

A single region may also convene a panchayat to discuss matters such as the amount of money to be paid in bridewealth, which while going beyond the individual or family do not necessarily touch the sub-caste as a whole.

At a large panchayat representing the Delhiyale region, it was agreed Kalbelias could marry girls from two other sub-castes of the Jogi Nath caste, the Chabdiyale and the

Chakkiyale. One Delhiyale gotra has taken some of their wives from these two sub-castes, but in general women from the Kalbelia sub-caste are still preferred as wives, and many young men are not even aware they may marry women from these two sub-castes.

Another decision made by the Delhiyale regional panchayat dealt with the consequences of death. About ten years ago if a member of the Kalbelia sub-caste died in their house, all contents were given away to Harijans (Untouchables), but now these articles may be retained by the family. At the panchayat which discussed this matter, it was stated that the Kalbelias believed that when a death occurred inside a house, then everything inside the house was dead (and therefore polluted), as are the people who are taking the dead person for burial, but this tradition should be changed. A connected custom was that when a person died as a result of an accident, all their ornaments were given to Harijans. A further panchayat was held to discuss this, and it was finally agreed that this tradition should cease. Germane to this decision was the realisation that some families had been impoverished, even to several succeeding generations because of this practice. "But in Marwar it is still the tradition that these things should be given to the Harijans," (Bhadra Nath).

The regional panchayat also made changes concerning social interaction. "In Delhiyale tradition, an older brother cannot marry a younger brother's widow, but the younger brother can marry his older brother's widow. I can sit on my elder brother's cot, but he cannot sit on my cot. This is extended to our widows. Elder brother is like a father and elder brother's wife is like a mother and to an elder brother, his younger brother's wife is like a daughter. It used to be that I could help my elder brother's wife take the matka (earthenware pot) off her head, but my

elder brother could not help my wife because I am his younger brother. But in 1981 there was a big meeting under the guidance of my father where it was decided that everyone can help each other, so now my older brother can help my wife," (Manendra Nath).

Possibly the earthenware pot was formerly considered to be a metaphor for sexual relations. Be that as it may, an elder brother still may not marry a younger brother's widow, although an elder brother's widow may be taken as wife by his younger brother.

The regional *panchayat*, as in the examples above, may come to a consensus about altering or relaxing customs, but these are not matters which affect the image the sub-caste wishes to present to the outside world, as are matters dealt with by the inter-regional *panchayat*. They are internal matters, and customs vary regionally, for example, the amount of money to be paid as bridewealth within each region is fixed by each region's own *panchayat* and the amount of bridewealth varies from region to region.

#### 8: 6 KALBELIAS' LOCAL PANCHAYAT

Kalbelias apply for personal cases to be heard in the *panchayat* of a man's area of natal origin. The cases of women are heard by a *panchayat* in their husband's area of natal origin, which is not necessarily the area in which they currently reside. A Marwar man living in the *Delhiyale* region takes his case to a Marwar *panchayat*, either actually held in Marwar or with *panchs* invited to come from Marwar. He cannot apply or appeal to the Delhi-region *panchayat*. If a Delhi-region Kalbelia woman is married to a Marwar man, her husband (or her natal family) has to take her case to the Marwar *panchayat*.

Kalbelias always resort to their own *panchayat* in any disagreement involving members of their own sub-caste. For example, if a Kalbelia is requested to remove a cobra from a house at an agreed price but another Kalbelia intervened and offers to remove the snake for less money, then this matter could be taken to the *panchayat* because one Kalbelia should not undercut another. Or the *panchayat* might be asked to intervene in a disagreement over inherited wealth, or any quarrel between different families, or within extended families.

There are no instances of complaints about Evil Eye or Evil Spirit, although this is hardly surprising since most Kalbelias regard all such with cynicism, and in fact they are usually called in by other castes to deal with the consequences of black magic, (see Chapter Four). Where spirit possession occurs among the sub-caste (which is rare), if a woman is concerned, it may be that she has a grievance which her husband or natal family are loth to take to the *panchayat* on her behalf. Possession is sometimes an individual's only way to have a grievance heard by the community and the trouble alleviated, perhaps by social pressure brought on a woman's husband to treat her more kindly.

I was never told of disputes over land, probably because not enough land has been accumulated for inheritance to become a contentious issue, although this may change as more land is acquired. Bora Nath remarked to my Brahmin companion, "You people quarrel over land, but we quarrel over our women!" Certainly the Kalbelia *panchayat* deals with cases concerning inter-personal relations far more often than with property, even movable property, and most cases taken to the *panchayat* concern engagements and marriages. Requests for divorce are also considered by the *panchayat*.

### 8: 7 PANCHS

A respected man may be requested to attend a *panchayat* as *panch* and help decide cases. This means that after hearing from both sides in the case and anyone else's comments, he is one of the five men who make the final decision as to what should be the outcome of the case.

Older men usually serve as *panchs* because they have had many years of attendance at *panchayats* and have heard the reasons for decisions made by other *panchs* and have an encyclopaedic knowledge of precedent based on old cases. If a man had been invited to attend a *panchayat* but died in the meantime, his widow may attend. She will not join in the deliberations, but will be there to show respect to the *panchayat* and the *panchs*, and so that others can show respect for her husband's memory and herself.

At present, Biman Nath is the All Rajasthan *sirpanch* (head *panch*) of the Kalbelia caste. This means he sits in the important All-Regions *panchayat* which occasionally meets to decide matters of importance to Kalbelias throughout the whole of Rajasthan. Biman Nath also sits as *panch* in his own region, and says he is in constant demand for work in the *panchayat*, which is sometimes inconvenient, because he needs to earn for himself and his family.

The position of *sirpanch* was thrust upon him after the death of his father, but the fact that Biman Nath's father was *sirpanch* is not a relevant factor in Biman Nath being pressed to fill the position. Access to authority and prestige is not inherited, and is available to all Kalbelia male adults. Biman Nath enjoys only a transitory power. Of prime importance are his personal qualities of outstanding intelligence and conciliatory skills, which have gained him the hotel monopoly in Jaipur. He has shown that he has knowledge and expertise that goes beyond his own domestic

hearth. Members of the sub-caste are distinguished by gender, age, strength and intelligence, but beyond these distinctions, ascendancy is entirely a personal matter. Possibly this may change when there is ownership of land beyond mere house-plots, and differential access to economic resources becomes established. But the present ethos is of equality for which there is a conscious striving. Ostentatious excess wealth for example, brings the expectation of redistribution by sharing.

Very many years ago, if the disputants in a case did not wish to accept the arbitration of the *panchayat*, a representative from each of the opposing parties took seven large leaves in both their hands, and an iron rod was heated until it was red hot, and this was held in their hands covered only by the leaves while they walked seven steps. After this ordeal, the person found to have a burn or irritation on his hands was held to represent the wrong-doers in the case, the person who escaped injury was considered to represent the innocent party, (Manasi Nath).

#### 8:8 PERSONAL CASES REFERRED TO THE LOCAL PANCHAYAT

Personal cases are taken to the *panchayat* at local level where the emphasis is on arbitration and the continuity and preservation of traditional practices.

A formal *panchayat* is arranged to hear a specific case or cases. Each party to the case is required to pay five rupees to the *panchayat* in order to have a date decided when the *panchs* will discuss their case. This money is paid via each party's representative, called a *zamantdar*, who guarantees his party will appear at the *panchayat* on the agreed date. Each *zamantdar* is paid by his party a further one hundred and twenty-five rupees which he keeps for himself. He very much has to earn this money by continuing, even at this late stage, to mediate between the opposing

parties to try to help them come to some agreement before the *panchayat* meets. If this does not work, he has to arrange with the other party's *zamantdar* and the *panchs* for a date and place acceptable to all. This can entail a considerable amount of letter-writing and travelling between various villages. If the party the *zamantdar* represents fails to appear at the *panchayat*, he is personally liable to pay a fine of six hundred *rupees* to the *panchayat*. Therefore he has every incentive to ensure his party's good faith. The party to the case is also fined five hundred and twenty-five *rupees* by the *panchayat* for non-appearance and wasting everyone's time.

On the agreed date, five hundred *rupees* is deposited with the *panchayat* by each party as an earnest of good behaviour, which is forfeit if either party quarrels or behaves in an unseemly manner. This money is returned to the depositors after the *panchayat* gives its decision in the case.

Where a formal *panchayat* is called, proceedings are held on neutral ground, not in a home village, but somewhere like a piece of wasteland. Kalbelias arrive with donkeys and tents and camp for the duration of the *panchayat* which can last several days. On these occasions most women stay at home in their village, but some men bring their wives along, and as in their home village, they can easily hear what is going on. Kalbelias camp at the site of the *panchayat*, listen to the presentation of the case, join in the discussion and then go off to work or beg, returning at the end of the afternoon with loaded bags. They catch up with the day's news at night, after the evening meal, while smoking the *hugqa*.

The following description sets the scene of a typical formal *panchayat* held at Sanganir, outside Jaipur. The

nearest settlement of Kalbelias was a bicycle ride away at Harjipura. Two donkeys had been used to transport tents and Jaga Nath, a young man from Ramalpura, a village some distance away, was staying in one of the tents. I also recognised a man from the Kejigar camp, and Gonanda Nath, and a few other people mostly from nearby Harjipura who were attending the panchayat. Rajata Nath, my *dharma bhai* (religious brother) sent Bhadra Nath to get chay from the stall some distance down the road. Jaga Nath, after bringing water for the people sitting in the circle, went to do household chores among the tents. Men and boys of all ages, from toddlers to teenagers, were sitting in a circle on the patch of wasteland alongside the railway line. People travelling in and on top of the trains waved and shouted and some men going past on their bicycles stopped to listen to the proceedings. Three Kalbelias sitting in the circle wound string into balls from skeins wedged on their knees. Some men smoked the *huqqa*. Women were nearby making chapatis, or rocking babies in cradles, or moving among the tents. The people who spoke in the panchayat were mature men, the old or middle-aged, and men who had been married for some years. None of the boys spoke. Kalbelias spoke one at a time, in an orderly manner. This panchayat continued for several days and concerned a disagreement about a proposed marriage, (see below).

The party bringing the grievance to the panchayat speaks first. Their spokesman explains everything fully and in detail, and no one may interrupt. Then the other party responds. After both sides have given their explanations, they leave the meeting with their family members, supporters, and anyone directly involved in the case. Once they have gone, the people remaining constitute what is called *chota panchayat* (small panchayat). Anyone remaining who speaks logically about the case under examination and is not connected with the case is counted as a panch in the

*chota panchayat* which discusses in detail what they have heard.

After everyone who wishes to has spoken, the case is finally decided by the *sirpanch* and four other *panchs*, who weigh up the arguments and discussions put forward by everyone at the *panchayat*, and also take into consideration precedent. Decisions made in previous cases are remembered. Written records are not usually kept, although nowadays decisions concerning dissolved engagements or marriages are recorded in writing, so the families concerned are able to show they are free to arrange another marriage.

Occasionally a special *panchayat* is arranged in order that long outstanding cases may finally be resolved. To avoid accusations of bribery or other underhand dealings, invitations are sent by local *panchs* already involved with cases to *panchs* in other areas of Rajasthan, to join the *panchayat* and help make decisions. Usually only men go to the big *panchayat*, which because of the back-log of cases, continues for days, sometimes weeks.

#### 8: 9 CASES CONCERNING MARRIAGE

The largest number of cases dealt with by the local *panchayat* concern engagements which did not result in marriage. If an engagement is to be broken, then one of the families involved sends three rupees to the *panchayat*. Then the other family, if they agree the engagement should be broken, follow suit by also sending three rupees to the *panchayat*. Here again the financial transaction signals an evidential change in status. A broken engagement entails loss of prestige, especially to the second family to send the money, because they are assumed to be mostly or wholly to blame for the break-down of the engagement. This formal notification enables both families to arrange another marriage for their son or daughter and nothing else need be

done publicly if both families are able to amicably resolve outstanding matters such as compensation for brideservice. But if one party refuses to send the three rupees because they do not accept the engagement is at an end, a *panchayat* is called to decide if the marriage must go ahead despite the misgivings of one of the families. Even when both families agree the engagement has failed and the marriage will not take place, the *panchayat* may be asked to decide the amount of compensation for the brideservice.

In the following example, two families initially agreed their son and daughter should marry, but later the arrangement broke down: the boy had done a year's brideservice but the girl's family did not approve of him sufficiently to accept him as their daughter's husband.

Family A had agreed to give their daughter in marriage to family B, so family B sent their son to do brideservice in Kanoda, the A family's village. But it was alleged that the boy misbehaved. He didn't wear a *pagri*, he smoked, and sat on a cot or chair in front of his prospective father and mother-in-law. Although he may do all these things because they are not forbidden per se, he should refrain in the presence of his future in-laws because these actions display a disrespectful familiarity.

In the village where the boy was doing his bride-service, two opposing groups formed over this dispute. One group, including the prospective father-in-law, claimed the boy misbehaved, but the other group said the boy behaved well and did wear a turban and did not smoke etc. So the boy's father called a *panchayat* because he believed the complaints against his son were trivial and did not justify rejection as son-in-law.

The boy's family are from Sundargarh and the girl's family are from Kanoda, so a panchayat could not be held in either of those two villages. It must be held in a neutral place. Therefore a panchayat was held at Sanganir, where the girl's family's complaints were upheld. The panchayat said the marriage need not take place, and the girl's family could arrange another engagement for her, and that the two thousand rupees the boy had earned and given to the girl's family during his brideservice should be returned to his family. This was done.

Then the boy's family called for a further panchayat, claiming the return of their money was proof their boy was not bad, and he should be allowed to marry the girl. The girl's family were indignant that the boy's family were still claiming their daughter. "We won the panchayat so why are they saying their son behaved correctly throughout his brideservice?" and they also demanded another panchayat, with different panchs, to finally settle the matter.

This case had still not been resolved when I left Rajasthan, but it was expected the next panchayat will be asked to decide whether the girl should marry this boy or not. To help them come to a decision, the new panchs will ask the previous panchs at Sanganir how and why they came to their conclusion. However, people not directly involved in the case say they think the two families will come to an agreement between themselves before the second panchayat meets, either for financial compensation or for the marriage to take place. "Because by her family having returned the boy's bridewealth of two thousand rupees, the boy's family say it has been proved their boy can work and earn and therefore was not totally wrong," (Manendra Nath).

Most panchayat decisions are accepted because the matter is talked out among the people there until there is a

clear answer. And after all, the parties have called in the arbitrators - and put up considerable amounts of cash in order to do so. In the case above, it will be in the interests of both parties to come to an agreement, or accept the decision of the *panchayat* because until the matter is settled, no-one will enter into marriage negotiations with either of the families, and therefore both are at stalemate.

#### 8: 10 PROPOSED MARRIAGES AGAINST CUSTOM

There was a case pending concerning some four or five engagements which would, it was argued by some members of the caste, be incestuous if they resulted in marriage. "Two (classificatory) sister's children are engaged. These families have ignored the four *gotras* we avoid when planning marriages for our children (see Chapter Six). They say the *gotras* doesn't matter, but other Kalbelias say this is bad, the people who participate in these marriages are lowering themselves.

This matter is going to the *panchayat*. I am sure the *panchs* will say they should not arrange their marriages in this way because they will be making themselves different from the rest of our sub-caste, making themselves lower than us in the caste hierarchy. Perhaps they will be totally disconnected from our Kalbelia community and become outcastes like Harijans. Then we won't smoke a *huqqa* or *biri* with them, or take a meal with them," (Manendra Nath).

This all sounded very serious and I queried how children from these marriages would themselves ever be able to marry if they and their parents were outcastes. But outcasting is not usually an irrevocable fate. "These cases have happened before. The children from these marriages, if they go ahead, will be able to marry because the families will be outcasted, but after a few weeks or months they will pay a fine and rejoin our sub-caste. So then the children

will be members of our sub-caste and be able to marry," (Manendra Nath).

#### 8: 11 INCESTUOUS SEXUAL RELATIONSHIP

Couples who want to marry but whose families do not agree, sometimes elope. If they are not members of a *gotra* to be avoided when marrying, once they are found they are hurriedly married to each other. But if they are both from the same *gotra*, then marriage cannot be countenanced, and the *panchayat* will declare them all, the families, as well as the two wrong-doers, to be put out of caste.

A few years ago a girl and a boy who were classificatory brother and sister - their *gotra* was the same and therefore they were not eligible to marry - were discovered to have had a sexual relationship. Both they and their families were outcasted. After a while their two families, but not the two culprits themselves, were readmitted into Kalbelia society after paying a fine.

In the meantime both families, perhaps in order to ensure their own readmittance to the sub-caste, had rejected the two miscreants and would have nothing more to do with them. So the boy and girl went miles away to Marwar region where they lived separately and with no further sexual relations occurring between them. They survived by begging in villages in Marwar, and the boy also gave the girl some money or goods because her family refused her any help. This help did not imply the boy accepted the blame for their situation. "Nothing could have happened without her permission, so she was more to blame," said Manendra Nath, explaining the sub-caste's attitude to sexual misdemeanours.

The outcastes did not tell anyone of their wrong-doing or that they had been outcasted, because they wanted to be

able to live with other Kalbelias, albeit far away from their original area of residence.

After a few years of living in Marwar, they attended a *nukta* (feast held in honour of the dead) and helped to serve food and also accepted food. In this way they tricked Kalbelia families in Marwar into unknowingly, but still formally, accepting them. But the *sirpanch* from the *Delhiyale* area from whence they had fled discovered the Marwar families were accepting these outcastes by allowing them to associate and eat with them. The boy and girl realised they were discovered and confessed their misdeeds to the Marwar Kalbelias. These Marwar families who had accepted them, albeit unknowingly, were fined thirteen hundred rupees by the inter-regional *panchayat*, because by associating with and accepting these outcastes they undermined the authority of the *panchayat* and the customs of Kalbelia society.

I do not know whether these two people are still outcastes or whether they have, perhaps by dint of paying huge fines, managed to gain re-admittance into Kalbelia society, somewhere.

### 8: 12 DIVORCE

Marital grievances can be taken to the *panchayat* and a divorce obtained. Grounds for divorce mainly hinge on wrongdoing by the woman, usually sexual infidelity. Sexual infidelity on the man's part is not automatically considered to be grounds for divorce, although it is not impossible that a divorce may be granted to a woman on these grounds. But it is considered a wrongdoing and if his wife complains, her husband may be fined by the *panchayat*. A woman may also ask for a divorce if her husband beats her, or fails to ensure she has adequate food or clothing.

The partner in the disintegrating marriage who is at fault is fined, usually in the region of two hundred and fifty rupees. But in any case, the woman's family have to pay to the husband, whether he is the guilty party or not, fifteen hundred rupees, representing repayment of the bridewealth given by his family to the woman's family at the time of the marriage. If a woman returns to her natal home after the divorce, she is entitled to half the marital property, but if she plans to re-marry within a few days she is not entitled to any money from her previous marital household, and her new husband, not her natal family, has to pay her first husband compensation, representing the return of his bridewealth. If a woman misleadingly states she does not intend to re-marry but within about a month she does so, the *panchayat* fines her double the value of the marital property she took away from the first marriage, and any money she was awarded by the *panchayat* when they agreed to the divorce. If a divorced man re-marries within a few days or a month, then his ex-wife gets all the marital property.

Once divorce is agreed upon, the *panchayat* gives both parties a paper stating they have permission to leave each other. After this, both the woman and man are free to marry again, but never again to each other, although the woman could marry any of her ex-husband's brothers.

There does not appear to be any hard and fast rule about the custody of children of a broken marriage. Some men say the children always stay with the father even if he is a drunken brute, others say the woman could take the children with her if they were small but would have to return them to their father when they were older. Most said it was a matter for the couple themselves to decide - whatever they wished. If death can be thought akin to divorce, in two cases where widowed mothers married into other families, their children were brought up by relatives of the deceased

husband, the child's paternal grandparents in one case, and in the other, the child's father's brother and his wife.

But this is by no means the rule. Bhujji Nath has left his son from his first marriage with his dead wife's family. He has remarried, and now has a son from his second marriage. Kadru is bringing up as her own son, the child of her second husband and his previous wife, even although she divorced her second husband, who later died. She married again and now has children from her third marriage.

Divorce is uncommon but not unheard of. The Kalbelias are fairly pragmatic in that if for some reason a marriage is not working because of a clear breach of duty or bad behaviour on the part of one or both partners, then divorce is allowed. Divorcees can usually have other marriages arranged for them, but none the less, divorce is not a step to be taken lightly. A man divorced because he has beaten his wife or not provided enough food for her may have difficulty in finding another family willing to give him their daughter in marriage. But there is no feeling that a woman, either because of divorce or the death of her husband should remain alone. Both Kalbelia men and women usually remarry in the event of the death of their spouses or on divorce.

#### 8:13 INTEGRATION OF OUTSIDERS INTO THE KALBELIA SUB-CASTE: TWO CASES

##### Marriage with a man from another caste

The integrity of the Kalbelia sub-caste is maintained not only by a strong sense and requirement of loyalty to its members, but also by careful vetting of any proposed integration of newcomers to the caste. Kalbelias see themselves as a discrete bounded unit, and there was much discussion when a possibility of a breach in sub-caste boundaries arose, in this case, with the proposed marriage

of a Kalbelia woman to a man from another caste, the only remembered instance of marriage between a member of the Kalbelia sub-caste and a complete outsider to the Jogi Nath caste and religion.

"A man from the Carpenter caste married Gupti. He is a *dholak* (drum) player and she is a dancer and they fell in love after performing in very many programmes together. When this man asked to marry Gupti, Kalbelias were very angry because he dared to try to enter our caste. The girl's family were also blamed because they were willing to allow this boy from another caste to marry our girl, so the girl and her family were fined. Our *panchayat* also fined the boy one thousand rupees, which he paid.

In order to marry Gupti, the boy from the carpenter caste was told by our *panchayat* he had to become a member of our Kalbelia sub-caste. He agreed, and so did his original caste *panchayat* because Tarit Lal, as he was called then, stated very firmly that if he did not marry Gupti, he would not marry at all.

We accepted this marriage because both girl and boy were still determined to marry despite the fines. If the boy had hesitated to pay the fine and thereby rejected the authority of our Kalbelia *panchayat* he would never have been admitted to our sub-caste. And if he had been a *badmash* (scoundrel) we would never have accepted him. This was written down and if he later turned out to be dishonest he would be fined more and more, and thrown out of our sub-caste.

So Tarit Lal changed caste and is now called Tarit Nath. He was given the new gotra name of Gobriya Chauhan. There are many Chauhans among the Kalbelias, but Gobriya Chauhan is a new gotra and their children will be called

Gobriya Chauhan. Gupti now has a daughter, and she and any other future sons or daughters will be considered to be Kalbelias. Gupti's husband has adopted our Kalbelia culture and catches cobras and does snake-charming. Before, he used to make tables and chairs." (Nanda Nath; Manasi Nath; Manendra Nath).

In this case, and the one following, the integrity of the sub-caste was maintained by the obliteration of the new member's past affiliation, a denial of their origin, of being anyone other than a Jogi Nath Kalbelia. In the case of wives from the *Chabdiyale* and the *Chakkiyale* sub-castes, their origins are not obliterated, but neither are they paraded, and are dismissed as unimportant. The children of the marriages are considered to be Kalbelias.

#### Adoption

Adoption is not usually a matter the *panchayat* is asked to consider because most adoptions are carried out not only within the sub-caste, but also within the *gotra*. Or adoption is not resorted to, because the husband marries a second wife and has children by her, and the sons of the second wife will be responsible for supporting their father and both wives in their old age.

Not only is the adoption of an outsider a possible breach in the integrity of the sub-caste, but other members of the man's natal family, especially his brothers, are likely to complain that part of the family's wealth will "go out", that an outsider will acquire inheritance and other rights. Where a childless couple are considering the adoption of a child, it is likely the husband's brother will insist one of his children be adopted, not an outsider, even if such a child were available.

But two or three generations ago, a child from outside the sub-caste was adopted by a Kalbelia couple. Which caste the boy originally came from is unknown – or perhaps now has been deliberately forgotten. He himself came to the Kalbelias when he was twelve or thirteen years old. The *panchayat* decided this boy could be accepted into the caste, and he was given the new *gotra* name of Kakra (which actually means cattle food). Later he was married, and now there are twelve or fifteen Kalbelia families with this name.

#### 8: 14 WRONG GREETING

This case illustrates how highly the Kalbelias value their sub-caste identity, loyalty, and recognition of each other as Kalbelias and Jogi Naths.

A Kalbelia man complained to the *panchayat* that another Kalbelia at the Gulab Marg tented squatter settlement when drunk greeted him with "Ram Ram!" instead of the caste's traditional greeting of 'adesh.' "We say 'adesh' to each other at big *panchayats* or weddings, and it should be said on all occasions."

Religious or esoteric meanings are assigned to this greeting:

'When *Nathapanthis* meet they hail each other with the word "*adesha*" which means "injunction". The hail must be considered esoteric', (Ghurye, 1964: 135). 'They greet each other with the mystic word "*Adesth*"... (which) means "Thou art the Brahman in form." (B. Bhattacharya, 1975: 732). Bahri gives it the more mundane meaning of "Order, command", (Bahri, 1983: 40).

"We greet outsiders by saying 'Ram! Ram!' That's why that man went to the *panchayat* and complained that the other Kalbelia had greeted him with 'Ram! Ram!' It made him seem he was from another caste to other people who were also there and heard. The Kalbelia felt insulted. If a Kalbelia

plays the *bin* outside your gate and I go out to him he should greet me with 'adesh' if he recognises I am a Kalbelia. That's why there was a big *panchayat* over this matter, because the drunken Kalbelia used the wrong greeting to another Kalbelia. That was the wrongdoing, not that he was drunk! He was forced to spend between four thousand to five thousand rupees over this matter, because of the *panchayat*. At the time of the incident both knew the other, but they were not wearing their ochre clothes," (the traditional dress of the *yogi*) "...but we all are *Jogis* and it is against our tradition to say 'Ram Ram!' to people inside the caste," (Bhuji Nath).

Terms of address are institutionalised as a means of defining and affirming the identity and status of both speaker and person addressed, and serve as a bridge between individuals and as 'emotional capital' which can be invested and manipulated in order to achieve a specific result, (Mehrotra, 1986:80). Greeting is normally of 'zero value', but when the rules of etiquette are infringed, the zero value disappears and,

'your conduct immediately begins to speak of your lack of respect for your friends with whom you refused to shake hands and for your hosts when you slumped into a chair without asking permission,' (Konratov, 1969: 31, in Mehrotra, 1986: 83).

Because the greeting 'adesh' is of religious and sectarian significance, the Kalbelia was possibly annoyed by a supposed slur upon his piety or religious sincerity, as well as the implication that he was not a member of the sub-caste, or had even been outcasted. As Mehrotra comments,

'A Hindi greeting phrase, because of its religious character, can easily be taken as a password among fellow believers since it cannot normally be used by members of other religious sects,' (Mehrotra, 1986:90).

#### 8: 15 CONCLUSIONS: THE PANCHAYATS OF OTHER CASTES

Relationships of power between people are revealed by patterns of disputes, and can illuminate their respective positions in society, (Hayden 1987: 269). Kalbelias have an ideology of equality within their sub-caste, at least of adult males. This equality is shown by the two sides to any case coming to the *panchayat* as equals, with equal rights to be heard. However, after a case is settled, the individual and their family who lost the case feel they have lost prestige. There is a certain amount of gossip about cases coming up at the *panchayat*, but after a case is settled, gossip about it is tacitly avoided, especially in the presence of parties to the case. Kalbelias are careful to avoid saying or doing anything to prolong that feeling of loss of prestige and equality. The sub-caste ideology requires that egalitarian peace and harmony be quickly restored, and this is implemented by the matter being tacitly ignored and allowed to fall into the background of everyday life. A vendetta is not pursued over the generations or even for a few weeks. Combativeness is a quality which is discouraged as reprehensible, as is physical confrontation. Where animosity lingers, it is comparatively easy for Kalbelias, because of their mobility, to avoid unpleasantness by moving away temporarily or even permanently.

Brothers rarely quarrel, it is claimed, and it seems to be true, probably because everyone has equal access to economic resources, although in recent years differential access has started to emerge with the hotel monopoly. As yet this is not perceived as disturbing the egalitarian ethic of the sub-caste. There is only a small amount of agricultural land owned by Kalbelias in two or three villages and it has been passed down through inheritance only once, without any of the disputes or complications which may conceivably arise later on.

The examples of matters the *panchayat* discusses are illustrative of the sub-caste's internal functioning, and articulation of relations with other castes and external authorities such as the Government and State, in a plural legal system. The Kalbelias' dispute procedures are almost virtually in an encapsulated sphere which scarcely impinge on the national system.

Opposed to the Kalbelias' attitude of peaceful co-existence with outsiders, the internal regulation by the *panchayat* displays a determination to keep outsiders at bay, and to exert a close regulation of the lives of sub-caste members, thus preserving the integrity of the sub-caste. The Kalbelias' *panchayat* and its decisions have a much greater effect on its member's lives than does the *panchayat* of a large caste such as the Brahmins. There cannot be a Kalbelia male over the age of twenty-five years who has not attended a *panchayat*, if only because sooner or later one is held in or near his village or camp, or someone within his extended family is directly affected by a case. But Brahmin friends tell me they have never attended a caste *panchayat* and know nothing of its doings, cases, dates or venues, and consider it unlikely it will ever have anything to do with them personally.

This apparent contrast between the strong well-organised state-wide *panchayat* system of the Kalbelias which impinges on every member of the sub-caste, and practically speaking, the non-existent *panchayat* of my Brahmin friends posed a question. Although the *panchayat*, both at caste and village level has an ancient history in India, how do other castes settle their internal problems nowadays, and what factors have enabled the Kalbelias to continue to employ their own dispute settlement procedures in face of changes to their lifestyle, and the possibility of requesting the State or other outside sources for adjudication?

The internal cohesion of the Kalbelia sub-caste is facilitated by being a small sub-caste within a bounded geographical area, (they say snake charmers outside Rajasthan are different, not of their caste), further broken down into smaller areas, such as Marwar or Mewar, with an organisation for consultation and interaction in place from ancient times, and still used extensively. Their previous nomadic habit brought opportunities for integration and communication with each other, often because of marriage between members of the sub-caste whose natal families originated from different regions.

Kalbelias also have a sense of a clear identity of being different from other people, displayed through their distinctive ochre-coloured dress, which signals their spiritual affinity, specialised knowledge and traditional occupation with poisons and snakes, especially cobras. Mandelbaum remarks that a farmer finds a closer understanding with another farmer of his own *jati*, (caste). How much more this must apply to the Kalbelia sub-caste with such an esoteric occupation as snake charmer! Also, most of an individual's social relations are within his own caste, including those of kin and friends. Many of the major experiences (marriages, funerals) of a person's life take place among caste-mates, and trips to other villages are usually to visit caste-mates, (Mandelbaum, 1968: 38). All this applies to Kalbelias.

Hutton comments that various writers have claimed:

"The lower the caste in the social scale, the stronger its combination and the more efficient its organization," (1961: 99, cited in Mandelbaum, 1961: 37).

There is some evidence to show that often this is true, although not the whole story. The Pallas, Untouchable

landless labourers of a village in Tanjore District, South India have their own *panchayat*, which works independently of the official *panchayat* of the village. Every attempt is made to arrive at a unanimous decision and avoidance of divisions or voting is sought... Although the *panchayat* does not have any legal authority, it is effective because of its social homogeneity and the pervasive nature of the moral bonds which unite its members, (Beteille, 1965: 162-4).

And in Totagadde in the Western Ghats of Mysore State, the formal caste organisation - both intravillage and intervillage, of the Untouchables, who are repressed by all other castes, is more tightly knit than that of the Shudras, while the latter's is more highly structured than that of the Havik Brahmins, (Harper, 1959: 451).

Gough suggests that a Brahmin landowner did not need to co-operate with his peers. Rather, he values the dependent relation of son upon father. But in low castes, a father's authority is broken after his son's puberty when the boy becomes an independent wage earner. Therefore the emphasis in a low caste is on the equivalence and solidarity of peers and the solidarity of the *jati* group and *jati*, (1956: 844-46). Kalbelia sons retain strong feelings of emotional attachment to their parents and frequently continue to live and work with their father and brothers, even after maturity. The father's authority continues to be respected, but the nature of their traditional occupations of snakecharming, with its dependence upon personal qualities of bravery and a steady hand, or begging, essentially an individual effort since more than one beggar at a time smacks of threatening behaviour, militate against the strong continuity of minute supervision (and surely fertile ground for disagreement?) exerted by the head of a family in a mercantile or landowning caste, for example. Gough's suggestion that the authority of lower caste fathers takes

second place to the equivalence of peers broadly holds true for the Kalbelia sub-caste, especially after marriage.

But contrary to Hutton's comment, it does not always follow that the lower the caste, the stronger their caste panchayat will be, or that higher castes do not seek help from those who, in the religious hierarchy at least, are their inferiors:

'The minority castes in Rampura, including the Muslims, seem only too ready to take their disputes to elders of the Peasant caste for settlement. The sentiment that disputes should be settled within the caste does not seem to be very strong. There is, on the other hand, a tendency for the poorer people to take their cases, even quarrels within the joint family, to their patrons, who are usually Peasants. Peasant elders may be called upon to decide cases in which all the litigants are Brahmans, or Untouchables, or Muslims.' (Srinivas, 1972: 18-19).

Here, the economic dominance of another caste is the explanation for the weakness of local internal caste dispute settlement.

Srinivas suggests that sometimes dispute settlement by people with whom a litigant has a face to face relationship, albeit from a different caste, is preferable to going to a caste panchayat, the members of which are unknown:

'By comparison with taking a dispute to the village elders, taking a dispute to the caste court is a procedure not unattended by an element of risk. A man can be certain of receiving consideration, if not kindness, at the hands of the elders of his own village; he cannot be as certain of it at the hands of his caste elders, some of whom belong to different villages and some of whom he does not know well.' (1972: 19).

This presupposes then, that personal relationships, shared experience, locality and background are more important than a somewhat dormant caste membership. It is

understandable when there are only a few families from a caste living in a village, that an individual may feel a better understanding will be obtained from local people, albeit from another caste, but who share the same territory and are better able to understand the background to a dispute. This situation has not yet arisen among the Kalbelias.

Rather than lowness of caste being the sole criterion for a strong caste *panchayat* as Hutton suggests, it appears the economic strength of a caste is often a decisive factor:

'In those Bengal villages where land ownership was more widely shared' (among members of the community) 'there was a corresponding increase in *panchayat* activity and effectiveness,' (Nicholas & Mukhopadhyay, 1964: 37; 39).

Epstein reports that the Untouchables of Wangala in Mysore have no *panchayat* organisation beyond the village, (1962: 118). Presumably when members of a caste are poor and totally dependent, its people cannot afford to move about beyond the village. The problem of free movement and communication with caste-mates hardly poses a problem to non-pastoral nomads, and Kalbelias are not totally economically dependent on any particular individual patrons, or on any specific locality.

The absence, or abdication of power of a former dominant authority can strengthen a previously impotent caste *panchayat*:

'While the authority of the Thakur *panchayat* began to grow weaker...' (attributed particularly to changes in the prestige system of the Thakurs and the formal superstructure of government)... 'Camars came to depend more upon themselves for settlement of their own disputes... Eating and drinking restrictions for the Camars have been tightened and are strictly enforced. Although Camars would formerly eat with and take water from other untouchables, they now punish such acts by outcasting. As the Camar caste has grown

stronger, outcasting by the Camar *panchayat* has actually become more frequent, (Cohn, 1969: 68-9).

When the dominant outside authority faded away, the previously dependent caste took steps not only to settle their own disputes, but to increase caste identity and solidarity.

It does not surprise me that non-pastoral nomadic peoples appear in the literature as possessing a strong caste *panchayat* system. They may have to be careful not to antagonise the sedentary people they move among, but they are not usually in one place long enough to be dominated by another group in a thorough-going systematic manner which would significantly affect their on-going internal dispute-settlement system. Berland reports Muslim Qalandars (entertainers with bears and monkeys) of Pakistan, who also travel and live in Rajasthan, to have a well organised *panchayat* system:

'Disputes and other social infractions that cannot be worked out informally by the camp members themselves are sent before the *birsadari panchayat*... The ruling on a dispute... is binding for the litigants. Punishment for most social infractions consists of public apologies, payment for damages, and fines, (Berland, 1982: 90).

The Gaduliya Lohars (nomadic blacksmiths) also have a strong *panchayat* system, although not so highly developed as that of the Kalbelias:

'There is no general *panchayat* for the whole Gaduliya Lohar caste in the State, but each group of about one hundred carts or a big band comprising of two or three sub-bands has its own caste *panchayat*', (Ruhela, 1968: 94). 'There has been a long-prevailing convention among the Gaduliya Lohars... that none of their cases should be taken by them to the police or law courts of the State. It must be decided by their own *panchayat*. The decision of the *panchayat* must be accepted otherwise the defaulters are subjected to ridicule, open contempt and abusive speech.

Or... they may be formally expelled out of the community, the caste *huqqa* may be denied to them... a word goes round that nobody should accept his children as partners in marriage,' (Ruhela, 1968: 97-8).

The Kalbelias are a community in the process of transition from nomadism to semi-sedentarism. As (or if) settlement becomes firmly established and nomadism abandoned, sub-caste members may lose their need or desire for loyalty to each other, and replace sub-caste ties by new economic and emotional attachments to their village. Then their strong sub-caste ideology and egalitarianism and present lack of dependence upon any one locality or patron may fall into abeyance, and their well-organised, effective and far-reaching *panchayat* system become redundant. But for now, their relatively small numbers and limited prospective marital partners, their feeling of being different, not only from wholly sedentary people, but from other nomadic peoples too, because of their strong identity and self-awareness of their uniqueness as Jogi Nath Kalbelias, together with their continuing partial mobility which gives them the ability to easily communicate with each other on a face-to-face basis, mean that their *panchayat* continue to function as a medium for continuing cohesion. The Kalbelias' *panchayat* touches the life of every sub-caste member at some time or other.

## CHAPTER NINE

### CONCLUSIONS

Kalbelias have been helped to extend their repertoire of economic strategies by Indian government intervention which offered non-pastoral nomads plots of land on which to build houses. Free schooling will also play its part, although very few Kalbelias as yet are sufficiently well-educated to take advantage of the quota system whereby a proportion of government jobs are set aside for candidates from Scheduled Castes or Tribes.

The Kalbelias have fitted easily into their villages. They bring information and money from outside, and provide expertise in the removal of lethal cobras, midwifery, indigenous healing services, training in the building trade, agricultural and other services. Unlike pastoral nomads dependent upon large herds, Kalbelias impose no extra burden on scarce local resources such as pasturage and water. But they are available as casual labour if needed, without depriving other local people of work, since Kalbelias are not solely dependent upon their home villages or its immediate area for employment.

The entertainment of foreign tourists in hotels and special 'Tourist Villages' enables the Kalbelias to acquire earnings essentially derived from overseas. Biman Nath's hotel franchise operation involves Kalbelias from a number of villages around Jaipur and beyond, some as far away as Marwar, and these monies are redistributed throughout several regions of Rajasthan, by way of expenditure in local village shops and markets.

Although Kalbelias are sceptical of the many myths and superstitions surrounding the cobras with which they are identified, and of Evil Spirit and Evil Eye, they are far from being cynical charlatans callously exploiting the poor, ignorant and superstitious. Their placebo medicines and rituals are often instrumental in bringing relief to their patients, and they perform the exceedingly dangerous public service of removing poisonous cobras from houses and public places at any time of the day or night.

Since they receive no retaining fee to be on call to deal with these emergencies, it is understandable that adult Kalbelias should beg in order to support themselves when their specialised services are not required. In the absence of long-term, dependable sources of income, begging by adults (usually males) enables the Kalbelias to send their children to school, rather than sending them out to work or to beg, as the children of some other castes are forced to do. Most Kalbelia boys attend school until they are fourteen years old, and some girls up to the age of ten.

Bose's Indian examples (1975:8) tend to support the notion put forward by Burnham (1979:351) that spatial mobility inhibits the development of centralisation and class stratification. Kalbelias emphasize the equality of adult males of the sub-caste. They do not have a leader, but a strong caste *panchayat*, which contributes greatly to the continuance of their self-confident identity. Although Kalbelias are not particularly ideologically attached to the notion of nomadism as a way of life, if they became completely sedentary this would probably lead to a curtailment of their strong sub-caste identity and internal dispute settlement system. Fewer economic strategies might be available to them, and they would probably develop a dependence upon the economic support of a local dominant caste. Over time, disputes would be likely to arise over

acquired or inherited land and other fixed property, and experience of the outside world and its opportunities become more limited. So far there has been no suggestion that they should entirely abandon their nomadism.

The nomadism of the Kalbelias was, and is, only an economic strategy, albeit a valuable one, unlike English Gypsies who derive an important part of their identity from their ideal of nomadism, even referring to themselves as 'Travellers', (Okely, 1983). The Kalbelias primarily identify themselves as Jogi Nath sanperas. Other people may be *jogis* (*yogis*), or Naths, or sanperas (snake charmers), but they are not all three. There are no other Jogi Nath sanperas but them. Furthermore, they are the only snakecharmers known as Kalbelias, a name used solely in Rajasthan, and which refers to their dominion over poison, which the god Shiva entrusted to their care. "Kai means death, and we Kalbelias control poisonous snakes and remove the fear of death by order of Shivaji." They are sincere in their belief that they provide a service to society with their snake bite cures and by making the cobra available for the devout to worship at *Nagpanchmi*. They display a responsible attitude toward their profession: they will not sell the poison they remove from cobras, and captive cobras are always eventually released back into the wild.

Kalbelias do not have particularly close relationships with other non-pastoral nomadic castes as a result of their own past or present nomadism. The bonds they share with the *Chakkiyale* and *Chabdiyale* arise because all are Naths and there are some marriage alliances between them. The Kalbelias are no more knowledgeable about other non-pastoral nomads than they are about the sedentary Hindu population. This is not an uncommon attitude, since most Indians display a marked lack of curiosity and knowledge about castes other than their own. A Brahmin civil servant said, "I do not know

where the Kalbelias are in the caste system, and it doesn't matter to me because I am only giving to them, not receiving anything," (that is, pollution).

Barth suggests that nomads may be outside society because their thoughts and experiences are very different from those of settled people, (1987: XI). But this is not borne out by the accounts written by themselves, for example, Boswell (1973), Reeve (1958), Whyte (1979), and Wood (1973). Sedentary Untouchables could also be expected to possess distinctly different social and cultural forms as a result of their low position in the Indian system, but Moffat found they are not detached or alienated from the "rationalisations" of the system and do not distinctly question or revalue the dominant social order. As Moffat says, this observation does not rule out the existence of certain types of cultural variation from caste to caste, but that variations exist within and must be interpreted within a framework of shared definitions and values, (Moffat, 1979: 3-4).

In fact Kalbelias share the same background knowledge and cultural values as other Hindus, including the general concern with the opposing poles of purity represented by the Brahmin and pollution represented by the Harijan. But the notion that Indian non-pastoral-nomads, because they are nomadic must necessarily and invariably be Untouchable, is incorrect. Nomadism per se is not polluting, (Bose 1975: 8), although caution may be exercised in interacting with any group of strangers, seemingly out of place, or lacking well-known antecedents.

Of far more importance than nomadism in the conception of purity and pollution is occupation and living habits. The Nandiyaile, essentially nomadic beggars with trained bulls, were considered to be a clean caste, even

though meat-eaters, until they lost status by embarking upon sacrifices of huge numbers of pigs and public consumption of pork, (Hayden, 1987: 278). An occupation or way of life which involves killing, lowers a group in the caste hierarchy. For example, the Kurivikarans catch and kill birds for sale and are considered to be low, (Moffat, 1979: 144). Kalbelias do not kill cobras; on the contrary, they afford protection from death by their removal of cobras and snake bite remedies. They have access to temples and wells, and Brahmin priests officiate at their marriages. They say they are a clean caste of Shudras.

It has sometimes been assumed that non-pastoral nomadism is inevitably associated with poverty, and any sedentary community however impoverished is likely to be substantially better off than any non-pastoral nomad. Malhotra and Gadgil argue that non-pastoral nomads are, by their very nature, at the penai end of a resources dependency chain, (1982), but I suggest that in India, especially in times of shortage, their mobility gives them advantages over low caste sedentary groups at the mercy of natural catastrophe or disadvantageous economic situations arising in their area. Birch's report that the nomadic Pardhis, beggar moneylenders, are always fed by sedentary villagers during times of shortage for fear they would refuse to advance further loans to buy needed market supplies (1971:89), refutes the universal application of Malhotra and Gadgil's argument.

Furthermore, Freeman in his study of Untouchables in South India found that most Untouchable families were employed fully for only three months of the year. 20% of the villagers lived precariously on the brink of starvation, a further 60% at a slightly more comfortable but still marginal state and only the highest 20% of the villagers where Freeman carried out his research were living

comfortably, without fear of starvation, (1979: 35). And according to Trivedi, many low caste village families are in such dire straits that they introduce their daughters to prostitution, (1977: 85). Being sedentary, of itself, is no insurance against economic problems.

However hazardous and uncertain the economic gain may appear to outsiders, non-pastoral nomads are nearly always peripatetic because it pays economically for them to be so. Salo posits that the social environment usually has overall stability, although specific opportunities and constraints may vary from locality to locality or through time. The probable yield of the environment is such that the manipulation of locales, social organization or specific strategies assures survival, sometimes even relative luxury, as in contemporary North America, (1987: 106). Nomadism enables peripatetics to exploit their resources efficiently, and they tailor their cycle of migration patterns according to their customers' special demands. Gmelch and Gmelch suggest that non-pastoral nomadism is a socio-economic niche, available anywhere a surplus is available for exploitation, allowing an infinite variety of specific strategies to be employed over time or in a given location, (1987: 135).

Non-pastoral nomads exploit social rather than natural resources, providing specialized products and services to sedentary populations, and sometimes to pastoralists, in exchange for food, money and clothing. They are part of a wider economy and fulfil a complementary economic role, (Mulcahy, 1980; Quintana & Floyd, 1976: 9-13; Salo, 1981: 71-98).

'Peripatetic groups, sparsely scattered through larger socio-economic systems, offer a wide range of services and products which are frequently socially and economically inappropriate in more sedentary communities... A single small town or village may not be able to support a full time metalsmith or a group of entertainers, whereas a network of

these sedentary communities can support such specialized activities,' (Berland, 1982: 57).

Non-pastoral nomads often have several choices of occupation at any given point of the cycle, and Kalbelias now have a wide variety of economic strategies, ranging from their traditional occupation as snake charmers and healers, through to entertainers, *rikshavalas*, and workers in agriculture and building. Nowadays some men also work as engineers, plumbers and electricians, as well as office workers, and as members of the police force and armed services.

Weissleder argues that nomads function as necessary adjuncts to sedentary societies, (1978: XVII). The Kalbelias not only maintain themselves, but in doing so, contribute to their society as a whole.

## APPENDIX I

### "THIS IS THE ORIGIN OF THE KALBELIAS":

#### STORIES OF KANIPA AND GORAKHNATH."

The Kalbelias say they are descendants of the followers of Kanipa, sometimes said to be one of the Nine Naths, or at least one of the eighty-four *siddhas* (yogic adepts). The Nath are a sect sub divided into *panths* (ways), each headed by an archetypal *guru*. Kanipa is the *guru* of the Kalbelias. There are many stories told about the rivalry between him and Gorakh Nath, which indicate a rivalry between two Nath schools. Although Kalbelias are popularly supposed to be followers of the left hand path, black magicians, one and all, these stories indicate that it was Gorakh Nath who was expert at magical practises, their *guru* Kanipa preferring to busy himself with meditation.

"There were Nine Naths and eighty-four *siddhas*...." so the storyteller begins.

Jellander Nath, Machindra Nath, Gorakh Nath and Kanipa. All these are *guru-bhai* and so is Hanuman because their father is Shiva and they were all born from Ajni: Kanipa from her ear, Jellander Nath from water (*jal*), Machindra Nath from fish (*machli*) and Gorakh Nath from cow-dung and Vishnu cleaned his hand with cow dung, the holy thing.

Kanipa had seven hundred and fifty visible disciples and another seven hundred and fifty invisible or secret disciples, but Gorakh Nath was the only disciple of Machindra Nath. Gorakh Nath was a very great *siddha* and had many magical and spiritual powers, *mantra* powers. In this way they became two religious communities. In early days

they were guarding the seat of the kings (fighting ascetics). Kanipa's disciples were the Kalbelias and they were there when Kanipa did penance and yoga. (This part of the Nath sect, the 'pa' sect is also known as the 'penance' panth).

Gorakh Nath's Guru, Machindra Nath, was kept prisoner by *tantrik* women, and Gorakh Nath was very busy with *mantra* and his ritual fire which was supposed to be kept constantly burning. Kanipa's guru, Jellander Nath, was sealed up in a well, taking *samadhi*. Kanipa called a big meeting, and so many saints from all the world came to that meeting that Kanipa's disciples went round all the villages to collect food for them.

While returning, some of the disciples met Gorakh Nath in the forest tending his ritual fire. For his fire, Gorakh Nath needed a cow-dung cake because that is very holy. "What do you have in your baskets?" he asked.

Kanipa's disciples decided to tease him. "We are carrying cow-dung to do *samadhi* in our village," they said.

To teach them not to be rude Gorakh Nath turned all the food into cow dung cakes. When they reached the village they found all the food had turned to cow dung in their brass pots. When Kanipa asked about this, the disciples explained they had met a *sadhu* doing *samadhi* in the forest. Kanipa realised this *sadhu* was Gorakh Nath, and requested he transform the cow dung into food. Gorakh Nath complied and was invited to join the dinner. But then Gorakh Nath said "But I am one - or more than one!" and he multiplied himself into many Gorakh Naths.

Then Kanipa's disciples muttered "This Gorakh Nath is showing his *maya* (illusions) here while his guru, Machindra

Nath is captured by the women of Kamrup. It is his duty to rescue his *guru* from danger, rather than wasting his energy on these gimmicks and showing off that he is a *siddha* or a great *guru*." So Kanipa said, "Go and rescue your *guru*, Machindra Nath who is kept prisoner by *tantrik* women in Kamrup country!" (a place in Assam famous even now as the place to learn magic).

Gorakh Nath retorted "A great many magicians and much knowledge is in Kamrup so he is there for good reason. And your own *guru*, Jellander Nath is stuck in a well - go and rescue him!" So both went to rescue their *gurus*.

Gorakh Nath knew that even birds that flew to Kamrup country never returned, so how could he go there and escape with his *guru*? But he was determined to go to Kamrup country and rescue Machindra Nath, so he set out. On the way, Gorakh Nath met a party of acrobats going to Kamrup and he joined their company as a singer and magician. He carried a drum so he could sing and dance and call out: "Awake Machindra, Gorakh has come!" Another version says Gorakh Nath requested snake charmers who were able to move about freely in this area to take him with them, disguised as Nandi the bull, vehicle of Shiva, and Gorakh Nath was protected by *mantra* and the Goddess Kali, the *shakti* (power) of Shiva.

When they got to Kamrup country/Kangrudesh, (euphemism for a sexual and *tantrik* place), Gorakh Nath used his magic to transform the guards on the gates into stones by saying a *mantra* of Kali. Gorakh Nath was there for eighteen days and nights before he found Machindra Nath, and he passed the time by sitting by a well and changing women who went there to draw water into donkeys. Their husbands asked Gorakh Nath what had happened to their wives, but Gorakh Nath said, "How do I know? I am an ordinary man and do not know about such things."

The acrobats performed each evening, and Gorakh Nath tried to find his *guru*. He went from door to door beating loudly on the drum and calling out "Oh Machindra, wake up! Your disciple Gorakh has arrived." He called out in the east and the west "What kind of sleep are you sleeping that you have forgotten everything? You are a great *guru* and I am your disciple!"

When Machindra heard the song and recognised Gorakh Nath's voice, the sleep of forgetfulness dropped away and he looked out of the window of the *haveli* (palace, big house) where he was living with *tantrik* women. "Oh Gorakh, you were the guard of my ritual fire and you have abandoned it to come here!" he cried.

Gorakh Nath said, "I want you to leave this place. I am going to hold a big dinner. The Nine Naths and all twelve *panths* will be there."

But Machindra Nath explained, "It is not possible. This is Kamrup country and these people are very knowledgeable about magic and can even change people into animals. I can't escape from this place where I have to do hard work, grinding crops and making flour. I am a prisoner and now I have two sons." (Evidently Machindra Nath knew nothing of Gorakh Nath's own *tantrik* abilities).

Gorakh Nath said he would perform magic to enable Machindra Nath to escape with his two disciples. "In the evening come to watch the acrobats, and bring your broom with you because there is a *mantra* in that broom." (This was probably made of peacock feathers, well known as part of a magician's magical paraphernalia).

In the evening, Machindra Nath came out with his two sons (sometimes described as disciples) and pretended to

watch the acrobats. He carried two bricks and was sweeping with his special broom and managed to slip away, sweeping all the while. Everything Machindra Nath swept with his broom was thrown back to cause confusion to the place where he had been kept prisoner. But despite this, the two *tantrik* women who had imprisoned Machindra Nath managed to follow him and Gorakh Nath and the two boys, disguised as hawks.

Still sweeping with the magic broom, at last Gorakh Nath and Machindra Nath reached the sea shore. They stopped sweeping and the two hawks swooped down. Gorakh Nath started to perform magic in order to destroy the two *tantrik* women, but Machindra Nath said, "If you kill them I will go no further with you, Gorakh Nath." So Gorakh Nath made one *tantrik* woman fall into the sea and the other on to the shore and they both became pox Goddesses - one became Sitala and the other became Bodrimata. "Both Hindus and Muslims will worship them throughout India," said Gorakh Nath.

They left Kamrup country, but disputed over the route they should take. Machindra Nath advocated a route that would take twelve months but Gorakh Nath said they should go by a way which would only take six months. Machindra Nath insisted on the long way and Gorakh Nath wondered about the reason for this. (Possibly this represents a divergence of opinion about yogic practises, the short risky method versus the longer, more conservative method).

Gorakh Nath and Machindra Nath were walking through the jungle and it grew dark, so they decided to stay the night there. Machindra Nath was busy with *samsdhi* (meditation), so he ordered his disciple Gorakh Nath to keep clean Nim Nath and Paras Nath, his two sons/disciples, because they were in the habit of going to latrine again and again. But all night these boys irritated Gorakh Nath, so he killed and cut them up and hung them in front of Machindra Nath. When Machindra

Nath emerged from his *samadhi*, he saw that his sons were killed.

"You have killed my sons. I am definitely not going a step further with you!" So Gorakh Nath performed magic and brought them back to life. (Eliade points out that an imaginary, dreamed or ritual killing and dismemberment and reconstitution is a key constituent in most Shamanic initiations, 1974: 34; 36ff; 53ff; 66; 108; 130; 428-9).

They continued their journey and reached Bharatri near Alcwa. Machindra Nath told Gorakh Nath to go to the village and ask for food, but he protested that he was too tired, so Machindra Nath's two disciples/sons, Nim Nath and Paras Nath went to the village instead.

There was a Jain house in this village, and a big dinner was being held, so the two boys went there to beg for food. A cow had died and the boys were requested to remove the cow, and because they were young and ignorant, they agreed to take the dead cow from the village. Nim Nath put a cloth over his mouth because the dead cow was stinking. When he returned to the Jain family's house in the village the cloth was sticking so tightly to his mouth he was unable to remove it. In return for taking away the dead cow the boys were given food.

In the meantime Gorakh Nath predicted to Machindra Nath that the boys were returning bringing only blood. When they arrived and their bag opened, only blood was to be seen. Gorakh Nath had magically changed the food to blood, but he complained to Machindra Nath that his disciples were disobedient: they were bringing blood in their bag and one had also put a cloth over his mouth. Gorakh Nath strongly represented to Machindra Nath that these disciples should be turned away, but Machindra Nath refused. He said to the

boys, "Go and take your bath and then tell me what happened."

The blood was stinking so much that the boy who had tied the cloth over his face fastened it even tighter around his mouth and nose, and the other boy took off all his clothes because they were covered with blood.

After their bath they related the whole story, and while they were doing so the Jain family's kitchen was covered with blood. The Jain family realised the two boys whom they had requested to remove the dead cow were not ordinary boys, but saints. So the Jain family came to Machindra Nath to ask forgiveness.

Machindra Nath said, "The boy who put a cloth over his face, he is your *guru*. And the boy who threw off his clothes, he is also your *guru*. One is Jain *guru* and the other is Sarowgi *guru*." (Jains of different sub-groups. Kalbelias say there is some connection between the Naths and the Jains).

So the boys were left to be *gurus* to the Jains, and Machindra Nath and Gorakh Nath travelled on until they came to some trees and a well. While Machindra Nath was away at latrine, Gorakh Nath noticed the two bricks in Machindra Nath's bag and threw them down the well. Machindra Nath suspecting that Gorakh Nath might do something wrong, hurried back. He saw the bricks were gone and was angry. "Yes I threw away the bricks. They are useless and you were burdened," said Gorakh Nath.

"But those bricks were of gold and you have thrown them away!" protested Machindra Nath.

"A *guru* should not be involved with worldly wealth! Those *tantrik* people in Kamrup country have affected you very badly!" replied Gorakh Nath,

"Without that gold how am I to provide a dinner for all the Nath *panth*? The gold was only for that purpose."

So Gorakh Nath did magic and turned a mountain into gold. But this did not appease Machindra Nath.

"Men will fight and kill to possess this mountain and all will blame me. I only require a little gold, not a whole mountain!"

So Gorakh Nath turned the mountain into Kashmiri glass stone which is used not for house-building or mundane purposes but only for temples and for the ear rings of Naths. (The huge ear rings which go through the cartilage of the centre of the ear are usually worn by followers of Gorakh Nath).

Then Gorakh Nath and Machindra Nath continued their journey and reached Chaksu near Jaipur. They went on to Nagarkot, where Kanipa and his disciples were trying to rescue Kanipa's *guru*, Jellander Nath, from the well where he had been taking samadhi. As fast as sand was removed from the entrance to the well, it appeared again. Gorakh Nath had caused this to happen with his *siddhis* (magical abilities) so Kanipa would be forced to beg Gorakh Nath for help.

"Only I can help your *guru* emerge from the well!" said Gorakh Nath, and threw a little sand in the well and said a mantra and the sand started to fall away. Then Gorakh Nath called "Oh *guru* come out!"

Jellander Nath looked out of the well and was surprised. "Where have you come from, Gorakh?"

"I have come to release you. Raise your hands and I will bring you out," said Gorakh.

So all four, Machindra Nath, Gorakh Nath, Jellander Nath and Kanipa were together in Nagarkot. Gorakh Nath called a religious meeting and invited all the disciples to stay for dinner afterwards. Tradition decreed they bring hollow gourds to eat from, and Gorakh Nath instructed them to cover their gourds and wish for the food of their choice. Everyone wished for delicious food, except Kanipa's disciples who were angry with Gorakh Nath and wanted to put him to the test. They wished for snakes and poison, thinking it would be impossible for Gorakh Nath to fulfil, but it was not, and their gourds were filled with poisonous snakes.

Gorakh was annoyed and cursed them. From that day forth they would have to carry poisonous snakes and use them to beg for their food because they had tried to spoil the dinner and his name. They were egotists trying to test a guru which was not in accordance with traditional rules. "You will go to jungles and hunt, you will beg from all castes!" So from that day to this, the followers of Kanipa have to carry the snakes and poison in their bags.

#### Other versions of the story:

As it was difficult to collect enough food from the villages for everyone at the meeting, Machindra Nath suggested "It is better that we provide ourselves with delicious food, for we all have magic powers." But Kanipa asked for poison, snakes, *bin*, baskets, meat, alcohol. This was done in the spirit of rivalry. And not only Kanipa, but also all of his disciples found the strange things in their

plates. Then Kanipa and his disciples felt ashamed and they fled from that village and into the jungle where they are still living.

Another version states that far from being shamed, Kanipa was the only one at the feast blessed by the god Shiva (Adi Nath, the first Nath) because he asked for snakes or poison at the dinner. This showed Kanipa was willing to take up Shiva's own occupation.

"The *guru* of our *panth* was Kanipa, and the *guru* of our *guru* was Machindra Nath. He was testing his disciples. He got two bottles of poison and asked them to drink it. Gorakh Nath refused to drink it, but Kanipa said, "I'll lose my good name and suffer degradation if I don't drink it," so he drank the poison. Shiva was so pleased, that he blessed Kanipa and his followers with our occupation, *kal*. That is when the caste of snakecharmers began. The village people call us Kalbelias and the city people call us sanperas and we're very proud that we can catch any snake they want," (Nala Nath).

## APPENDIX II

### POPULAR STORIES ABOUT SNAKES

Most of the stories the Kalbelias tell among themselves are of their guru, Kanipa and of his meetings with the famous Gorakh Nath, or pan-Hindu tales of the Gods. Kalbelias have an essentially pragmatic attitude towards cobras and other snakes. They capture and care for them to the best of their ability, and although they are aware there are myths and legends about the amazing powers of cobras, they do not believe in these things. Neither do they appear to know as many stories or superstitions about cobras as other people. For Kalbelias, a cobra is not a mysterious creature. However, I collected the following stories.

#### SNAKE STORY (told by Irya Nath, Chandiwar village)

This is an incident from Moonwar in Marwar. There was a cobra with a jewel inside its head and there was a king who said "To anyone who catches the snake I will give half my gold and kingdom." One family from my sub-caste went - one *sanpera* (snake charmer), one *sanperin* (his wife) and their child. The king explained the cobra was very dangerous and had already killed many buffalos, goats and sheep in the fields, and he asked the Kalbelias to catch it.

So the *sanpera* played his *bin* (snake pipes) and the cobra emerged from his hole with two gold coins and said "Keep these coins for playing the *bin*, but go away and don't disturb me!" But the *sanpera* had promised the king he would catch the snake, so he played his *bin* again and again until the cobra came from his hole again and offered another two gold coins to the *sanpera* to go away. But the *sanpera* refused the coins and continued to play the *bin* because he

was determined to catch the snake. Then the cobra was very angry and bit the *sanpera*. The *sanpera* died, but his wife the *sanperin*, was very clever, and knew what she should do to bring him back to life. She kept her husband's body in a cow dung cake and went to Kangrudesh in West Bengal. This is the place to go to learn magic, and she learned how to remove the snake poison.

After one month she returned from Kangrudesh and performed magic. She took seven earthenware pots and placed them around the snake's hole, and when the cobra came out hissing furiously, she bravely caught it an earthenware pot. The cobra begged to be released, promising her gold or to teach her even more magic, but the *sanperin* only wanted her husband to be restored to life. This the cobra did, and the *sanperin* and her husband left that place and that country and that King. But the cobra was still angry and cursed the King, who was destroyed by that curse. After this, no-one ever dared again to try to catch the cobra with the jewel in its head.

#### THE FOUR FRIENDS (told by Manendra Nath)

When I asked for a story with a snake in it, only Manendra Nath, from a group of five men aged from their late twenties to, I estimate, the early seventies, managed to remember one. The other men commented it was new to them.

There are four close friends, all from different castes. One boy is Brahmin, one boy is Rajput (warrior caste), one boy is Mena (a Rajasthan tribe), and one boy is Karti (Carpenter). The Rajput boy loved to hunt and the four friends spent most of their time hunting together in the jungle on horses. The Brahmin and the Karti boys' parents objected to the hunting because they are vegetarian, and they went to the King, father of the Rajput boy, to complain that his son was responsible for making their boys impure by

hunting, and that the Rajput boy and the Mena boy were persuading the Brahmin boy and the Karti boy to eat meat.

The King expelled his son from his family and the City of Jaipur for twelve years. He gave him only a black hunting dress and a horse. The parents of the other three boys did the same. When the four friends returned from hunting they saw a sign on the gates of the City telling them to take the black clothes and the horses and go away. So the King's son, the Rajput boy, led his friends into the jungle and they went to the river.

Many months ago a thief had left his footprints there. The Mena boy tracked these footprints and eventually they met some Mena people by the river, who asked what they were doing. The Mena boy said, "I am following the tracks of a person who passed this way twelve months earlier."

The Rajput boy said to one of the Mena men, "We have this Mena boy with us. Can you teach him to follow footprints in water also?" So the Mena man agreed to teach this to the Mena boy for one coconut and one rupee and twenty-five paise. The three remaining friends set off together, the Rajput boy, the Brahmin boy and the Karti boy, leaving the fourth friend, the Mena boy with the Mena man to learn how to track footprints in water.

On and on the three friends travelled, until they came across a very old dead cow surrounded by Brahmins, who were about to restore it to life by performing tantra-mantra. The three friends said, "We have a Brahmin boy among us. Can you teach him tantra-mantra?" The Brahmins agreed to teach the Brahmin boy tantra-mantra for one rupee, twenty-five paise and a coconut. The two remaining friends, the Rajput boy and the Karti boy went away together, leaving the Brahmin boy

with the Brahmin to learn about tantra-mantra and all other things.

The two friends travelled on to a place where a carpenter was constructing an aeroplane which can fly without an engine. They told this carpenter that one of the two friends was from the carpenter caste, and the carpenter agreed to teach the Karti boy how to make aeroplanes without engines for a fee of one coconut and one rupee and twenty-five paise. So the Rajput boy bade his Carpenter friend farewell and travelled on alone.

He travelled on and on until the sun was setting and it quickly grew dark. There was no village nearby but the Rajput boy saw a lamp glimmering in the darkness.

He made his way towards the light and came to a well with a big banyan tree beside it. At first he thought he saw a man there, but when he blinked and looked again he saw it was a *Nag* (male cobra) which swiftly went into a hole. When the *Nag* went into the hole the light disappeared because the light was coming from a jewel on the head of the *Nag*. It was late, so the Rajput boy decided to camp by the well for the night.

At dawn the boy awoke and the cobra emerged from its hole. The *Nag* said, "I will eat you because I haven't eaten anything for a long time. And I will eat your horse also." The Rajput boy said: "But I am the son of a king so you shouldn't eat me." But the cobra replied that being the son of a king didn't matter, he still intended to eat the boy. "But I will give you one chance to avoid this fate! Even so, I will end up eating you!"

While the *Nag* was speaking, the Rajput boy drew his sword and cut the cobra to pieces and snatched the jewel

from its head and put it into his pocket. Then he cremated the *Nag* and bathed in the well. He dived deep into the well, and the water went over his head, but still there was an air space all around him.

Down the well was the *Nag*'s house where a beautiful girl was living. This girl was the human daughter of the cobra. She was combing her hair, and when she saw the Rajput boy, she laughed and cried with joy and fear. She was happy to see him, but also afraid that if her father, the *Nag*, found the boy in his house down the well, he would kill the Rajput boy. But the boy took the jewel from his pocket and showed it to the girl and said, "I have already killed your father." The girl said, "Now we can live together happily, because if my father lived, he would never permit me to marry."

For some time they lived together happily. One night when the boy fell asleep, the girl decided to borrow the Jewel and use its power to keep the water away and to travel up the well and reach the outside world. Without this jewel they could not have lived inside the well, because the jewel kept the water away from them and allowed them to breathe.

While the *Nag*'s beautiful daughter was outside the well, a prince out hunting came to drink, and the girl hid, but in her haste she left one shoe behind. The prince noticed the shoe and thought what a beautiful shoe it was. "If the shoe belongs to a man I will treat him as a brother and if the shoe belongs to a woman I shall treat her as a wife," he said to himself. Then he returned to his Palace.

In every Palace there is a place where anger can be vented or grievances aired. If the Queen is angry with the King she can go there and the King has to also go there and listen to her. So the Prince returned to his Palace and went

to this special place and the King was informed. He went to this place to find out what the problem was. But the Prince said to the King "This problem you cannot solve." He showed the shoe to the King and said he'd found it near a well and had decided to treat the owner of the shoe as a brother or as a wife.

So the King enquired for the cleverest people in his country. The two most clever were women, one named Undi and the other Bokli. They were alarmed at being summoned to the King's presence. The King told them he had some important and difficult work for them. "Find the owner of this shoe and whether they are male or female, Queen or King, or whoever." Undi and Bokli asked where the shoe had been found, and were told near the well in a certain jungle.

Both women already knew of the *Nag* of the well and his daughter, and guessed the shoe belonged to the cobra's daughter. They thought they'd been given a difficult task, but it would be better to go to the well to try to meet the *Nag*, otherwise the King would kill them. So they went to the well and cried and wept. The *Nag*'s daughter heard their cries. At that time the Rajput boy was sleeping so she took the jewel and with its aid to keep the water away from her, she came out of the well. One of the women said to her "I am your father's sister and I have heard your father is gone." The cobra's daughter said she was right and told the pretend aunt that the Rajput boy had killed the *Nag*. "Now he is inside the well," the *Nag*'s daughter told them, "And whenever he wants to come out he just holds the jewel in front of him and the water runs away. We have put the jewel into a ring and I wear this ring whenever I want to come out of the well." So one of the women said "I will return in three days time to arrange the *nukta*," (death feast)

The *Nag*'s daughter did not tell the Rajput boy about this encounter, and the women returned to the King and asked for a ring which looked exactly like the one the snake's daughter had shown them.

The King gave them the ring, and the women returned to the well as arranged. To get through the water, the *Nag*'s daughter placed the ring on her finger. When she reached the top of the well, the woman pretending to be the girl's aunt managed to steal the true ring which she slipped on to her finger, and substituted the duplicate ring she'd obtained from the King. She flattered the girl by saying she was sure her husband was handsome and good. Then the woman returned to the King to tell him what she'd discovered, but she did not mention she had obtained the jewel.

In the meantime, the *Nag*'s daughter tried to go back down the well and when the waters didn't recede, realised she had been cheated of the true ring and began to cry.

At the King's Palace the woman advised the King's son that if he wanted the girl, to go to the well immediately. The girl was weeping at the top of the well when the Prince arrived. He took her away in his chariot saying he wanted to marry her.

The Rajput boy had told the *Nag*'s daughter the story of his three friends and that each one would take six months to learn their new tasks. The girl was clever. She said to the King "I can marry your son but first there are conditions. For six months I will provide wealth for all poor people. And I will have my own Palace."

The Mena boy had finished his learning and had learnt each and every thing about hidden footprints and tracks, so he started to track the footprints of his three friends,

thinking at first they were still all together, but the first person he came to was his Brahmin friend who had been learning tantra-mantra and had just finished his time, so they travelled on together.

They had originally been four friends so they set out to find their other two friends. They were afraid that perhaps the other two had died in the interim and the Brahmin boy said to the Mena boy, "If you find even a single footprint of each of our two missing friends I can cause them to be reborn again."

The next friend they found was the Karti boy who had been learning how to make an aeroplane, and he told them, "I have learned everything and I can make an aeroplane that can fly without an engine."

But still one friend was not with them. This was the Rajput boy. And he had died because he was trapped down the well and had no food to eat and no air to breathe.

The three friends reached the well with the Mena boy tracking the Rajput boy's footprints. He said, "Our Rajput friend must be down this well. He cannot be anywhere else because I can see his footprints go right up to the edge of the water." He also saw women's footprints and horses hoof prints, and marks made by the chariot and the King's son.

It was sunset, and they were all hungry. They went into the King's City to obtain food and went to the palace where the cobra's daughter was giving food and money to all poor persons. She didn't recognise them because although she'd heard their story from the Rajput boy, she had never seen them. When they asked for four portions of food she said, "Why are you asking for four portions of food when you are

only three?" But she gave them food, and they remembered their Rajput friend was dead, and were sad.

No one wanted to be the one to eat first, but if they didn't eat they would starve, so in spite of their sadness they decided they would all start to eat at the same time. The *Nag*'s daughter noticed everything, for she was serving the food herself. To get them alone she told them she would give them some new clothes at the back door. She asked, "Are you all brothers from one mother?" (real brothers) and they said "Yes," but this didn't confuse her because she had recognised them, and told them their story to prove it. She knew all their names, and said, "One friend is missing. And you are not from one mother. He is Karti, he is Brahmin, he is Mena. And the missing friend is Rajput. I will tell you where he is, but you will have to perform a difficult task and you may even lose your lives."

She told them everything that had happened and showed them the substitute ring. "Two women from the King's Court who are very clever, they have the ring."

Now the clever woman Undi had only one son and he had gone into the Jungle as a *sadhu*. This *sadhu*'s face was very much like the Brahmin's face so the Brahmin boy dressed up as a *sadhu* and went to the woman and told her "I am not going to be a *sadhu* any more. I am going to be a worldly man, so tell me what is the condition of our household." After some conversation he said, "All my baggage has arrived in a bullock cart."

It was dark, and the Brahmin boy, still pretending to be the woman Undi's son, asked for a light. There was an oil lamp but he pretended to accidentally spill the oil, but still asked for a light, saying there was something he wanted to inspect. There was no time to go to the market to

buy more oil, and in the hurry and bustle the pretend sadhu set up, the woman Undi brought out the *Nag's* Jewel Ring and gave it to the Brahmin boy she thought was her son, saying, "This is like a lamp. Take it and use it, but do not tell anybody about it." So the Brahmin boy went away pretending he was going to see to the bullock cart, but really he was changing the original *Nag's* Jewel Ring with the duplicate ring given him by the snake's daughter.

Undi was busy sweeping the house while the Brahmin boy met his other two friends and told them what he'd done. They went to the well and with the aid of the *Nag's* Jewel, dived safely through the water and saw their Rajput friend dead in his house in the well. The Brahmin boy said "In five minutes I will bring him to life again!" And he performed magic and the Rajput boy was alive again. And all four friends were together again and very happy. Then the Rajput boy asked his three friends if they had all learned their jobs. They said, "Yes, but what about you? You've been in a well! And it was difficult for us to reach you here!"

Then the Rajput boy realised his wife was missing. "Who has taken my wife away?" His friends said they had met his wife and she was safe. They gave him some of the food she'd given them, and he ate it where he was, in the well, while they made their plans. They decided to go away from that land, and the Karti boy should make an aeroplane. "Immediately! From that tree over there!" they demanded.

The Karti boy started to make the aeroplane, and the other three boys went to the *Nag's* daughter's palace. She was overjoyed to see her husband alive and well, but it was not safe for her to publicly recognise him. However, she could not resist providing special food for her husband, and the servant who was serving the food thought, "Special food for this man? Why?" and he was suspicious.

The *Nag*'s daughter said to her husband, the Rajput boy, "I will give you some new clothes, please come to the back door." When he went to the back door, the girl requested two aeroplanes to land on the palace roof that very night. One was already made because the Carpenter boy had started to make it when they had come out of the well. Now the Rajput boy asked him to make a second one.

That night the *Nag*'s daughter called the King's son, who with the aid of the woman Undi had tricked her out of the well. She promised to marry him the next day. But the *Nag*'s daughter requested that the last night before their marriage, he would send three maidens to stay with her, one Mena girl, one Karti girl and one Brahmin girl. The King's son agreed to this condition, and found the three most beautiful girls, and they went to spend the night with the cobra's daughter.

The *Nag*'s daughter told these three girls: "Tonight there will be aeroplanes, and you and I go to meet our God. But don't tell anyone this story, keep it secret!" The girls all agreed happily.

At midnight the aeroplanes were ready and in place on the roof of the Palace. Then the *Nag*'s daughter showed the Mena girl to the Mena boy and told her, "This is your husband." and similarly she introduced the Brahmin girl to the Brahmin boy, and the Karti girl to the Karti boy. Then all three girls and the *Nag*'s daughter went away in the aeroplanes with the Four Friends.

They reached the Four Friends' home City in the aeroplane and sent a petition to the King asking to be allowed to stay, and he agreed they could live in the City with their wives. So they all married traditionally, and the

four friends lived happily ever after with their wives, especially the Rajput boy and the *Nag*'s daughter.

"This is a popular story and lots of people know it, both Kalbelias and people from other castes," (Manendra Nath).

#### FILM: NAGINA

The Kalbelias do not subscribe to popular beliefs about the ability of cobras to change into human form or to be found carrying jewels on their heads, and do not have any such stories, special only to them. The (few) stories they told me are also known by other castes. When I asked the Kalbelias for snake stories I was usually told the film story of *Nagina*, the theme tune of which they play when they are begging round the streets.

"*Nagina*" is a very popular Hindi language film, of which there are three versions made over the last 30 years or so. The story is based on the Hindu myth of cobras who are able to transform themselves into a man or woman.

A woman took her six year old son to worship at a Shiva Temple. He wandered off and was bitten by a cobra, which was then killed. The boy was already dead when sadhu Bhairon Nath arrived. He is a snake charmer dressed in black and carrying a trident (showing he is a devotee of the God Shiva). He succeeds in reanimating the boy's body and his mother is grateful because he has saved her son from death.

The boy is sent abroad to be educated and returns home when he is twenty-one. His mother and deceased father's friend have arranged a marriage between the son and the friend's daughter, but in the meantime the boy visits the Shiva Temple where he was bitten by the cobra all those years ago, and is captivated by a young woman whom he meets

there. He doesn't realise she is a *Nagina* (female cobra) in human guise, and widow of the cobra that bit him. The audience at this stage suspects the *Nagina* is intent upon avenging the death of her cobra-husband. The *Nagina* and the young man marry. His deceased father's friend is furious about the insult to his daughter and several times tries to kill the son, but each time a cobra bites the father and his henchman.

The marriage is proceeding happily until *sadhu* Bhairon Nath visits the house, accompanied by orange-clad attendants each playing a *bin* (snake pipe). *Sadhu* Bhairon Nath tells the boy's mother he can smell the presence of a cobra in the house, and offers to draw it out into the open so it can be captured.

The *sadhu* and his attendants play their snake pipes, and the *Nagina* fights the strong magic of the music which is forcing her to reveal herself in cobra form. This involves a great deal of dancing while her eyes turn from brown to blue as she struggles against the powerful snake charmer, who quickly realizes it cannot possibly be an ordinary cobra in the house. He catches a glimpse of the wife-*Nagina*, and denounces her to her mother-in-law who collapses in terror when informed her son is married to a *Nagina*. A *Nagina* must take on the guise of a cobra at least once every twenty-four hours, so the mother-in-law keeps watch, and to her horror, sees her daughter-in-law turn into a cobra. She tells her son, who shows her his wife in bed in human form, sound asleep. But as soon as her husband leaves the bedroom, the wife-*Nagina* sits up in bed and informs her mother-in-law in chilling tones that she truly is a *Nagina*.

The next scene takes place in the Shiva Temple as the wife-*Nagina* and *sadhu* Bhairon Nath confront each other. The *sadhu* saved the life of the little boy all those years ago

by reanimating his dead body with the spirit of the *Nagina's* cobra husband, in order to gain a monetary reward. The *Nag* (male cobra) is trapped in the boy's body and has forgotten his former existence, but when he met the *Nagina*, in human guise, at the Shiva Temple, where they had lived together in the form of cobras, his love for her rekindled. The *Nagina* had to continue to assume the guise of a human, because the *Nag* still did not remember anything of his former life. The snake-charmer is discredited, the husband (in human form) arrives, and fights and kills the *sadhu*.

My interpreter said newspapers reported that when this film was first shown, the sound of the *bin* attracted many snakes into the cinemas. I asked the Kalbelias their opinion of the film:

"This is a film, not real life! But before people didn't believe we could remove poison and all that. Now they do, so the film has improved our image," (Bhadra).

"According to religion, after the cobra dies, it worships Shiva for more than a hundred years near the sandalwood trees and it changes its shape from day to day, into any animal, a cow, buffalo, ox or even a bird or a human. And it's a holy thing. There is a special snake which has a diamond on its head and it can see by the light of its rays. This applies to any black cobra. After hearing this religion, people make films. The girl in the *Nagina* film, could change into any guise because she worshipped for one hundred years," (Naia Nath).

Although Kalbelias are aware of beliefs that a cobra can speak and tell its own story and take on the guise of humans, they say "These are not beliefs among ourselves, we don't know them. They are just stories, not truth!"

### APPENDIX III

#### LIST OF GOTRAS AND SUB-GOTRAS

This list was compiled with the help of several people, but is thought to be incomplete.

1. Barmanyar
2. Devra
3. Chauhan
4. Solenki
5. Bati
6. Rator
7. Sarsar
8. Gachat
9. Deran
10. Bala
11. Dagla
12. Golani
13. Shikari
14. Nagani
15. Boggya
16. Byal
17. Makawana
18. Mer
19. Panwar
20. Kakra
21. Gargriya
22. Atwai
23. Panibel
24. Dehyia
25. Sindai
26. Gardi
27. Lawa
28. Manani

29. Mengani
30. Dinani
31. Likmani
32. Hirani
33. Modhani
34. Kormuka
35. Ghoriwale
36. Durriwale.
37. Jaki
38. Mata ki pujari
39. Gobriya Chauhan

APPENDIX IVGLOSSARY \*\*

abichar / abhicar - an incantation to destroy.

adesh / ades - traditional greeting between Kalbelias, as members of the Nath panth. Lit: instruction; command.

alakh - not perceptible, hence formless, ie. the Absolute Brahmin.

alu / alū - potato.

apkari / apkārī - harm, black magic.

ata / ḥṭā - flour, or ball of dough.

ayatar - avatār - incarnation of a god.

badmash / badmās - scoundrel.

bahin - sister.

bahurupiya / bahurūpiyā - mimic, uses disguises.

bap / bāp - father.

barat / barāt - groom's party

bechna / becnā - to sell.

beta / betā - son.

beyaji / bevājī - father-in-law.

bhajan - devotional song.

bhasha / bhāṣā - language.

bhikhari / bhikārī - religious beggar.

bhiksha / bhiksā - aims given in non-ritual contexts to yogi and wandering ascetics.

bhut / bhūt - troublesome ghost.

bigha / bīgnā - a measurement of land equivalent to five-eighths of an acre.

bij / bij - seed mantra.

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Footnote \*\* Words first appear in the format contained in the text of the thesis. The second version is transliterated (by hand, due to the limitations of my word-processing software) with diacritical marks according to the system outlined by Basham (1954).

bin / bīn - snake charmer's pipes.

biri / bīrī - cigarette made from rolled tobacco leaf.

buri atma / buri atmā - evil spirit.

buri nazer / buri nazar - evil eye.

Chabdiyale / Chabdivāle - member of the basket-makers sub-caste.

chach / chāch - buttermilk.

chadar / cādar - sheet.

Chakkivale / Cakkivāle - member of the grindingstone makers sub-caste.

chakra / cakra - one of the seven wheels of energy believed by yogis to be found in the body.

chapati / capātī - thin, round bread.

chay / cāy - tea.

chayvala / cāyvālā - man selling tea.

chela / celā - a guru's pupil.

chilam / cilam - apparatus for smoking tobacco.

choli / colī - short blouse or bodice.

chota / chotā - small.

dahej - bride's dowry.

dahi / dāhī - curd.

dal / dāl - lentils

dan / dān - ritual donation.

dari / dārī - rug.

desh / dēs - country

dharm - religion; religious duty.

dharm bahin - religious sister.

dharm bhai / dharm bhai - religious brother.

dhola / dholak - small drum.

dhoti / dhotī - length of cloth, usually white, worn by men, wound round the body with the ends drawn up between the legs.

dudh / dūdh - milk.

fitkari / fitkārī - alum.

ghaghra / ghāghrā - skirt.

ghar - house, home.

gharbari / gharbārī - householder.

gharjayai / gharjavāī - son-in-law residing in wife's parents' house.

ghat / ghat - a bathing place (generally with stairs) at the bank of a river or tank.

ghi / ghī - clarified butter.

ghora pachad / ghorā pachad - Kalbelia name for pink, non-venomous snake.

gotra - extended family; clan; patrilineage.

gur / gur - boiled sugar cane juice.

guru - religious instructor.

guru-bhai / guru bhāī - disciples of one guru

halaya / halavā - celebratory dish made from flour, ghi, honey or sugar, raisins and coconut.

haldi / haldī - turmeric.

har - Kalbelia term for brideservice.

haveli / havelī - palace, big house.

hijra / hijrā - man who dresses and acts like a woman.

huqqa / huqqā - hookah

jadu / jādū - magic.

jajman / jajmān - donor of dan.

jal - water

jantra / jañtrā - any article which, after rituals are carried out and mantras spelled becomes imbued with one hundred mantras and is therefore jantra; an amulet.

jaributi / jarībūtī - herbal medicine.

jati / jāti - caste; endogamous group, generally commensal and sometimes associated with a particular occupation.

jayai / javāī - son-in-law.

jholi / jholī - large cloth bag.

jivatma / jivātmā - individual soul.

jogi / jogī - N. Indian vernacular for yogi. Also used by Kalbelia woman to address her husband.

**jogini / jogīnī** - N. Indian vernacular for yogini, a female practitioner of yoga. Also used by Kalbelia men to address their wife.

**kachchi / kacci** - unmade, unfinished, rough.

**kachchi basti / kacci bastī** - squatter settlement.

**kaddu / kaddū** - pumpkin, gourd.

**kafan** - shroud.

**kajal / kājal** - black eye-liner.

**kal / kāl** - poison, death, time.

**kala jadu / kālā jādū** - black magic.

**kangan / kañgan** - coloured thread tied before wedding ceremonies.

**kanya dan / kanyā dān** - the gift of a virgin - daughter given in marriage.

**karia / karā** - heavy silver anklets.

**kariah / karāh** - a pudding made from rice or flour, sugar and ghi.

**kasht / kast** - affliction.

**kenchuli panth / keñchulī pañth** - a gathering of people who perform sexual rituals.

**kundalini / kundalinī** - fire-energy; a spiral of energy which lies like a coiled snake at the base of the spine.

**kurta / kurtā** - man's loose shirt worn over dhoti or lungi, with vents either side.

**kurti / kurtī** - woman's low-necked, sleeveless over-tunic.

**lungi / lungī** - a length of white or coloured cloth wrapped around a man's waist and overlapped at the front, covering his legs down to the mid-calf.

**ma / mā** - mother.

**machli / machlī** - fish.

**maharaj / mahārāj** - a term of respect.

**mahayogi / mahāyogī** - Shiva, the supreme yogi.

**mangna / māñgnā** - to beg in a worldly manner, not as a religious beggar.

mangta / mañgtā - beggar, mendicant.

mantra / mañtra - words or sounds of compelling power. A verse of any of the four Vedas; a charm; incantation; advice; exorcism; sorcery; to give spiritual instruction; to cast a spell.

mantra siddhi / mañtra siddhi - accomplishment, result of the utterance of a mantra.

masala / māsālā - spices.

mataji / mātājī - respected mother.

matka / maṭkā - earthenware pot.

maya / māyā - illusions.

mayra / māyrā - articles given by a woman's natal family to her and her marital family on certain occasions, such as after childbirth or when her children marry.

michala - Kalbelia word for snake.

milan - meeting, union.

milna / milnā - to meet.

moksha / mokṣa - release from the cycle of rebirth; liberation.

mol - price.

muklaya / muklāvā - ceremony of the first calling of the girl from her family after marriage.

nāg / nāg - male cobra

nagina / naginā - female cobra who can assume human form; precious stone, gem, jewel.

nagpanchmi / nāgpañcī - festival when cobra is worshipped.

nagvala / nāgvālā - cobra man.

nahin / nahiñ - no.

Nandin - the bull, vehicle of Shiva.

nandiyala / nandivālā - one who attracts donations by leading about a bull.

nata / nātā - relationship.

Nath / Nāth - literally means 'Lord, Master'.

Nathapantha / Nāthapañtha - the Nath sect.

nim / nīm - nīm or margosa tree.

nirgun / nirgun - those who believe that spirit has no form.

nugra / nūgrā - not good; term of reference used by Kalbelias to denote non-docile cobras.

nukta / nuktā - feast held in honour of the dead.

odhani / odhani - short veil.

pagri / pagrī - turban.

paisa / paisā - one hundredth part of a rupee.

pakka / pakkā - well made, finished, complete, good, superior, ripe.

pan / pān - betel leaf.

panch / pañc - juror; man invited to be one of five panchs who hand down decisions on cases brought to the panchayat.

panchayat / pañcāyat - caste council/court.

panda / pañdā - sacred specialist who helps in the worship of the deity.

pandit / pañdit - learned man/Brahmin priest.

pankha / pañkhā - fan.

panth / pañth - way, sect, order.

panthi / panthī - sectarian; follower of same religion.

panyala / pānvālā - seller of pan and other requisites.

pap / pāp - sin, evil.

paramatma / paramātmā - universal spirit.

patra / pātra - 'worthy vessel'; worthy recipient of dan.

pisacha / pisāca - demon.

pitaji / pitājī - respected father.

pitr - an incorporated ancestor.

prasad / prasād - food offered to the deity.

pret - unquiet, malicious ghost of one who died an untimely death.

pujan / pūjan - worship; ritual to show respect, homage and devotion.

raksha bandhan / raksābañdhan - festival held on full moon day in July-August when sisters tie a sacramental

thread on the wrists of  
their brothers and are  
guaranteed protection.

Ram Ram! / Rām Rām - greeting, invoking the God Ram.

rikshaw / riksā - rickshaw.

rikshayālā - driver of a rickshaw.

rit / rīt - tradition. Kalbelias use this word to mean  
bridewealth or brideprice.

roti / rotī - bread

rupaya / rupayā - one rupee. Indian unit of currency.

sabzi / sabzī - vegetables.

sadhana / sādhanā - the means of effecting or achieving a  
particular end.

sadhu / sādhu - monk.

sagai / sagāī - engagement. Pukka sagai - formal engagement.  
kachchi sagai - an informal engagement, an  
"engagement to be engaged".

sadguna / sadgun - people who believe spirit is in  
everything and takes every kind of form.

samadhi / samādhi - meditation; trance.

sanket / sañket - danger.

sannyasi / sañnyāsī - ascetic.

sanpera / sañperā - snakecharmer

sanpera bhasha / sañperā bhāṣā - private language or jargon  
used by Kalbelias before  
outsiders to preserve  
secrecy or privacy.

sanperin / sañperin - female snakecharmer or wife of a  
snakecharmer.

sanpyala/yali / sañpvālā/vālī - snake man/woman.

sari / sārī - Indian woman's dress of one piece of long  
material wound round the body.

sati / satī - immolation of widow on her husband's funeral  
pyre.

satsang / satsaṅg - a gathering of people for a night of  
devotional songs.

sehra / sehrā - gold cords wound round a wedding turban or veil.

shadi / sādī - marriage.

shakta / sākta - doctrinal text.

shakti / sakti - divine power or energy personified as female and dynamic as distinct from its male or passive aspect of Shiva.

sharab / sārāb - alcohol.

sharabi / sārābī - alcoholic.

siddha - adept, perfected yogi, magician, saint who lived a successful tantrik life. One who possess siddhis.

siddhi - magical or spiritual ability. Occult power.

Accomplishments dependent upon the perfect practise of yogic techniques or recitation of mantras.

sindur / sindūr - vermillion colour.

sirpanch / sirpanč - head of panchayat.

sos - Kalbelia term for brideservice.

stridhan / strīdhan - female property.

sughria / sughra - term of reference used by Kalbelias to denote docile cobras.

supari / supārī - areca nut/betel nut.

tantra - charm; incantation.

tantras - doctrinal texts also called Shaktas.

tapasya / tapasyā - heat produced by austerities.

tej - fiery energy; glow.

thali / thālī - large metal plate.

til - sesamum.

tilak - auspicious mark on the forehead made with sindur (vermillion).

tisra / tisrā - literally third. Ceremonies carried out on the third day after death.

tola / tolā - measurement of weight. One tola equals ten grams.

toran - ceremonial wedding archway.

totka / toṭkā - object used to transfer illness or inauspiciousness from one place to another

or from one person to another, commonly placed at the crossroads or at a village boundary.

**tu / tū** - thou: second person familiar, denoting intimacy, also used in addressing the deity, children, or to show contempt.

**yogi / yogī** - practitioner of yoga. 'Jogi' in the North Indian vernacular.

**vala/vali/vale / vālā/vālī/vāle** - in this thesis, a man, woman, persons, eg. Marwaryala: a man of Marwar.

**Veda** - Hindu scriptures.

**zamantdar / zamāntdār** - bailor, person who stands surety for a party's appearance at a panchayat.

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