

**Sons of Krishna: the politics of Yadav  
community formation in a North Indian town**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is an ethnographic exploration of the inter-locking relationships between politics, popular democracy, religion and caste/community formation in a North Indian town. This study is conducted through an exploration of the political rhetoric and political participation of a community of Yadavs in Mathura town, western Uttar Pradesh. The Yadavs were traditionally a low- to middle-ranking cluster of pastoral-peasant castes that have become a significant political force in Uttar Pradesh (and other northern states like Bihar) in the last thirty years. The analysis of Yadav political culture involves the historical exploration of varying local conceptions of caste, race, primordialism, socio-religious segmentation, factionalism, history/myth, politics and democracy. Throughout the thesis runs a concern with the elaboration of a theoretical framework which makes sense of the transformation of the caste system, and its interrelations with modern politics and Hinduism. It is concluded that in order to understand contemporary processes of ethnicisation of caste, attention should be paid to descent and kinship, and to the ways in which the 'traditional' caste ideology of hierarchy has been usurped by the religious ideology of descent. The thesis demonstrates how the successful formation of a Yadav community, and the political activism of its members in Mathura, are partly linked to their descent view of caste, folk theories of religious descent, horizontal caste-cluster social organisation, marriage patterns, factionalism, and finally to their cultural understanding of 'the past' and 'the political'. It is concluded that Yadav socio-religious organisation directly and indirectly helped the Yadav community to adapt to the modern political world. In so doing, the political ethnography of Mathura Yadavs sheds light on why certain groups are more apt to successfully exert their influence within the democratic political system, and why others are not, regardless of the fact that in many instances they have similar economic and political incentives and resources.

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## **Orthography and transliteration**

In the transliteration of Hindi words I have given preference to the sound of the words rather than to the rules of Sanskrit orthography. As a result, I have omitted the final 'a' from a number of words. The English plural 's' is often added to Hindi words to aid the flow of the text. For words widely used in the Indological literature and works on Hinduism however, I have chosen the textual written form rather than the spoken one. The glossary contains the words that appear several times in the main body of the text and for these, diacritical marks are given. Words used infrequently are translated as they arise, and in some cases this translation is repeated in subsequent chapters to aid the reader.

## Glossary of Selected terms

### GLOSSARY

<i>adharma</i>	unrighteousness, immorality
<i>akhārā</i>	wrestling school
<i>āllah</i>	story in the form of ballad
<i>ālah</i>	alcove
<i>avarṇa</i>	outside varna hierarchy
<i>avatār</i>	the incarnation of a deity (especially Vishnu)
<i>bābā</i>	respected man, used also to refer to a <i>Sadhu</i> or holy man
<i>badmāsh</i>	a person with loose moral character
<i>bare jāti</i>	big castes (refers to upper castes)
<i>bāgicā</i>	garden
<i>bal</i>	physical strength, brute force
<i>bali</i>	sacrifice, especially animal sacrifice
<i>bīr</i>	deified hero (also <i>vir</i> ), warrior
<i>bhagat</i>	devotee, a vaishnava ascetic, medium
Bhagavad Gītā	Song of the Lord, celebrated section of the Mahabharata, Book 6.
Bhāgavatapurāṇa	10 <sup>th</sup> century <i>Purana</i> , about the life of Krishna
<i>bhagwān</i>	god
<i>bhakti</i>	devotion, love (especially for a deity)
<i>bhāng</i>	a concoction made from marijuana leaves, mixed with milk, sugar, almonds and spices
<i>bhavan</i>	public building, palace
<i>bhrashtāchār</i>	corruption
<i>bhopā</i>	ascetic
<i>Brajbhāṣā</i>	dialect spoken in the area of Braj
<i>Brajbāsi</i>	inhabitant of Braj
<i>capātī</i>	bread
<i>caudhrī</i>	headman
<i>chandravamś</i>	the line of the moon
<i>choṭe jāti</i>	small (low) caste

<i>cor</i>	thief
<i>dūdh</i>	milk
<i>dalāl</i>	middle man
<i>dangal</i>	wrestling tournament
<i>darśan</i>	sight, vision of deity or image
<i>dargāh</i>	tomb of saint (Muslim)
<i>devī</i>	goddess
<i>dharma</i>	religious and moral duty
<i>dharamshālā</i>	rest house for pilgrims
<i>dil</i>	heart
<i>gap</i>	gossip
<i>gap-śap</i>	to gossip
<i>gārī-vala</i>	conductor, driver
<i>gaunā</i>	cerimonial
<i>gāyatrī mantra</i>	sacred formula
<i>ghī</i>	clarified butter
<i>ghāt</i>	a segment of river frontage
<i>ghosī</i>	cowherd, milkman, a man of the Ghosi community
<i>ghūs</i>	bribe
<i>gonḍā</i>	gangster/muscleman (throughout the text <i>goonda</i> )
<i>gopī</i>	cowherdess and lover of Krishna
<i>gopa</i>	protector of cows
<i>goshālā</i>	cow protection shelter
<i>got</i>	clan, an exogamous kinship group
<i>gumbad</i>	a cupola, dome-shaped figure
<i>halwaī</i>	sweet-maker
<i>hukkā</i>	a water tobacco pipe
<i>itihās</i>	history
<i>izzat</i>	honour, prestige, reputation
<i>jagā</i>	genealogist
<i>jājmānī</i>	system of patron-client relations
<i>janmābhūmi</i>	birthplace
<i>janmāṣṭamī</i>	the birthday of Krishna
<i>jāti</i>	caste
<i>jātivād</i>	casteism

<i>kaccā khānā</i>	boiled food consumed within the family and with caste members
<i>kathā</i>	story
<i>krōre</i>	ten million (in the text <i>crore</i> )
<i>Kṛṣṇa</i>	eighth <i>avatar</i> of Vishnu (Krishna throughout the text)
<i>Kṛṣṇavamś</i>	the dynasty of Krishna
<i>khīr</i>	rice pudding like drink
<i>kul</i>	lineage, tribe, community
<i>kuldevī</i>	clan or family female deity
<i>kuldevtā</i>	clan or family male deity
<i>kusthī</i>	competitive wrestling
<i>lākh</i>	one hundred thousand
<i>Lok Sabhā</i>	parliament
<i>līlā</i>	divine plays
<i>laḍḍū</i>	flower sweets often used as prasad
<i>lakh</i>	one hundred thousand
<i>lāthī</i>	bamboo stick
<i>lingam</i>	phallic form of Lord Shiva
<i>Mahābhārata</i>	longer of the two great Hindu epics
<i>mān-sammān</i>	dignity
<i>mūrti</i>	statue, image of god
<i>melā</i>	fair
<i>mohallā</i>	neighbourhood
<i>muṇḍan</i>	shaving ceremony
<i>Nandāvamś</i>	the dynasty of Nanda
<i>netā</i>	political leader
<i>pahalwān</i>	wrestlers
<i>pūjā</i>	worship
<i>pakkā khānā</i>	cooked or fried food normally served at feasts
<i>panchāyat</i>	council
<i>paṇḍā</i>	pilgrimage or temple priest
<i>paramparā</i>	tradition
<i>pardā</i>	veil, seclusion, avoidance behaviour especially of married women
<i>pargana</i>	subordinate unit in revenue administration

<i>parivār</i>	family (also lineage)
<i>peṭ</i>	womb
<i>prasād</i>	blessed food given to the worshippers after <i>puja</i> has taken place
Purāṇa	myth (or collection of myths) about deities
<i>puṇimā</i>	the night of the day of full moon
<i>rahan-sahan</i>	lifestyle
<i>rāj</i>	kingdom
<i>sabhā</i>	association
<i>sādhu</i>	ascetic
<i>samādhi</i>	shrines dedicated to ascetics
<i>samāj</i>	community and society
<i>samājwadi</i>	socialist
<i>sammān</i>	respect, honour
<i>sammelan</i>	association, meeting, convention
<i>sampraday</i>	tradition, religious order (or sect) following its own tradition
<i>sarkār</i>	State
<i>shakti</i>	divine power
<i>sudarśan cakr</i>	name of the circular weapon or discus of Vishnu-Krishna
<i>suryavamś</i>	the dynasty of the sun
<i>svarūp</i>	essential form of a deity
<i>svabhimān</i>	self-respect
<i>tapasya</i>	ascetism
<i>tappa</i>	cluster of villages acknowledging the supremacy of one among them
<i>taslā</i>	a brass or iron vessel
<i>thānā</i>	police station
<i>ustād</i>	guru, teacher, one who is proficient in a particular art or skill
Vaiṣṇava	worshipper of Vishnu (in the text Vaishnava)
<i>varṇa</i>	one of the four social classes (Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras)
<i>vīrya</i>	manliness, heroism; mail seed, semen
<i>vaṃśa (bams)</i>	line of descent (in the text <i>vansh</i> )
<i>videśhī</i>	foreign

<i>vikās</i>	development
<i>virah</i>	separation, loneliness, typical Ahir songs (in the text <i>viraha</i> )
<i>Yagya-havan</i>	Vedic fire sacrifice
<i>Yamunā</i>	with the Ganges one of the two great sacred rivers that flows eastward across the plains of North India.
<i>zamīndār</i>	landlord



# INTRODUCTION

## About this thesis

This thesis is an ethnographic exploration of the emergence of a community and ethnicised political unit in relation to the politicisation of caste and religion in a North Indian town. Caste and politics have been a recurring theme in anthropological studies in India (Srinivas 1962). Most of the literature on the topic was written, however, between the 1950s and 1970s in the years following Independence. This thesis reflects a renewed anthropological interest in exploring how caste is responding to recent political changes in the Indian political climate. In the 1980s and 1990s two major novel political trends developed: the upsurge of Hindu nationalism (van der Veer 1994; Jaffrelot 1996; Hansen 1999) and the political mobilisation of lower castes (Y.Yadav 1997; Hasan 2000). It is on the latter phenomenon that this work particularly focuses. Political scientists have long been concerned to explain the 'anomalous' social profile of politically active citizens in contemporary India. In contrast to the West, it is in fact the historically disadvantaged groups who are more likely to vote than their well-educated and wealthy counterparts (Y.Yadav 1997; 2000). Similarly, whereas in the West turnout has been declining for some years, this is not the case in India.

With the aim of contributing to a better understanding of the unique Indian experience of popular democracy at the local level, in this thesis I examine how specific primordial loyalties encourage participatory democratic processes, and how the latter reshape caste/community identities. In particular, through ethnographic accounts of everyday politics from a neighbourhood in Mathura town, western Uttar Pradesh on the one hand, and of the role of caste associations and political parties on the other, I attempt to illustrate the dynamics and complexity of the process of politicisation of caste (Kothari 1970).

This investigation is carried out through an analysis of the culture of political participation of the Yadavs, traditionally a low- to middle-ranking cluster of agricultural-pastoral castes. In the last thirty years, the Yadavs have become a

significant political force in Uttar Pradesh and other northern states (like Bihar). In Mathura, Yadavs are also extremely politically active and organised. Mathura town lies about one hundred miles south of New Delhi, in the so-called Braj area of western Uttar Pradesh. This area is well known as the mythical homeland of the god Krishna who is considered the ancestor of the contemporary Yadavs. A specific folk descent theory legitimises the formation of the Yadav community. Accordingly, all pastoral castes of India are said to descend from the Yadu dynasty (hence the label Yadav) to which Krishna (a cowherder and a prince by legend) belonged. In Mathura, the Yadav community traditionally inhabits three neighbourhoods: Anta Para, Sathgara and Ahir Para. The bulk of ethnography presented in this work comes from the neighbourhood of Ahir Para and the surrounding locality of Sadar Bazaar and Civil Lines.

More specifically, this thesis tells the story of how the members of the Ahir pastoral caste who reside in the Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar locality have become 'Yadavs'. By covering a time-span of one hundred years (1880s-1990s), it highlights the social, religious and political transformations that such a passage has entailed. This exercise is conducted through an ethno-historical exploration of Ahir/Yadav 'political' performances in the public and 'democratic' arenas. Yadav 'political' representation has been historically enacted by means of petitions, caste publications, oral epics, political speeches, rituals, violence, political rallies, elections, protests, contested religious shrines and strikes. These public representations are framed by the organisational abilities of the Yadav caste associations and in more recent times by the Yadav-dominated Samajwadi (Socialist) Party. The central theme of the thesis is, therefore, the study of 'Yadav' political rhetoric, and how this political discourse has historically been articulated, assimilated and contested by the Ahir/Yadavs of the Braj-Ahirwal area in general and by the inhabitants of the Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar locality in particular.

In sum, the political ethnography of the Yadavs of Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar, together with the anthropological exploration of the politicisation of caste beyond the domain of electoral politics, provide an understanding of how colonial and post-colonial government classifications, democratic processes and the socio-cultural constitution of a community can inform political participation.

The political ethnography of Mathura Yadavs thereby sheds light on why certain groups are more apt to successfully exert their influence within the democratic political system, and why others are not, regardless of the fact that in many instances they have similar economic and political incentives and resources. More specifically, the thesis demonstrates how a successful internalisation of 'Yadav' political rhetoric and hence the political mobilisation and participation of local Yadavs are partly linked to their descent view of caste, horizontal caste-cluster type of social organisation, marriage patterns, factionalism, and finally to their cultural understanding of 'the past' and 'the political'. I suggest that this cultural perspective, which also finds its roots in Ahir/Yadav traditional folk theories of religious descent, has significantly contributed to the political success of the Yadav community in Uttar Pradesh.

Thus, this work analyses issues concerning political change in relation to classical questions about caste. Importantly, throughout the thesis runs a concern with the elaboration of a theoretical framework which makes sense of the transformation of the caste system and its interrelations with modern politics and Hinduism. It is concluded that in order to make sense of the contemporary processes of the ethnicisation of caste (Barnett 1975: 158-59; Fuller 1996: 22-23) attention should also be paid to descent and kinship (Kolenda 1978) and to the ways the traditional ideology of hierarchy (Dumont 1970) has been usurped by the religious ideology of descent. Paramount to Yadav caste/community formation and political mobilisation is a discourse of religious descent centred on Krishna symbolism and history.

Although my starting point concerns a particular community, and the thesis is essentially ethnographic, the theoretical concerns of this work have wider ramifications and attempt to generate a more general argument concerning the logics of democracy, religion, primordial loyalties and political participation in post-colonial countries. There is a need to re-focus attention on the ways democracy is perceived and reworked in different socio-cultural and religious settings (see Spencer 1997) as well as on the ways politics actually operates on the ground (Hansen 2001: 232).

Despite recent anthropological interest in ethnographies of the state in India (A. Gupta 1995; Brass 1997; Fuller and Harriss 2000; Hansen and Stepputat

2001), 'democracy' has not been a common topic of study amongst anthropologists of South Asia. Exceptions are the important contributions made by a number of works that explore the ways in which formal democracy actually works in India (see Bailey 1963a; Kothari 1970; Carter 1974; Robinson 1988). And of course studies of caste have been concerned with the effects of democratic ideas upon its politicisation (Hardgrave 1969; Lynch 1969; Fox 1969). However, issues like elections and democracy are rarely discussed in anthropological studies. In a provocative article Spencer considers 'the rise and fall of political anthropology in the context of the global shift from colonial to post-colonial rule' (1997: 1). He argues that the anthropological study of 'modern' values and institutions has been neglected due to their presumed '*transparency*' and '*foreign*' origin. Accordingly, since 'democracy', 'political parties', 'elections' and 'the state' originate elsewhere, namely in the West, their interpretation in post-colonial states has been considered essentially similar to those in the West. It follows that this 'excess of certainty' (ibid.: 13) has discouraged the anthropological study of democracy, and the way in which the institutional framework of democracy as well as ideas about democracy itself are differently informed by different socio-cultural settings has been left unexplored.

Hence, the political ethnography of the Yadavs of Mathura contributes to the limited empirical literature that investigates the question of different cross-cultural understandings of 'democracy' and the role of primordial loyalties in modern political institutions. It primarily provides empirical data on the motivation of individuals and the circumstances in which they are more or less likely to participate in the modern political process. Furthermore, it explores 'the political' in areas which are not thought of as political per se. It is in these particular spheres (for example family, kinship, popular religion, leisure activities...) that anthropologists can best contribute to the understandings of democratic macro structures and their effects on ordinary people.

By linking micro-level data to macro issues, this study also has the potential to broaden the focus of existing research on the politics of religion and ethnicity and on patterns of electoral politics. More importantly, it provides interpretations based on the kind of detailed qualitative empirical research that is largely absent in the academic and policy-making sectors with respect to issues of

politics and democracy. For example, the work sheds light on certain sensitive topics including the function of local political networks and hierarchies, election malpractices and corruption, clientalism and feud-like conflicts. The findings will hopefully help to influence future research agendas and feed into national and international debates on the conditions under which democracy, political rhetoric and political participation work on the ground.

## **Methodology**

As will be evident in the following chapters, although this work is predominantly based on ethnographic material and on interviews with political leaders, political activists, city and district political and governmental representatives, religious leaders, businessmen, local ‘historians’ and intellectuals, it also draws upon a variety of other sources: archives, official publications, caste literature, political parties’ publications, religious texts, newspapers, books, surveys and so on. In particular this work combines ethnographic, quantitative and historical research techniques.

### **Ethnographic method**

I lived for twenty months (August 1998-March 2000) in the Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar locality on the outskirts of the old part of Mathura town. I learnt the vernacular language (Hindi) and participated in the day-to-day life of a local Yadav community. I documented their everyday life through field-notes and photographs and integrated ‘participant observation’ with in-depth individual interviews about specific topics such as kinship, politics, religion and economics.

The choice of studying a *locality* is based on particular methodological considerations. A study of politics through ‘participant observation’ in an urban setting can only be done by focusing on a particular urban lived space which constitutes a political and an administrative unit as well as ‘a space where people live, experience and seek to produce their own world’ (Hansen 2001: 13). Many scholars have described the neighbourhood (*mohalla, para*) in Indian towns as

spaces with defined social boundaries whose residents share values and behaviours (Kumar 1988; Molund 1988; Lynch 1969). Accordingly, a *mohalla* is a source of self-identification for its inhabitants and this manifests itself in terms of popular activities such as celebrations, festivals, political affiliations, protests and so on. Thus, a neighbourhood is said to provide an important opportunity to analyse the intertwining of cultural activities and local social and political organisations (see Freitag 1989). However, as Hansen points out, relations in urban areas are not bounded or defined by physical localities in the same way as in rural areas (2001: 13; see also Vatuk 1972). In urban spaces social boundaries are more difficult to 'fix' and accordingly the boundaries of *mohallas* and *paras* are difficult to map.

My focus is on the neighbourhood of Ahir Para. Ahir Para is part of Sadar Bazaar which lies on the outskirts of the old part of Mathura. Sadar Bazaar is like a small town in itself and it is seen as Mathura Yadav 'urban territory'. It is composed of different *mohallas* which are caste specific. However, in Sadar Bazaar Yadavs densely inhabit not only their 'traditional' neighbourhood, Ahir Para, but also parts of the neighbouring *mohallas*. To say, therefore, that this study focuses on the Yadavs of a particular neighbourhood is simplistic. The social field of my study is a *locality* which although centred in a particular *para* (Ahir Para) comprises different neighbourhoods. Moreover, the area inhabited by Yadavs corresponds to four municipality wards: Ward 2, Ward 4, Ward 10 and Ward 15. In order to socially map this space I employed the standard sociological survey method and collected data on the socio-demographic composition of the locality through genealogies. Moreover, I undertook a wide range of conversations with members of different communities and gathered information about who lives where, about the composition of the different communities and their socio-religious spaces.

It is within this mapped locality that I studied how supra-local economic and political networks manifest themselves in the day-to-day life of ordinary Yadavs. In particular I observed how Yadavs' newly acquired political power at the macro-level had consequences not only in terms of the redistribution of power at state and national level, but also had implications for the ideas of ordinary Yadavs with regard to their community and their day-to-day lives.

To study politics and political processes through the method of ethnography meant both to observe 'the political' as performed in the public arena, and to develop a detailed knowledge of the kinship, religious and economic worlds of 'the performers'. Following Hansen, the central focus of observation for my political ethnography was the Yadavs' 'mundane forms of politics' (2001: 232). The Yadavs of Mathura, throughout the twenty months of my stay, were exceptional 'performers'. Their imaginative political strategies never ceased to surprise me, and effectively yielded them 'visibility, public resources and recognition of their demands and identity' (Hansen 2001: 230). Data on their kinship, religious and economic networks and values were of primary importance to understand Yadav political success and the gradual consolidation of an all-India Yadav community.

Throughout my fieldwork local Yadavs attempted to include me in their continuous public 'acts of representation'. My arrival in Mathura was marked by the publication of numerous articles in the local vernacular press which announced the arrival of an Italian scholar from England who came to study and live with 'the famous and valorous' Yadav community.<sup>1</sup> Later I came to know that within hours of my arrival in Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar, the local Yadav caste association had sent a press release to the local and regional newspapers. As a result my first three days in Mathura were characterised by a procession of Yadav visitors who came from other localities of Mathura town and nearby villages to welcome me. My arrival was thus soon transformed into a political performance. After a few weeks a picture of me entering Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar appeared in various local Yadav caste association magazines and newsletters. In these publications the caste title Yadav was often suffixed to my surname. Throughout my fieldwork I was asked to deliver speeches at local and regional Yadav caste association meetings and to 'help' during election campaigns. Needless to say, maintaining a neutral and ethical position was a complex issue.

I always avoided delivering speeches, writing in local Yadav magazines, and taking sides with a particular faction or political group. However, while I could pay attention to avoiding and minimising my physical 'participation' in

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<sup>1</sup> See for example *Aj*, 18 August 1998.

Yadav 'political' representations, it was more difficult to maintain my neutrality whenever I ethically disapproved of what I had to observe and hear. One cannot remain purely neutral when witnessing violence and usurpations.

In particular I found it difficult to live in the highly factionalised and violent world of the local Yadav community. In order to maintain an impartial position, and hence access to the different Yadav factions, during my fieldwork I lived in two different places. This choice matured after a couple of months of fieldwork and the realisation of the endemic factionalism and tensions present in the community. I rented a house in the Sadar Bazaar/Civil Lines locality from a non-Yadav landlord and a room in the centre of Ahir Para with a Yadav family. In the latter setting I had access to the social world of the 'Chaudhri Parivar', which represents one of the largest and politically powerful Yadav lineages of Sadar Bazaar; while in the former, members of other Yadav factions, castes and religious communities felt comfortable to visit me. Moreover, these double living arrangements prevented me from being too closely associated with a particular Yadav faction and, to some extent, with the Yadav community in general. Even if this study is essentially about the Yadav community, the data on which it is based have not been collected in an isolationist fashion and they reflect inter-caste and inter-community relations.

As will become evident in the following chapters, the bulk of ethnographic data presented in this thesis were collected in 'private' and 'public' spaces where women, most of the time, were not allowed to be present. Most Yadav women in Sadar Bazaar/Ahir Para live in *parda*. Yadav houses are divided into female and male quarters. Women rarely mix with male guests, and, if they do, it is only with close family friends. Therefore, every Yadav event that I attended was really two events: the men gathered in one part of the house and the women in another. On most of these occasions my research interests led me to spend time in men's company. In the case of public events I did not have the choice of whether to spend time with men or with women.

Women were peripheral to the public political culture of the neighbourhood. From 1996, two of the municipality wards, which include the Sadar Bazaar/Ahir Para locality, were reserved for women. The representative of Ward 3 is 'Bola Yadav's wife', as local people refer to her. However if you ask



anybody in Sadar Bazaar who is the representative of Ward 3, the answer will be Bola Yadav. His wife does not have an active public role. This is also the case for the majority of women in the neighbourhood. As a consequence, my fieldwork took place mainly in a 'male' environment. I often participated and observed activities that would not have been considered 'proper' for any Yadav woman.

Most of the time, the Yadavs of Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar treated me as they would have treated a man. However, their flexibility also had some limits. For example, I was not allowed to wrestle or participate in male gatherings like the 'chicken and whisky barbeques' that took place in the evenings on the banks of the Yamuna. Even if I was often invited to these, and other, activities, people expected me to politely refuse their invitation. Despite the fact that as a woman I could not be present at events of this type, I suspect that on the whole my gender facilitated the collection of political data. Male informants did not perceive my presence as threatening, as they would have done if I were a man. They did not feel in competition with me and they talked freely in my presence about 'political matters'.

Whenever possible I followed the social, religious and political networks of the local Yadavs outside the social field of Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar/Civil Lines locality, letting local Yadavs guide the research from the micro- to the macro-levels (Mathura town, Mathura districts, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi...). Equally important settings of the research were also the neighbourhoods of Sathgara and Anta Para in Mathura's old town; Ahir/Yadav villages in Mathura district and in Ahirwal; and finally the headquarters of the All-India Yadav Mahasabha and Samajwadi Party in Delhi. I observed Yadav caste association meetings in Haryana, Delhi, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Kerala. In these settings I had the opportunity of meeting Yadav activists from other states and collecting information about 'Yadavs' in other localities.

## **Survey method**

Throughout my research I have been interested in bridging local level political analysis with politics at higher levels. This approach led me to integrate

ethnographic and qualitative research techniques with quantitative methods. I believe that no single method can resolve the complex issues involved in the study of politics and political behaviour. My political ethnography has been complemented by a survey on political behavior. I conducted this survey in collaboration with the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) after the 1999 parliamentary election. The fieldwork period coincided with that of the National Election Study 1999 carried out by the CSDS. Moreover, there is additional overlap between the two surveys, as most of the political questions were similarly worded, thus making comparisons between the surveys more compatible.

The aim of the Mathura survey was to interview a cross-section of inhabitants of voting age from Sadar Bazaar, Mathura. We considered various sampling strategies before deciding upon a stratified quota selection procedure. We opted for the quota selection rather than a probability-based selection procedure because we were keen to ensure a representative distribution of the different castes and communities present in Sadar Bazaar. A purely random sample might have meant that only Yadavs were interviewed. To ensure that other communities were also included it was therefore necessary to include some preliminary screening. We set loose quotas for caste, community and age. The survey also included detailed questions about household finances (see Appendix I). This meant we had to interview the household reference person, who was usually male. There is, therefore, an over-representation of men in the sample. In order to reduce the bias that this would cause, we also included a small boost sample of women for comparison. Moreover, we also collected demographic information on all household members. A small-scale pilot survey was carried out between the 1 and 10 September 1999 to test a draft of the questionnaire and modifications were made out as a result. The main fieldwork was conducted between 19 September and 6 October 1999. The fieldwork period followed the voting for the Lok Sabha elections, but began before the results were announced. In all, 225 respondents were interviewed. Of these, 175 were married, and additional questions were asked about their spouse. The survey thus comprises three separate samples which are reported in the tables: the full sample (all respondents = 225 cases), the male sample (all male respondents and all husbands

of female respondents = 218 cases) and the female sample (all female respondents and all wives of male respondents = 173 cases). Table entries are rarely based on all the cases, as some respondents were either unable to answer some of the questions, or provided incomplete answers. Missing values are reported where appropriate.

## **Historical method**

Historical sources complement and enrich the data collected through ethnographic/qualitative techniques and quantitative methods. The importance of history for a complex understanding of the 'here and now' has been widely acknowledged (Evans-Pritchard 1961; Cohn 1990; Das 1995; Gow 2001). In the specific case of the study of caste, many have pointed out how the exploration of colonial caste historiographies and 'official' ethnographies are valuable sources which can be used to infer, among other things, 'indigenous modes of identity' and past views of caste (Robb 1995: 51; S. Bayly 1995, 1999). Opposite positions are also powerfully argued (Raheja 1999a, 1999b; Bates 1995). Usually, these points of view are centrally based on the invention-of-caste argument (Dirks 2001). This position claims that colonial orientalism massively shaped caste. Accordingly, colonial ethnographic descriptions are considered biased and hence not apt to disclose nineteenth-century views of caste and social organisation (see Raheja 1999a). As Robb has pointed out, '... current worries about the construction of discourse inhibit the full use of sources. To an historian the bias of past records does not form an insuperable obstacle to interpretation, any more than do the assumptions and priorities of present-day social scientists' (1995: 52).

The present work recognises the value of colonial historiographies of caste. It considers them an important source to understand present manifestations of caste. However, in line with Gow's methodological argument concerning the relation between history and ethnography (2001: 19-28), I suggest that the process of the reinterpretation of colonial sources relating to caste (and historical sources in general) can only be fruitful if pursued in the light of a significant present anthropological knowledge of the community portrayed in the historical documentation. It is precisely with the coordination of present ethnographic data

and historical sources that anthropology and history can effectively enrich the understanding of contemporary phenomena. More specifically, ‘an anthropological analysis that uses historical methods must start from ethnography and from the problems ethnography presents’ (ibid.: 20). Accordingly, Gow argues that ‘we must first produce a general account, rooted in ethnographic description and analysis, of what we would expect to find within it (*the archive*). Only then can the archive start to speak to us of what we hope to find there’ (2001: 23, my emphasis). Fortunately, Ahir/Yadavs have been, and are, the subjects of a rich documentary archive produced on the one hand by colonial and post-colonial ethnographers and government officers, and on the other by Yadav ‘historians’ and ‘ethnographers’. In particular, I regard as important sources the documentation left by the Ahir/Yadav caste associations and Yadav social and political reformers (e.g. petitions, memoranda, speeches, minutes of meetings and caste association literature).

The critical analysis of these sources is relevant for an understanding of caste/community formation. In particular, their exploration provides the opportunity to understand if what I recorded in Mathura in the late 1990s should be interpreted as evidence of structural changes in the caste system or as a simple reproduction of past social structures. More specifically, the historical method helps to shed light on how ‘modern’ or ‘traditional’ is the current Yadav process of ethnicisation.

## **Chapter contents**

The argument presented in this thesis is cumulatively constructed throughout the six chapters. Chapter 1 maps the political and social spaces within which the story told in this work takes place. It also highlights the political and economic circumstances which provide the incentives for the politicisation of the Yadavs of Uttar Pradesh. Chapter 2 seeks to understand how the situation I found amongst Mathura Yadavs in the late 1990s came into being historically. This involves exploring the impact of administrative caste forms of social classification and ‘official’ ethnography on the construction of the Yadav community in the last one

hundred years. A critical exploration of Ahir/Yadav caste historiography is provided. When aligned with my contemporary ethnography, this ethno-historical exploration reveals how important the Ahir/Yadavs' descent view of caste has been (and is) in the creation of a Yadav community and in its political mobilisation. In particular it shows how a specific Ahir/Yadav folk theory of religious descent has informed the ways Yadav intellectuals, politicians and social reformers have read and manipulated government classifications and then shaped their community. Hence, the chapter shows how the refashioning of Yadav community boundaries, despite being based on the selective appropriation of colonial theories of caste and forms of social classification, is strictly interlinked with indigenous folk models of social categorisation and kinship.

The next four chapters are all concerned in one way or another with the ethnographic exploration of the modern refashioning of the Ahir/Yadavs' folk theory of religious descent and its representation in the political arena. They investigate, on the one hand, how this folk theory informs transformations in Yadav kinship and religious systems and, on the other, how it re-shapes the ways local ordinary Yadavs view themselves in 'history' and understand 'the political'. In many ways, these chapters illustrate ethnographically issues that Chapter 2 unfolded through an ethno-historical perspective. In particular, they explore how the 'tribal qualities' of the Ahir/Yadav kinship system, recorded in pre-colonial and early colonial times, are still resilient and have found a new vitality in a 'modern' society that recognises *difference* and *cultural distinctiveness* rather than the language of the religious ideology of hierarchy as an acceptable manifestation of caste.

More specifically, Chapter 3 describes the internal community organisation of the Ahir/Yadavs, and the peculiarities of the Yadav segmentary system. It then shows how different Yadav subdivisions are merging into a unique kinship unit: the Krishnavanshi-Yadav; and how this development mirrors changes in marriage patterns promoted both by Yadav caste associations as well as by 'traditional' hypergamous marriage patterns. Following on, Chapter 4 explores the 'religious' dimension of the process of expansion of the local Ahir/Yadav units of endogamy. It illustrates how Ahir/Yadav internal processes of fusion are accompanied by a gradual substantialisation of the Ahir/Yadav

Hindu pantheon: Krishna has progressively become the main god as well as the main ancestor. Such a process is accompanied by the adoption of Sanskritic forms of Hinduism which has transformed the different Ahir/Yadav subdivisions (Nandavanshi, Goallavanshi and Yaduvanshi) into superior 'Krishnavanshi' Yadavs. The encompassing Krishna tale legitimates the equality of all members and expresses it through the religious language of descent.

Having contextualised the relation between kinship and religious transformations within the process of Yadav community formation and its politicisation, Chapter 5 shows how a specific 'caste-view of 'democracy'' is successfully deployed and performed in the political arena and simultaneously used to reinforce a sense of Yadav commonality. Paramount to this idiom is the language of 'religious descent'. Yadav political rhetoric depicts the god-ancestor Krishna as muscular 'socialist' politician, and 'ordinary' Yadavs as 'natural politicians'. By 'linking' Krishna mytho-history with the modern democratic political world it supports Yadav political interests and the construction of an all-India Yadav community. Chapter 6 concentrates on the ethnography of 'existing politics' in Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar. The chapter explores how local Yadavs conceive 'the political' and what it means for them 'to do politics'. It explores how 'political' skills are perceived as 'innate' and how local Yadavs depict themselves as a 'caste of politicians'. It highlights the cultural peculiarity of Indian democracy, the importance of primordial loyalties and of the language of religion in modern Indian politics. Finally, it illustrates how the high political participation recorded amongst the Yadavs of Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar is partly rooted in their endemic factionalism.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Mapping the Yadavs' socio-economic and political spaces**

This chapter provides a brief background to the socio-economic and political landscape that frames the bulk of research undertaken in this thesis. The first section explores the political history of Uttar Pradesh. It describes the main political changes that have occurred in the last twenty years and highlights how they have affected the formation of the Yadav community in Uttar Pradesh and Mathura town. The second part describes the Braj and Ahirwal cultural regions, Mathura town, and finally the Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar locality.

#### **The political landscape of Uttar Pradesh state**

The story told in this thesis is interlinked with the recent political history of Uttar Pradesh and the major role caste has had in shaping the Indian political landscape during the last twenty years. Many have illustrated the dramatic upsurge in political participation in North India (Y. Yadav 1997). This rise is more marked amongst the 'underprivileged' castes and class sections of the society. Moreover, citizens are politically mobilised under banners of ethnicity, caste and religion (Hasan 2000: 147). Before exploring U.P. politics and the importance of caste in determining its political landscape I briefly illustrate the relation between caste, caste associations, political parties and elections and thus provide a general background to the following discussions.

#### **Caste, elections, political parties and caste associations: an introductory note**

One of the most significant changes brought about by Independence was the creation of one complete nationwide structure of government: from national level to state,

district, block, town and village levels. Today, besides the bicameral national parliament, the Lok Sabha, each state has a legislative assembly. In the 1960s, a further “democratic decentralisation” occurred at the local level (Brass 1968: 114). In the specific case of Uttar Pradesh, by 1961 a three-tier structure was introduced within each district: the local village *panchayats*, the *kshetra samitis* (block development committees) and the *zila parishad* (district boards). Although the village *panchayat* is directly elected by the villagers, the higher bodies are composed of indirectly elected members, government appointees, and Members of Parliament (MPs) and Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) from the area. A proportional quota of legislative seats at national as well as at state level is reserved for members of the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), but not for members of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs).<sup>2</sup>

The introduction of the modern political machinery gave rise to new dynamics in the traditional political structure and created caste political groupings (see Assayag 1995). It has often been pointed out that ‘traditional institutions’ like caste served as a vehicle for modern functions (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967). Following Independence, local castes, lineage groups and communal units began to have a major role in determining electoral alliances and enmities (Srinivas 1962). Caste started to provide an extensive basis for the organisation of democratic politics (Kothari 1970; Béteille 1969; Frankel and Rao 1989). It shaped political behaviour by influencing political party organisation, by determining the members of the Government and by informing the social structure of the administrative system both at the macro and local level. More specifically, after Independence, the locally ‘dominant castes’ transformed the patron-client relations (*jajmani*) with other castes into a vote bank through ‘vertical mobilisation’ (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967). In so doing political parties put together coalitions of upper and lower castes. The Congress party was the classic example of this strategy. By the late 1960s, electoral mobilisation had led to the new phenomenon called ‘horizontal mobilisation’

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<sup>2</sup> The policy of reservation aimed to uplift the former untouchables (SCs), the tribal groups (STs) and a less specified group of low caste people (Other Backward Classes). The policy consists of reserving a quota for government jobs, places in educational institutions and seats in parliamentary assemblies for castes which are socially and educationally backward.



whereby people situated at comparable levels within the local caste hierarchy came together into caste associations and caste federations (see Mitra 1994; Shah 1975; Lobo 1989; Jaffrelot 2000).

Today, political parties tend to mobilise support from members of caste/communities. Caste politicisation is generally correlated with the occurrence of the following political strategies: caste members vote en bloc for a candidate of the same or different caste, either in pursuance of the decision of the caste *panchayat* or of the caste association; the selection of the candidate for a constituency is based on whether he/she will be able to get the support of a particular caste or castes; and finally when a single caste is not likely to be effective, alliances are formed on caste basis by the candidate or by the voters. Dipankar Gupta has pointed out the 'limits of caste arithmetic' and what he calls 'the presumption of numbers' (2000: 149). He has argued against the assumption that political success in India depends primarily on the caste composition of the individual constituencies (ibid.: 149). Accordingly, he points out how the organisational ability of a caste is far more important than its numbers. In the following sections Dipankar Gupta's point will be explored through the lens of Yadav ethnography and proved partly valid. However, long hours spent at political party headquarters at pre-election campaigning times taught me that politicians are obsessed with 'caste' and with 'numbers'. At the end of the day, in my experience candidate selections in Uttar Pradesh are most of the time purely based on caste and arithmetic, and this is because numbers count. This is also evident from the emphasis that caste associations put on the construction of larger and larger communities by encouraging processes of fusion or alliances with similar subcastes and castes.

Contemporary caste associations are administrative and political units. They have offices, publications and legislative processes expressed through conferences, delegates and resolutions. They are interest groups in the sense that 'they are oriented to secure economic benefits, jobs or special concessions, or for the more clearly political purpose of uniting to fight the hegemony of the "upper castes" or the "ruling caste" or bargaining with the political party of government, but in all cases for one or more specific purposes' (Béteille 1967: 123). Caste associations have attempted to have their members nominated for elective office, working through

existing parties or forming their own parties, to maximise their caste's representation and influence in state cabinets and lower governing bodies. These organisations have thus contributed significantly to the success of political democracy by providing bases for communication, representation and leadership (K.Verma 1979).

By the 1980s horizontal groups have increasingly been mobilised by parties, which appear to have substantially undermined the vertical model based on patron-client relations. These parties concentrate instead on mobilising the lower castes against the upper castes, attacking the vertical hierarchy of the Hindu social order and demanding a greater share of political power. The Janata Dal, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP) are the best examples of this newer 'horizontal mobilisation' in northern India.

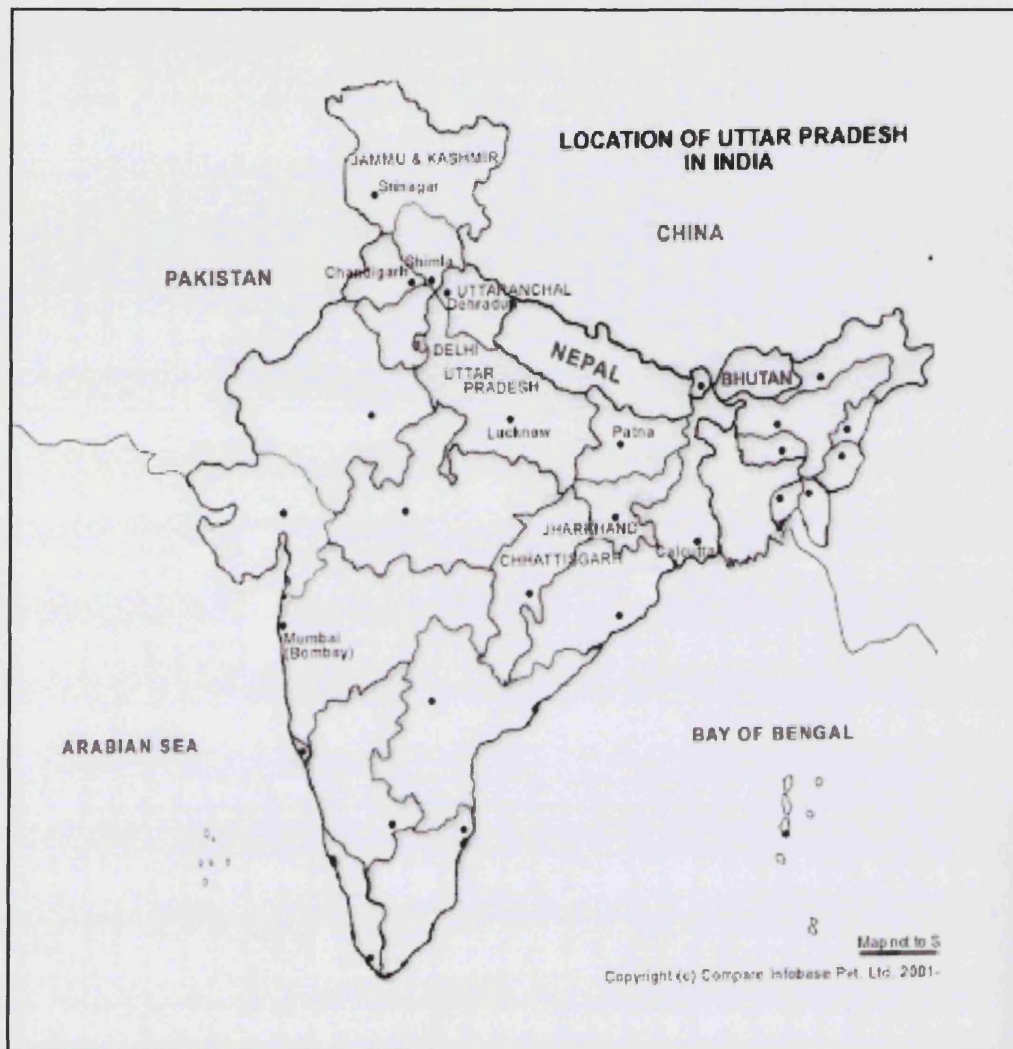
### **Uttar Pradesh politics in the 1990s: Samajwadi Party and the rise of the Yadavs**

The state of Uttar Pradesh with its 140 million people, located in the Hindi heartland, is one of the most backward in India in terms of social-economic conditions (see Map 1 and Map 2). However, since the late nineteenth century Uttar Pradesh has been the nerve centre of Indian politics (see Hasan 1989). By having a 1/6 share of the members of Parliament, the state occupies a central position in the calculation of all the national Indian political parties. In the 1999 Lok Sabha elections, 85 of the total of 545 seats were in Uttar Pradesh.<sup>3</sup> Besides its political importance, Uttar Pradesh is also the site where an effective and powerful challenge to upper caste political domination is taking place. In addition, it is one of the states where Hindu nationalism has been highly supported throughout the 1990s. As Hasan suggests: 'the way in which conflicts between castes and communities are played out in U.P. will influence the course of democratic politics in north India and alter the ways of wresting and sustaining political power at the national level' (2000: 148).

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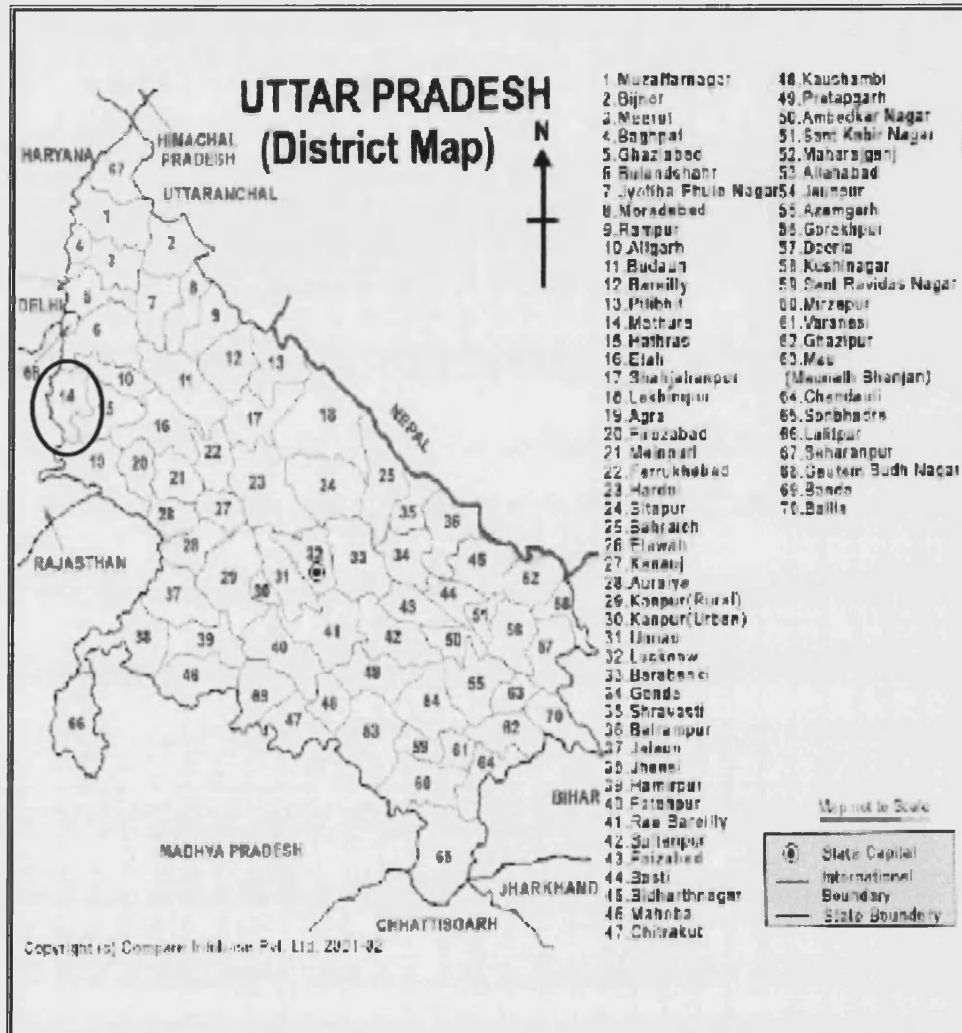
<sup>3</sup> In November 2000, after my fieldwork had been completed, the separate state of Uttaranchal was carved out of Uttar Pradesh. The revised number of seats in Uttar Pradesh at the national level is now 80.

## Map 1: Uttar Pradesh in India



Source: [www.mapsofindia.com](http://www.mapsofindia.com)

**Map 2: Uttar Pradesh, district map**



Source: [www.mapsofindia.com](http://www.mapsofindia.com)

From Independence to the mid-1970s, Congress dominated the political arena of Uttar Pradesh by forging a coalition of higher and lower castes (Brahmans, Muslims and Scheduled Castes). Its leadership was generally monopolised by the former. Thereafter, thanks to the Green Revolution, the Yadavs, together with other castes like Kurmi, Jat and other backward castes backed by socialist leaders, began to challenge the Congress domination (see Rudolph and Rudolph 1987; Corbridge and Harriss 2001: 80-92). In fact already in the 1950s, with the abolition of the *zamindari* laws, a large section of Ahir/Yadavs, Gujars and Jats purchased ownership rights from the state and emerged as the dominant agricultural communities in rural Uttar Pradesh. In western Uttar Pradesh, the wealth and power of the AJGAR alliance (Ahirs, Jats, Gujars and Rajputs) increased considerably during the Green Revolution (see Hasan 1989).

The so-called new 'bullock capitalists', who were generally smallholders and not members of the dominant landowning class, were given a political voice by the *kisan* (peasant) movement of the 1970s and 1980s. In this uncertain situation, peasant caste/communities like Jats and Ahir/Yadavs increasingly began to use the language of caste to assert 'a strong perception of their own and other people's caste endowments' (S. Bayly 1999: 323). This was a response to an unstable situation in an area where the control of land and resources and of the uncertain benefits of the Green Revolution did not prove to be an easy battle (ibid.: 323).

In 1989 the backward castes were mobilised by the Janata Dal party, led by the socialist leader V.P. Singh. Its socialist-like manifesto emphasised social justice and promised the backward classes reservations in education and government service. Besides agrarian changes, a factor that contributed to the political importance of caste membership amongst low- to middle-ranking communities was the extension of the policy of protective discrimination to the OBC category.

However in the early 1990s it was the Hindu nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and not the Janata Dal (JD) or its various offshoots,

that emerged as the most credible alternative to Congress at the national level.<sup>4</sup> This political development was partly influenced by the central government's adoption of the Mandal Commission's recommendations to establish caste-based reservations at the national level. The implementation of the Mandal recommendations in 1990 provoked widespread resentment and disapproval, and intensified divisions among Hindus. Many upper castes reacted violently to the new reservation policy and shifted their vote from Congress to the BJP.

Parallel to that, the *Ramjanmabhumi* movement organised by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), an organisation affiliated to the BJP, and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) significantly changed the Indian political landscape. The Sangh Parivar (RSS, VHP and BJP) demanded the construction of a *Ram mandir* (temple) at the site of the Babri mosque which allegedly stood on Ram's sacred birthplace (van der Veer 1994). The *Ramjanmabhumi* movement successfully mobilised the Hindu vote in the Assembly election of 1991 and thus marked the decline of Congress's political career in U.P. In 1992, the BJP state government helped the Sangh Parivar succeed in the demolition of the Ayodhya mosque, which was then followed by widespread rioting between Hindus and Muslims (see Hasan 2000).

By the same token, the Janata Dal state government (1989-91), led by Mulayam Singh Yadav, consolidated its power base by extending reservations for backward classes in state educational and administrative services (Hasan 2000: 150-151). In the 1993 U.P. assembly elections the BJP lost to a coalition of non-Congress parties based on the support of lower caste groups and Muslims led by Mulayam Singh Yadav. However, fights over the control of public goods and resources weakened the BSP and SP alliance, and it collapsed in June 1995. As Hasan points out 'this was not a natural alliance, since the two communities (Dalits and Yadavs) were engaged in sometimes violent conflicts over land and wages in the villages' (Hasan, 2000: 185). In the aftermath, the BJP supported the Scheduled Caste oriented Bahujan Samaj Party to form a state government. This was a strategic choice for both the parties since it allowed them to control the rising political influence of Mulayam Singh Yadav. In the 1996 national elections the BSP and the

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<sup>4</sup> For an exploration of the BJP's regional expansion and rise to power see Heath (2002).

SP continued their upward march as strong political realities in U.P. Together they polled 45.6 per cent of the votes and got respectively eighteen and six seats (Brass 1997b).

Thus, in recent years, the political battlefield of Uttar Pradesh has been characterised by the emergence of 'backward castes' as major vote banks in opposition to the so-called 'forward castes'. Political parties such as the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) mobilise lower strata of the society against the 'forward castes' by demanding a greater share of political power (see Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998). The Yadavs have been active protagonists in the so-called Backward Classes movement (Rao 1979), and in what Yogendra Yadav has termed the 'second democratic upsurge' (Y. Yadav 1997; 2000).

By the 1970s, the Yadavs of Uttar Pradesh had gradually introduced themselves to the political process at local, state and national levels. However, in the last twenty years Yadavs and other 'lower castes' have made their votes even 'more effective with the help of better aggregation in social and political terms' (Y. Yadav 2000: 132). In the 1990s, the manufacturing of electoral majorities based on caste and community seems to matter more than at any time before (Corbridge and Harriss 2001: 220-221).

At present, there are two well-established Yadav-dominated political parties: The SP in Uttar Pradesh led by Mulayam Singh Yadav and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in Bihar guided by Laloo Prasad Yadav and his wife Rabri Devi. Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav have become key figures on the contemporary political scene.<sup>5</sup> They are either perceived as heroes, as modern Robin Hoods who steal from the rich to help the poor, or as *goonda* (musclemen, gangsters) who exploit state resources for personal benefit. In either case, their political role has been of immense symbolic importance for the whole of Indian society and for the Yadav community, in particular.

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<sup>5</sup> According to the CSDS data (NES 1999), in the 1999 Lok Sabha elections 77 per cent of Yadavs in U.P voted for the SP, 10 per cent for the BJP, 4 per cent for the BSP, and 2 per cent for Congress.

The Samajwadi Party was formed in 1992 out of a series of defections from the Janata Dal. It is mainly a regional party and has its centre of power in Uttar Pradesh. Its founder and mentor is Mulayam Singh Yadav. However, Mulayam Singh has credited his personal success to his mentor Dr Rammanohar Lohia. Lohia's writings on socialism and politics are acknowledged as a major source of inspiration by Yadav socialist leaders. A copy of Lohia's book '*The caste system*' (1964) was the first present that I was offered whenever I visited a Samajwadi Party office in Delhi or Mathura for the first time. Lohia was one of the few social leaders in the 1960s and 1970s to have recognised 'the political potential of the horizontal mobilisation of lower castes on issues of social justice and ritual discrimination' (see Seth 1999: 108). He favoured caste mobilisation over class polarisation because he was of the idea that the latter lacked an 'empirical social basis for mobilisation politics' (ibid.).

The rhetoric of the Party today depicts Lohia as a hero who fearlessly fought for social justice:

'Such was his life that Lohia became another name for fearlessness. Both during British rule and in free India he expressed his opinions fearlessly. His yardstick to judge any idea or plan was always the same – does it help the downtrodden and the poor? His scholarship was amazing. His intellect was penetrating. He was a man of independent views. For five thousand years no one has known whether the common man is alive or dead in this land. His personality should blossom and he must grow into a new man. Lohia toiled and died for the cause of the common man' (SP pamphlet/manifesto, 1999).

'The common man' and the 'ordinary people' are the target of the Samajwadi Party's rhetoric, and they are mobilised on caste lines. The party draws its vote from two principal social categories: Muslims and Backward castes. Amongst the latter the largest caste group is that of the Yadavs, followed by Kurmi, Lodhi and Saini. Indeed, the Samajwadi Party mobilises on caste lines amongst the Muslim community also. It draws its strength mainly from backward Muslim castes like the Qureshi, Kasais, Ansari and Bishti. Thus, the Samajwadi Party's mobilisation relies on ascriptive categories. It attempts to build up support not by merging individual castes together into common social category (i.e. the backward castes), but 'by stitching discrete communities into a coalition with the common interest of achieving political power' (Chandra 1999: 78). At its rallies the nature of such



support is visibly brought out by different caste associations, whose banners offer support to the Party on behalf of single castes, rather than aggregative social categories such as the OBC.

The SP makes a special effort to portray its agenda as designed for the poor and the ordinary people. However, from 1998 Mulayam has also attempted to recruit support from the 'forward' castes. As part of this attempt in the 1996 and 1998 Lok Sabha elections he allotted respectively 21 per cent and 25 per cent of seats to upper castes. His right hand man and Vice President of the SP, Amar Singh (Rajput by caste from western Uttar Pradesh, Aligarh district), in an interview pointed out how one of the main targets of the SP in the next ten years is to gain more appeal among the upper castes.<sup>6</sup> Amar Singh, who is commonly known as 'the businessman-politician', the 'Thakur face of the SP' or 'the network *neta*' (political leader), is actively engaged in the activities of the All-Uttar Pradesh Kshatriya Mahasabha, an association which brings together castes which claim Kshatriya origins.<sup>7</sup> This engagement is clear from the following extract from a speech delivered by Amar Singh at a Yadav caste meeting in 1999.

'...I would like to be pardoned for saying that Mulayam Singh Ji is not only a leader of the Yadavs but we Rajputs also admire him as our leader. We also organised a mega event, Samajwadi Kshatriya Mahasammelan. Mr Mulayam Singh Yadav was also felicitated on the occasion. As I told you Yaduvanshi and Raghuvanshi (heirs of lord Rama) should be united...The history of the Yadavs and the Kshatriyas dates back long. Lord Ramachandra without the support of the backward classes he would have not defeated King Ravana. Therefore I am confident that the union of the Yadavs and the backward class people, which has been taken care of under the leadership of Mulayam Singh Yadav and other leaders will be maintained' (Amar Singh, AIYM Convention, Vaishali-New Delhi, 26 December 1999).<sup>8</sup>

The 1999 and 2002 SP manifestos mirror the party specific social targets. The following are the major themes of the SP's political agenda: the party stands

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<sup>6</sup> Amar Singh/interview, 28 January 2000. For profiles of Amar Singh see Outlook, 10 May 1999; India Today, 25 October 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Amar Singh/interview (ibid.). See also, The Hindu, 12 April 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Throughout the thesis, extracts from speeches and texts originally in Hindi appear in the English translation. Whenever the quote is originally in English it is mentioned.

for equality and prosperity for everybody; it is against communal forces; it believes in democratic socialism and it opposes the uncontrolled entry of multinational companies to India; it believes that agriculture and small and medium scale industry are the backbone of the Indian economy, and hence every assistance should be given to these sectors (see Samajwadi Party Manifesto 1999 or [www.samajwadiparty.org](http://www.samajwadiparty.org)). Thus, lately the party does not present itself as essentially a party of farmers but also as a party of small entrepreneurs and businessmen. In my experience in Mathura many young 'self-made' men who also belong to upper castes were big fans of Mulayam Singh Yadav. They appreciate his upfront active position and they took it as an example of a self-made man. Mulayam Singh portrays himself as an 'ordinary' man from a modest background who has achieved personal success. Men from similarly upwardly mobile castes who wish to acquire economic and social recognition take the SP leader as a model.

Significantly, the one category excluded from the SP's appeal is that of the Scheduled Castes. The Party demands parity in development schemes for backward castes with schemes that already existed for the Scheduled Castes. In 1998, Mulayam Singh Yadav accused SCs 'of misusing the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes Preventions of Atrocities Act (1989) to humiliate members of the other caste categories' (Chandra 1999: 80). Locally in Mathura, Yadav SP leaders explicitly express their commitment to undermine Scheduled Caste interests and attempt to mobilise a coalition of other caste categories against the SCs.

The election rally held in September 1999 in Mathura district by Mulayam Singh exemplifies the SP's mobilising techniques and targets.<sup>9</sup> The leader made special effort to reach out to the Muslims, the backward classes and the small and medium entrepreneurs. He began his speech by saying the SP is the party which gives a voice to the poor, the working people and youth. He said that Congress and BJP are wasting their time by discussing how Indian borders are not safe, and

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<sup>9</sup> Mulayam Singh Yadav/parliamentary election campaign rally/Kosi, Mathura district/2 September 1999.

do not pay enough attention to unemployment, poverty, lack of water and electricity.

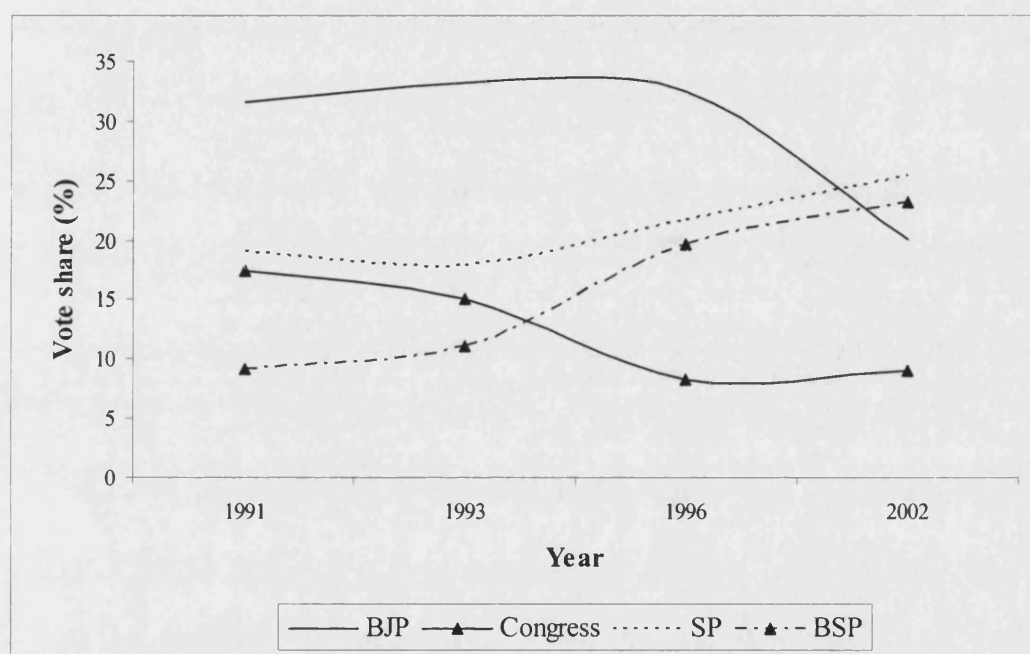
By highlighting the dangers posed to them by the BJP Muslims were encouraged to vote for the SP. Mulayam Singh explicitly said that the BJP had a negative attitude towards Muslims. He said that many Muslim shrines were attacked in the nearby area. He referred to the cases of two small mosques in the nearby districts of Faridabad and Ferozabad which were attacked by Hindu fundamentalist organisations in the previous months. He said that he had sent 'his men' to fix the matter and that order had now been re-established. Thus Mulayam Singh presented himself as a 'muscular' defender of Muslim interests. He promotes himself as a fearless leader.

The Yadav audience was indirectly courted by a long digression on the usurpations and unjust treatment that milkmen (who in U.P. mainly belong to the Yadav community) had to face in the previous months (see Chapter 6). Mulayam Singh said that the milkmen were falsely accused of mixing milk with water and were then asked for bribes by the police. He accused the public dairy of exploiting the small milk producers and of buying their milk for Rs. 8 and then selling it for Rs. 14; and he directly accused the BJP government of not being able to solve the problems of the poor people and of small scale entrepreneurs. He said that Congress had destroyed the country in forty-four years and that the BJP managed to do that in only thirteen months. He ended the speech by saying the SP was the party of youth, and that in the next assembly elections (2002) the party would form the government in U.P. During his speeches Mulayam Singh relies on a language which highlights the weakness and impotence of Congress and the BJP and the strength and vitality of the SP's supporters. Mulayam asks his 'brothers and sisters' to assert themselves and to take control of their lives.

In the most recent Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections (February 2002), the Yadavs' political relevance was reconfirmed by the successful performance of the Samajwadi Party, which gained 143 seats in the Vidhan Sabha, and was the largest single party. The SP is said to have owed its strong showing to Mulayam Singh's all-out campaign. His organisational skills successfully mobilised SP

workers across the state.<sup>10</sup> However, the BJP won 88 seats, the BSP 97 seats, Congress 26 seats, Independents 15 seats, and the mandate ensured that no single party could form a government. Even if Congress and the SP came together, the alliance would still fall short of a majority as there were not enough independents and members from other parties to prop up the alliance. A BSP-BJP combination was the only realistic alliance that could form a government. At the time of writing, the U.P. government is run by a BSP-BJP coalition led by Mayawati, the leader of the BSP.

**Figure 1: Vote share of the major parties in Uttar Pradesh, Vidhan Sabha 1991-2002**



Source: Election Commission of India ([www.eci.gov.in](http://www.eci.gov.in))

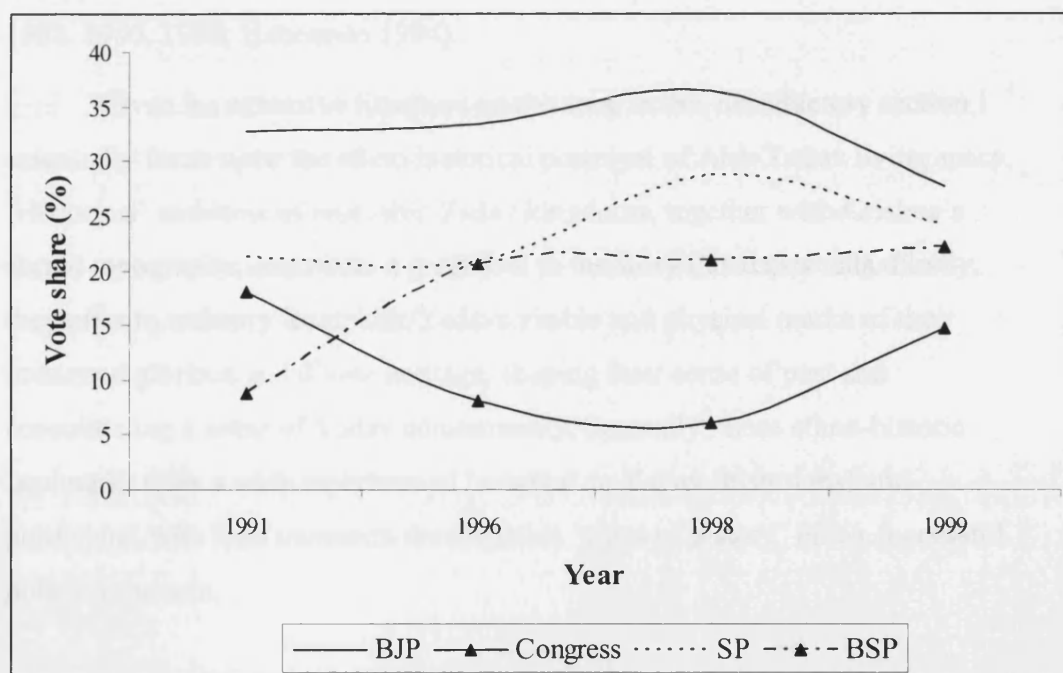
However, by becoming the largest single party in U.P., and overtaking the BJP in both vote share and seats, for the SP the results of the 2002 Assembly elections represented the culmination of a decade of gradual growth and consolidation under the stewardship of Mulayam Singh Yadav. Figures 1 and 2 detail the progress of the major parties in U.P. throughout the 1990s for Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections. The entries for the SP in 1991 refer to the vote share for

<sup>10</sup> *Frontline*, 2-15 March 2002.

the Janata Dal, which was at that time led by Mulayam Singh Yadav. Figure 1 shows that in 1993, the year following the Samajwadi Party's split from Janata Dal, the vote share of the SP was hardly any lower than it had been in the previous election for the JD. Mulayam was successful in taking most of the old JD's votes with him (in 1993 the JD received just 12.3% of the vote), and in the following elections he managed to build on this even more.

In Lok Sabha elections, the Samajwadi Party steadily increased its share of seats, from seventeen in 1996, to twenty in 1998, to twenty-six in 1999. Indeed, between 1998 and 1999 it managed to win six extra seats despite its vote share dropping by over 4 percentage points. This gain is therefore as much a testament to the organisational capacities of the party, such as the effective targeting of constituencies, as it is to its popular support.

**Figure 2: Vote share of the major parties in Uttar Pradesh, Lok Sabha 1991-1999**



Source: Election Commission of India ([www.eci.gov.in](http://www.eci.gov.in))

In the following sections I discuss in detail the political rhetoric and populist strategies employed by the SP in mobilising Yadav votes, and the way they are

coupled with the rhetoric of Yadav caste associations and the consolidation of a Yadav sense of commonality at all-India level.

## **The Yadavs' ancestral landscape: the Braj and Ahirwal areas**

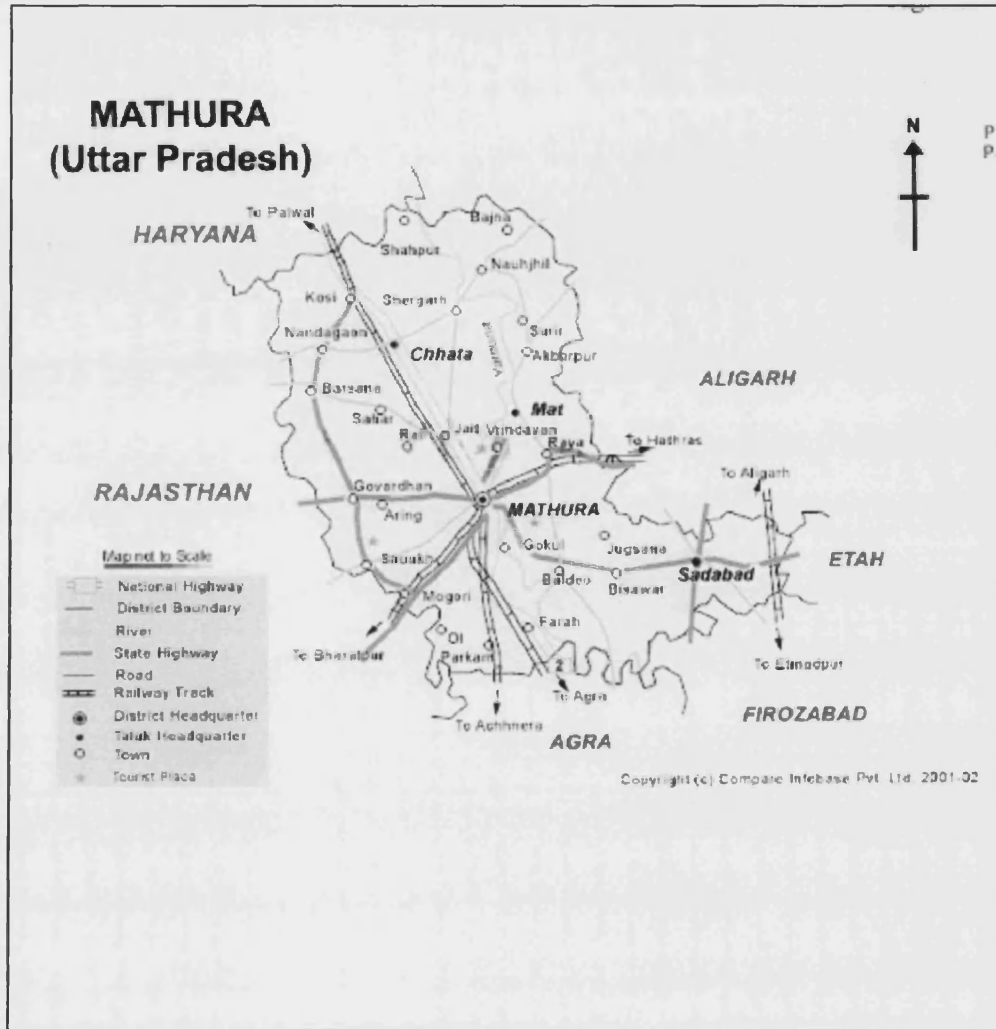
Mathura town lies in the so-called Braj area (see Map 3).<sup>11</sup> This area is well known as the mythical homeland of the god Krishna. It is also popularly known for its Buddhist and Jain historical heritage, which today is on display in Mathura museum. Many studies have analysed the Braj cultural region. From the seventeenth century onwards the history of Mathura and Braj were recorded in the accounts of European travellers and British administrators (Lane 1926; Whiteway 1879; Growse 1998; Drake-Brockman 1911; Joshi 1968). More recently, Entwistle (1987) has produced a detailed study of the area. In addition, the available contemporary literature on Krishna cults, devotionalism, new religious movements (i.e. Hare Krishnas) and pilgrimage, all provide detailed descriptions of Braj and Mathura socio-religious culture (Hein 1972; Hawley 1981; Lynch 1988, 1990, 1996; Haberman 1994).

Given the extensive literature on the area, in this introductory section I essentially focus upon the ethno-historical portrayal of Ahir/Yadav living space. 'Historical' emblems of past Ahir/Yadav kingdoms, together with Krishna's sacred topography, contribute a great deal to the story this thesis tells. Firstly, they offer to ordinary local Ahir/Yadavs visible and physical marks of their presumed glorious and divine heritage, shaping their sense of past and consolidating a sense of Yadav commonality. Secondly, these ethno-historic landmarks offer a wide repertoire of 'sources' to Yadav 'historians' and politicians, who then transform the available 'signs of history' into a successful political rhetoric.

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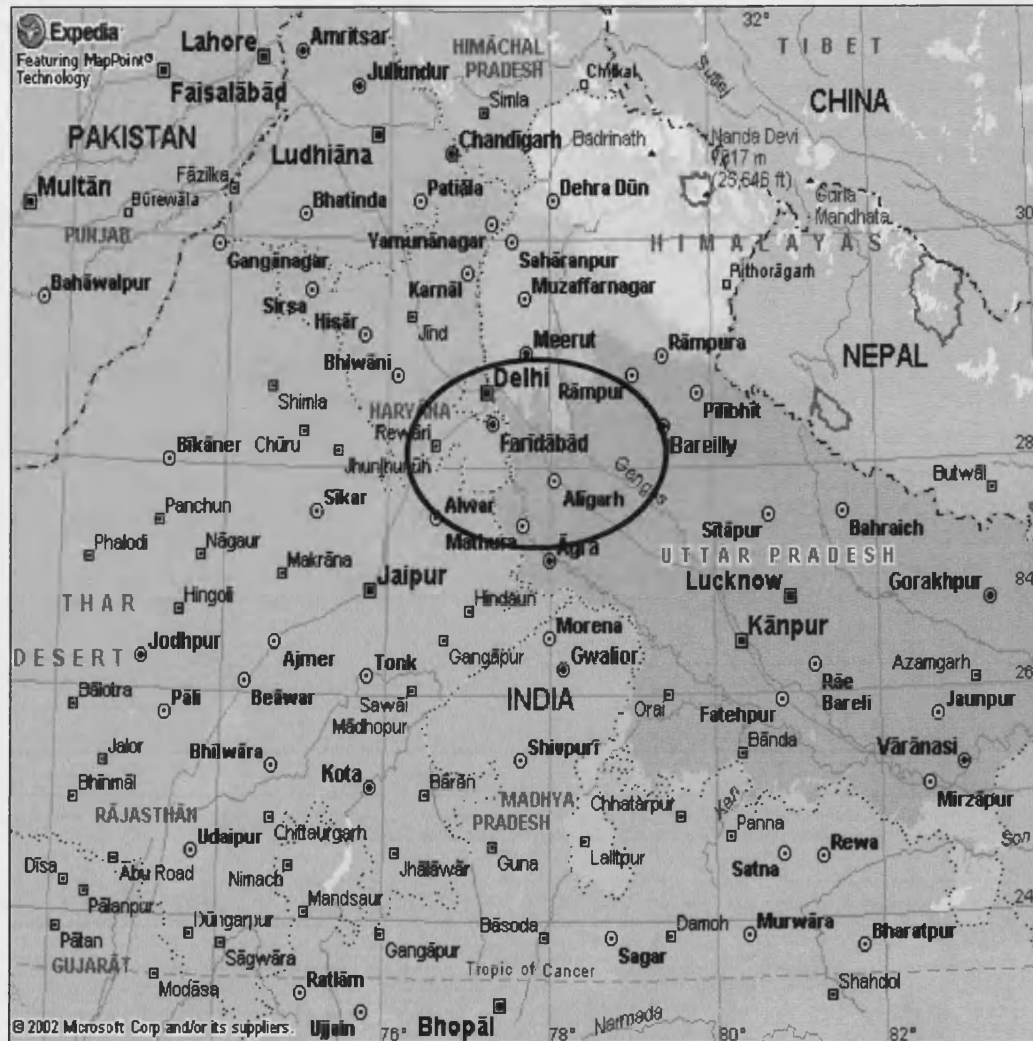
<sup>11</sup> During colonial times Mathura district was known under the name of Muttra. In 1803 it was included in British territory, but it was only in 1832 that the city of Mathura became a local administrative and government unit. During colonial times it was part of the North-West Provinces, Agra Division, and then from 1877 it was part of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh. In 1950 it became part of the new state of Uttar Pradesh.

**Map 3: Mathura district**



Source: [www.mapsofindia.com](http://www.mapsofindia.com)

Map 4: Braj-Ahirwal cultural area



Source: [www.expendia.com](http://www.expendia.com)



To begin with, the term 'Braj' means 'pasture' and a settlement of herders and cattle breeders. It immediately conveys the pastoral character of its indigenous inhabitants. The term Braj does not refer to an area with clearly defined boundaries. It is used to refer to the countryside where Krishna grazed his cattle and where all the sacred places associated with his childhood are located. However, more often it is used to describe a cultural area where the *Braj Bhasa* Hindi dialect is spoken (Rawat 1967). This dialect is popularly known for its sweetness and it is assumed to be the language that Krishna spoke while he lived among the pastoral communities of Braj (Entwistle 1987: 8). This area stretches from Mathura, Jaleshar, Agra, Hathras and Aligarh right up to Etah, Mainpuri and Farrukhabad districts. Its western borders blur into a less famous cultural-geographical region: the Ahirwal (the Land of the Ahirs) which includes parts of the district of Alwar, Bharatpur in Rajasthan and Mahendragarh, Gurgaon in the state of Haryana (see K.C. Yadav 1967).<sup>12</sup>

The Braj-Ahirwal geo-cultural area represents the historical and geographical universe within which most of the kinship and meaningful relations of my contemporary Mathura Yadav informants had taken place over the last two hundred years (see Map 4). In Mathura, the Yadav community traditionally inhabits three neighbourhoods: Anta Para, Sathgara and Ahir Para. Anta Para Yadavs claim to come from Ahirwal (Mahendragarh, Alwar and Bharatpur districts); Sathgara Yadavs claim to be the original inhabitants of Mathura and Braj; and finally, Ahir Para Yadavs migrated a century ago from the districts of Etah, Mainpuri, Kannauj and Farrukhabad. The bulk of the ethno-historical and ethnographic data presented in this thesis come from what I call 'the Braj-Ahirwal' cultural area.

The Braj-Ahirwal area is both the land of Krishna and of the Ahirs. Contemporary Ahir/Yadavs consider this area as their ancestral homeland. Hence, Yadavs coming from different parts of India claim their 'original' home to be Mathura. Informants endlessly narrate the stories of Yadav diasporas as reported in the Mahabharata epic (the longer of the two great Hindu epics). Yadavs are

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<sup>12</sup> Details on the Ahir caste in the Ahirwal-Braj cultural region are provided by Drake-Brockman (1905); Lupton (1906); Roberts (1906) and Neave (1910).

said to have followed Krishna's migration from Mathura to Dwarka (Gujarat). This narrative attempts to explain to outsiders why most of the Yadavs nowadays live outside Braj. Other legends tell of the Yadavs' abandonment of Braj to the Muslim invasions. According to these narratives the Yadav population of Braj had to take refuge in the forest to protect their women from the Muslim conquerors and as a result were dispersed throughout India. Finally, locals also tell the story of how Yadavs were decimated during the Yadav war, a fratricidal conflict in which Yadavs from different clans fought each other after the death of Krishna. This episode is also illustrated in the Mahabharata epic. As a matter of fact, the Ahir/Yadav population in Mathura district is not as dense as it is in the neighbouring districts of Etah, Jaleshar, Mainpuri, Farrukhabad, Kannauj and Etawah. Given the number of Yadavs living in these adjacent districts and the political strength of the Samajwadi Party there, this U.P. area has also been labelled the 'Yadav belt' or the *raj* (kingdom) of Mulayam Singh Yadav.<sup>13</sup>

Contemporary Yadav 'democratic kings (*rajyas*)' and ordinary Yadavs live in a socio-cultural religious landscape which is informed by historical landmarks of the 'past', little Yadav kingdoms and political enclaves. Amongst the most significant are the Ahir kingdom of Rewari (Rao 1977), the Ahir kingdom of Mahabhan and the Jadon-Rajput kingdoms of Jaleshar (Growse 1998: 11) and Karouli (Drake-Brockman 1911: 110). The aristocratic dynasties of the Jats of Hathras, Bharatpur and Alwar, which from the eighteenth century were carved out of parts of the Braj-Ahirwal territory, are also locally considered to descend from the Yadu dynasty and hence from Krishna (Mayaram 1997: 29). Local Yadavs endlessly portray themselves as heirs of this important 'historical' heritage'.

The royal merchant family of Mathura, the Seth, also enriches the range of historical signifiers employed by local Yadavs to assert their intimate and special link with Mathura town and its urban landscape. The Seth family was a family of bankers and acted as political representatives for the colonial government in the nineteenth century (Growse 1998: 14-15). The family conducted its business in Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta and it was very popular throughout northern India

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<sup>13</sup>According to the CSDS data (NES 1999), the largest caste/communities of U.P. are, in descending order, Chamar/Jatavs, Rajputs, Yadavs and Brahmans.

(ibid.: 14). The founder of the bank was a Gujarati Brahman and follower of *Pusthi Marg*, a devotional sect popular amongst merchant communities and centred in Braj.<sup>14</sup> Being childless at his death he left his fortune to Mani Ram Seth, one of his collaborators. Throughout the nineteenth century the Seth family remained the most influential family of Mathura. According to historical sources and oral histories the Yadavs of Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar had a special link with the Seths (Growse 1998: 179). By the beginning of the nineteenth century, local Ahirs were employed as administrators by the royal merchant family whose mansion was constructed nearby the Yadav locality.

One of the symbols of Mathura town is Holi Gate. The ornate sandstone Gate at the entrance to the old part of the city is Mathura's major landmark. Holi Gate is said to have been partly constructed with the money offered by Bola Ahir, an Ahir/Yadav who used to work for Chand Seth. This and other stories link topographical features of the town and the surrounding religious landscape with Yadavs past and present. Thus when they look at the Braj-Ahirwal landscape Mathura Yadavs see emblems of their past political success and importantly of their 'kinship' relation with the god Krishna. In fact, the Mathura landscape includes Krishna's birthplace. In recent years this religious site has been politicised by the Hindu nationalist agenda. As will become evident in the following sections, 'the political recruitment' of Krishna has indirectly helped the local Yadav community to think about Krishna as an 'historical' ancestor'.

### **Mathura: Krishna's 'divine' and 'political' business**

Mathura is recognised as one of Hinduism's seven sacred cities. One of the most profitable industries of the town is religious tourism. In recent years Mathura has been industriously advertised as a tourist site. The new Agra-Delhi motorway has

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<sup>14</sup> The origins of this movement are attributed to Vallabha at the turn of the sixteenth century (see Bennett 1993; Pocock 1973: 117-20). Vallabha discovered a *svapur* (form or image) of Krishna (himself born as a Kshatriya prince) as Sri Nathji which became the order deity. The Maharajas (or Gosain), the custodians of *Pusthi Marg Havelis* (the symbolic homes of Nandaraj, Krishna's foster father), are descendants of Vallabha and are regarded as body incarnations of Krishna. Braj is one of the main religious centres of the sect.

facilitated day trips from Agra to Delhi via Mathura. Hence, Mathura has been included in the popular 'package tours' which cover the Delhi-Agra-Jaipur travel circuit. Pilgrims come to Mathura throughout the year to bathe in the Yamuna and to visit temples, particularly the one erected on Krishna's birth-site and Dwarkadhish temple. The latter is the largest *Pusthi Marg* temple in the town. It is dedicated to Krishna as Dwarkadhish (Lord of Dwarka). Many come for the annual Braj *Caurasi Kos Parikrama* (a 160-mile circumambulation around the land of Braj), a forty-day pilgrimage visiting many of the places where Krishna performed his miraculous plays and sports (*lilas*) as a child (Lynch 1990). Braj is also the centre of popular Vaishnava sects such as the *Gaudiya Sampraday* (tradition), which attracts followers from Bengal, and the *Pusthi Marg* which is largely supported by Gujarati merchants.<sup>15</sup> There are also establishments of Ramanandi orders whose members are primarily devotees of Ram (see Burghart 1978). Ram and Krishna are considered to be *avatars* (incarnations) of the god Vishnu, who alongside Shiva is one of the most important great gods of Hinduism. In Mathura people popularly greet each other with cries of 'Jai Sri Ram', 'Jai Sri Krishna' or 'Radha Radha'. These forms of greeting reflect the Vaishnava character of the city.

The old part of the city is constructed on a hilly area on the banks of the Yamuna river. It is constituted by a complicated labyrinth of very narrow alleys (*gali*) which lead to the *ghats* (segments of river frontage). This area of the city was traditionally divided into 110 *mohallas* (Growse 1998: 271). Today, the neighbourhoods still remain an important focus of many cultural and religious activities. Certain neighbourhoods are mainly Muslim. An estimated twenty per cent of Mathura city population belongs to the Muslim community.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Vaishnavas are worshippers of Vishnu or any of his *avatars* including Ram and Krishna. Devotees of Krishna usually belong to a particular group, order or movement which may be referred to as *sampraday* or *marg* (tradition). The *Gaudiya Sampraday* is a devotional sect which was inspired by the Chaitanya who came from the province of Gauda in Bengal (alias *Gaudiya Sampraday*); it centres its cult on the love of Radha for Krishna (see Toomey 1994).

<sup>16</sup> Muslims represents the 8 per cent of Mathura district population and nearly 20 per cent of Mathura city population. In Mathura town their number is nearly 45,000 (Census of India 1991). According to the Census 1991, the total population of Mathura town is

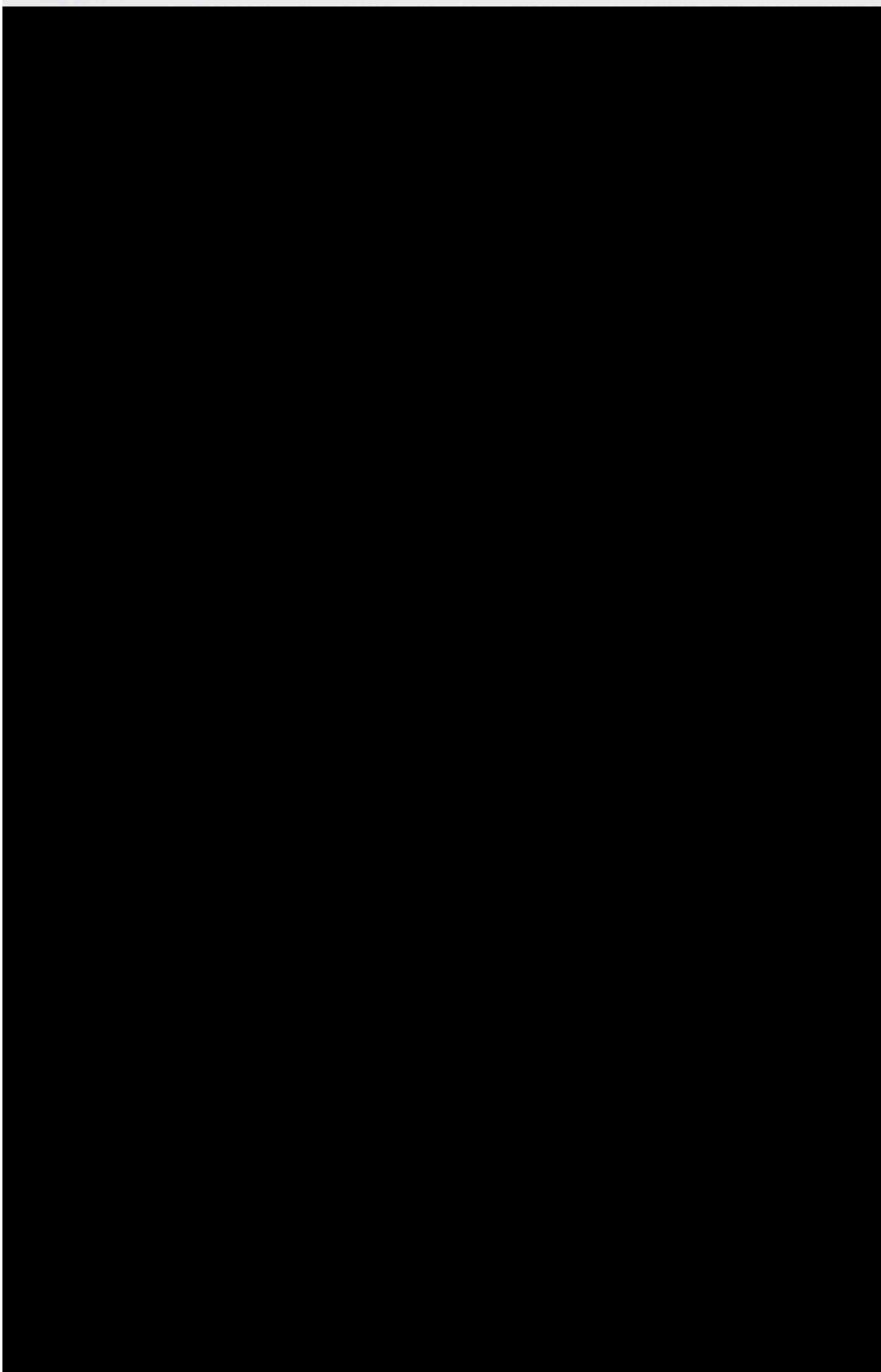
Chaubiya Para, the neighbourhood of pilgrimage guides, is located in the heart of the old part of the town. The Chaubes, with their 'typically carefree, spontaneous, extrovert, and boisterous way of life' are a symbol of Mathura and Braj culture (Entwistle 1987: 7; Lynch 1988). But 'Krishna' is not only big business for the Chaubes. The shops, restaurants, hotels, guesthouses and sweet-makers greatly benefit from the pilgrimage industry. Most of the inhabitants of Mathura are employed directly or indirectly in the religious industry. Even if in recent years light industry has begun to develop around Mathura, and the nearby Mathura Oil Refinery offers new forms of employment, religious tourism remains the most profitable activity of the town.

The Hindu religious character of the town makes Mathura an important site for Hindu nationalist leaders and their followers to gather and organise themselves for political action. Hindu religious images, in particular of Krishna, are deployed to forge and popularise Hindu nationalist agendas and to attract support for rallies and electoral campaigns. Hindu nationalism and religious business feed each other in a complex and effective way. As a result, Hindu pilgrimage centres are ideal places where 'activists publicise Hindu nationalist ideology and organise support for the movement' (McKean 1996: 43).

Krishna is one of the most celebrated deities in the Hindu pantheon and one of the most popular heroes of Hindu mythology. Krishna is a complex figure (see Singer 1968; Varma 1993). There is the Krishna of Braj, the mischievous child and the adolescent cowherd and lover of *gopis* (cowherdesses), the eternal paradox of flesh and spirit (cf. Hawley 1981). Then there is Krishna the warrior, the struggling hero of the Mahabharata (Hiltebeitel 1979, 1989, 1990). One of the great epic parts, the Bhagavad Gita is believed to have been spoken by Krishna himself. Here he is represented as the chief of the Yadavas who serves as Arjuna's charioteer in the Bharata epics; he is the god incarnate, the instructor of Arjuna and through him of all mankind.

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245,153. According to the provisional data of the Census 2001 the total population of the district is 2,069,578.



It is the image of Krishna the rigorous, moral, military and masculine advisor of Arjuna of the Bhagavad Gita that welcomes pilgrims into the *Krishnajanmabhumi* complex (see Plate 1). This complex was constructed in the late 1950s. It stands opposite the Shahi mosque which was allegedly constructed in the seventeenth century on the ruins of a Krishna nativity temple, the Kesava Deo temple. Hindu nationalist narratives tell the story of how a series of Muslim invaders, concluding with the Emperor Aurangzeb in the seventeenth century, demolished the Kesava Deo temple and built a mosque in its place. Hindu nationalists believe that Krishna was born 3,500 years ago in a prison cell where his parents were held captive by the tyrannical king Kamsa. This cell is supposed to be located under the present mosque. Today, against the rear wall of the mosque is an underground chamber representing the cell in which Krishna was born.

In 1984 the VHP decided to 'liberate' three temple sites in North India: Mathura, Varanasi and Ayodhya. Although the Sangh Parivar chose to focus its initial efforts on the *Ramjanmabhumi* issue in Ayodhya, in the last ten years it has also regularly taken up the issue of the liberation of Krishna's birthplace. In particular, on the yearly occasion of Krishna's birthday celebrations (*Janmastami*) and the anniversary of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, it has organised demonstrations and protests.<sup>17</sup>

The *Krishnajanmanbhumi* issue has also been raised in pre-election campaigning in an attempt to mobilise the Yadav community in Uttar Pradesh. The BJP employed this strategy in 1996. As a Hindu activist reported to a journalist 'though Lord Krishna cannot be compared with Lord Ram as a role model of the Hindu way of life, and though the Mathura deity does not have as much popular appeal as Rama, we (VHP) had thought it would generate enthusiasm at least among the Yadav community in Uttar Pradesh who consider Krishna as their ancestor' (Ramakrishnan 1995: 11).

Despite the fact that the demonstrations organised by the VHP never achieved the expected success and Mathura is claimed to be a place where Hindu

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<sup>17</sup> The Hindustan Times, 22 August 1995; Frontline, 8 September 1995; The Economic Times, 20 August 1996; Indian Express, 13 August 1998; The Hindustan Times, 15 August 2000.

Muslim relations are harmonious and peaceful, from the 1950s onwards rioting seems to have been a recurrent event. In recent times the city has been under curfew in December 1992, August 2000, and March 2002. In all these instances Muslim-Hindu or Christian-Hindu tensions were the cause. Hindu nationalist anti-Muslim rhetoric is present in the everyday life of Mathura residents. Regardless of apparent calm, local people are aware that violence can spark in the town at any moment. There is a permanent military command, 'the black cat', whose duty is to protect the temple and the mosque twenty-four hours a day. This regiment has its headquarters just two hundred metres from Sadar Bazaar and it is a constant reminder of the tension between local Hindus and Muslims.

Mathura is undoubtedly a 'BJP town'. The Hindu nationalist party won the 1991, 1996, 1998 and 1999 Lok Sabha elections in Mathura. It draws its strength from the numerous Bania, Brahman and also Jat communities. The winning candidate in the last three Lok Sabha elections, Tej Veer Singh, is a Jat. Also the five Vidhan Sabha constituencies of the Mathura district: Goverdhan, Chatta, Mat, Mathura-Vrindavan and Gokul have recently been dominated by the BJP. In the 1996 Vidhan Sabha elections, four of the five constituencies went to the BJP (Goverdhan, Chatta, Mat and Mathura-Vrindavan), and only one (Gokul) to Congress.

### **The Yadavs' 'imaginary numerical strength' in Mathura town**

It could be expected that in the BJP stronghold of Mathura, the Yadav-dominated SP and the Yadav community as a whole lack an effective political voice. In contrast, local Yadavs are viewed as a numerous and politically strong community. Since my arrival in town, non-Yadav informants kept telling me that my choice of Mathura as a site for my research was an excellent one and this was because the Yadavs were very numerous in town. However, such a claim is far from reality. The total Yadav population in Mathura district is around 20,000, which makes them a tiny minority when compared with the numerical strength of the Jat, the Brahman or the Chamar communities. Since 1991, Mathura has been a stronghold for the BJP. In the last ten years the SP, which in Uttar Pradesh is viewed as the party of the Yadavs, has not had much chance of winning a



parliamentary seat in the Mathura constituency. Yet it is viewed as powerful and vocal. During fieldwork, many local issues, such as the lack of water and problems with electricity, have been politicised and manipulated by local Yadav SP activists and used as occasions for demonstrations or strikes.

The majority of Mathura town's Yadavs support the Samajwadi Party. Locally, this party is also popularly described as a '*goonda* party': a party of musclemen and fixers. At the local level its reputation is moulded by the violent and aggressive outlook of some of the local Yadavs and members of the SP. Hansen (2001: 81) describes the SP's ethos of violence and male honour in a Bombay Muslim neighbourhood. In a similar way, in Mathura the Samajwadi Party's leaders and activists stress their bravery in confronting anyone if necessary. People are afraid of their language of 'muscle power'. Yadavs in town have a '*dada*' (strongman) image. A number of Yadav informants pointed out to me how they are more feared than admired. Indeed, during my fieldwork a number of violent episodes occurred involving Yadavs. However these do not wholly justify the extremely bad reputation of Yadavs in the town. I suggest that the Yadav reputation is based more on rumours than real 'violent' actions.

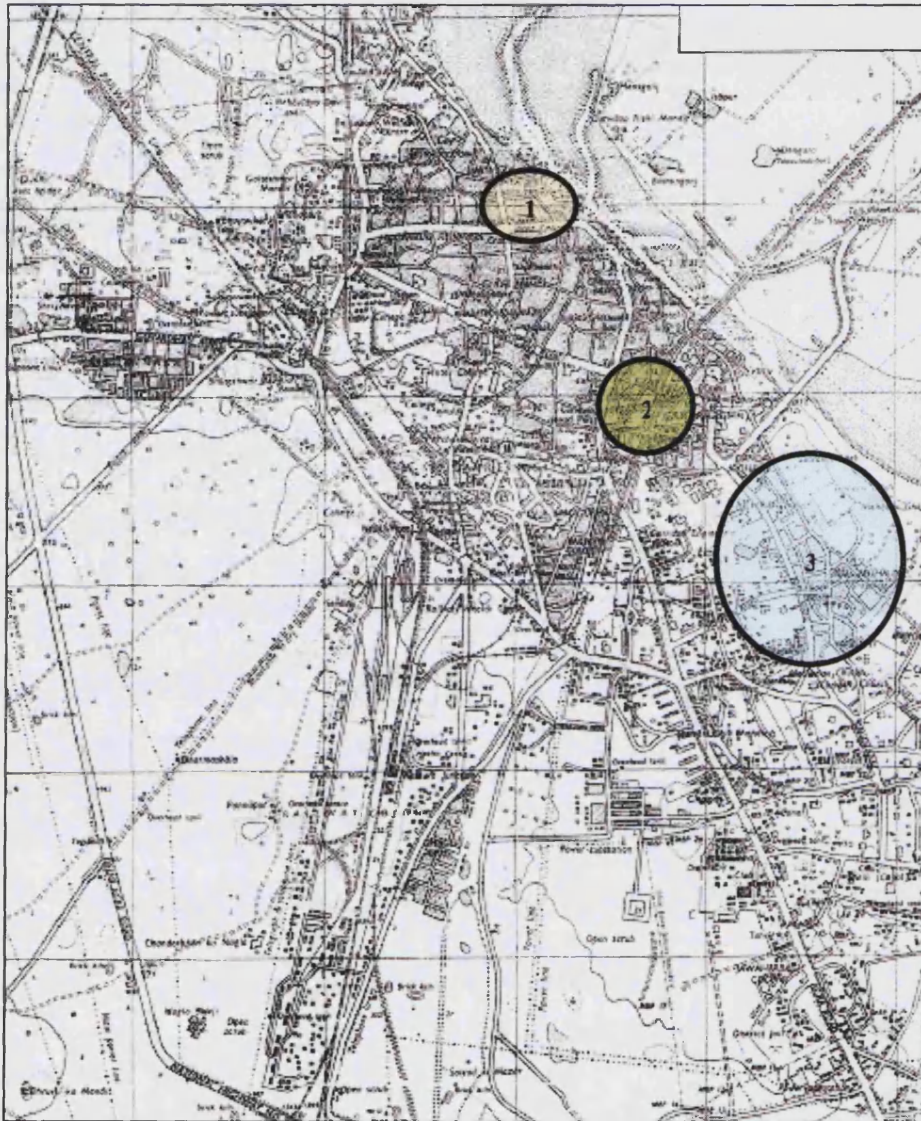
The ethnography presented in this thesis suggests that the Yadav community appears numerically strong and politically powerful because of its impressive organisation and 'reputation'. It is its political activism and its reputation for aggressiveness and violence that makes the community visible. As Dipankar Gutpa has argued, 'politics is not only about numbers it is also about ability to exercise power in a concerted and organised fashion' (2000: 171). Similarly Hansen points out how 'the idea of relatively stable "support bases" and "constituencies" of parties or movements is highly evanescent and largely depends on strategic performances, as well as local configurations of power in different localities' (2001: 56). What is at stake in Mathura is the organisational ability of the Yadav caste associations and the Samajwadi Party which shapes ideas of what the 'Yadav' community is.

As mentioned above, Yadavs inhabit three neighbourhoods in Mathura: Sathgara, Anta Para and Ahir Para (see Map 5). Sathgara is located in the heart of Mathura's historical centre. Anta Para is located just outside the main entrance to

the old part of the town (Holi Gate). Ahir Para is located in Sadar Bazaar near the Cantonment area. Traditionally these three neighbourhoods were respectively inhabited by Goallavanshi-Ahirs, Yaduvanshi-Ahirs and Nandavanshi-Ahirs. In Sathgara, according to local leaders, there are 250 Yadav households. Their members are mainly involved in the small local dairy business. 60 Yadav households populate the neighbourhood of Anta Para. Few amongst them are still involved in milk-business. Anta Para Yadavs were traditionally bullock-cart drivers. Nowadays, they are mainly engaged in business and government service. Ahir Para accounts for 400 Yadav households. The total population of Yadavs in Mathura city is estimated at around ten thousand by local Yadav caste leaders. However, pre-election calculations made by different political parties estimated fifteen thousand. In their calculations they also counted the Yadavs living in Krishna Nagar and in the Mathura Oil Refinery residential colony. Yadavs who migrated to Mathura in recent times tend to reside in these localities.

At the beginning of the twentieth century each of the three Yadav neighbourhoods (Sathgara, Anta Para and Ahir Para) had their own caste associations: the Goallavanshi Kshatriya Sabha, and two both named the Ahir Kshatriya Sabha. It was only in the late 1970s that these associations fused together to form the *Mathura Yadav Sammelan* (association) (MYS), a caste association affiliated to the All-India Yadav Mahasabha (AIYM). In 1981, the MYS organised the AIYM's forty-eighth conference. Informants generally pointed to this event as the start of the Yadav 'awakening' in Mathura. Such local reorganisation and mobilisation should be understood in the context of changes that occurred at the macro-level of the AIYM structure, which I discuss in detail in Chapter 2. The MYS is very active and organises numerous meetings and religious festivals. These coupled with the activities organised by the local unit of the Samajwadi Party and an efficient use of the local media make the Yadav community extremely visible in the public arena.

### Map 5: Mathura town, Yadav neighbourhoods



Source: Entwistle (1987: supplement)

#### Key:

- 1 Sathgara
- 2 Anta Para
- 3 Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar

## Map 6: Sadar Bazaar locality



Source: Entwistle (1987: supplement)

### Key:

- 1 Mali Mohalla
- 2 Arat Mohalla
- 3 Sabzi Mandi/Bazaar Street
- 4 Ahir Para
- 5 Zaharkhana
- 6 Bara Kasia
- 7 Chota Kasia
- 8 Mewati Mohalla
- 9 Dhobi Mohalla
- 10 Regimental Bazaar

## **The sociology of Yadav living space: Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar locality**

Today, local Yadavs say that their population in Sadar Bazaar is about 4,000. Within Sadar Bazaar the Yadav and the Muslim communities are numerically the strongest. They are followed by Malis, Baniyas, Dhobis, Brahmans and Jatavs. Ahir Para borders the Dhobi *mohalla*, Mewati *mohalla*, Regimental Bazaar and Bazaar Street (see Map 6). The northeast part of Sadar Bazaar is mainly Muslim: Chotta Kasai Para, Bara Kasai Para and Zaharkhana *mohalla*. Kasai/Qureshis, Pathans, Mewatis and Bishti/Abbasis live in these localities. Low castes such as Jatavs and Valimiki mainly live in Mukheria Nagar in the northwest part of Sadar Bazaar. Mainly Baniyas and Brahmans inhabit the central part of the market. Towards the northwest, within the so-called Yamuna Bhag area, Malis (gardeners) mainly reside. South of Ahir Para, the area called Regimental Bazaar is a mixed caste area even if the Yadavs outnumber the other castes and communities. Sadar Bazaar corresponds to four municipality wards: Ward 2, Ward 4, Ward 10 and Ward 15. At present, the elected municipality members of Wards 2, 4 and 10 belong to the Yadav community. Thus, local Yadavs are not only numerically dominant but also politically powerful.

Sadar Bazaar's varied social composition is related to the history of the Cantonment station on whose outskirts it has developed in the last two hundred years. The concept of the cantonment was developed by the British in the second half of the eighteenth century. Considerations for the health and discipline of the troops made the East India Company start to set up residential areas for soldiers and their officers. Cantonment stations, though primarily meant for Army personnel, incorporated civilians who provided services to the army. Thus, milk-vendors, merchants, vegetable and fruit suppliers, butchers, barbers, carpenters, cooks, sweepers, gardeners, doctors, and water carriers moved in and began to live in areas often called 'bazaar areas', where they rendered services or pursued their trades and professions. In various Indian towns we still find localities called Sadar Bazaar which stand close to Cantonments and the Civil Lines. The Civil Lines city quarters are another British legacy. These areas were occupied (and still are) by the government administrative offices (courts, police and district

headquarters) and the bungalows of their employees (and, in the past, by British expatriates).

The Mathura Cantonment occupied a fairly large stretch of land between the city and the Civil Lines. Following Independence it still maintained a high level of government autonomy. Life in the Cantonment is indeed different when compared with life in the other localities of Mathura town. Its inhabitants provide a unique character to the place. First of all people from different parts of the country live together and they have developed a peculiar 'Cantonment culture'. The common language is English and usually the wives and sons of army people portray themselves as 'cosmopolitan' and 'modern'. They have transformed their protected Cantonment environment into small 'Bombay' and 'Delhi' middle and upper class enclaves. Needless to say, they generally dislike the old parts of the city because they are too 'backward', 'dirty' and 'noisy'. Within the Cantonment there are clubs, internet-cafes, restaurants, beauty-parlours, shops, and sports complexes. The lives of its inhabitants revolve around these centres and regular trips to Delhi.

Over the years Sadar Bazaar has gradually lost its role as the main bazaar in the Cantonment and Civil Lines. Local merchants (Baniyas) tell stories of the gradual deterioration of the bazaar following Independence. According to them, during colonial times it was an affluent market. Soon after Independence, the shift of large battalions to the nearby Meerut Cantonment affected local business. Moreover, over the years the Cantonment structure has become more self-sufficient and few people now come to shop in Sadar Bazaar, and instead go to the Cantonment emporium.

Consequently, in the last fifty years the economic fabric of Sadar Bazaar has changed substantially. In particular, over the years the relation between specific castes and professions/services has weakened. For example, the decrease in demand for milk, meat, vegetables and for services such as clothes-washing, barbers and so on, encouraged many people to leave their caste-specific profession and to set up their own business: petty business, taxi companies, printing-presses, sweet-shops. Moreover, the younger generation are encouraged to study and to participate in the Civil Service competitions. Table 1.1 shows the generational change in occupations. Men living in Sadar Bazaar today are

significantly more likely than their grandfathers to be in business (42 per cent compared with 31 per cent).<sup>18</sup> They are also significantly more likely to be manual workers and significantly less likely to be in agriculture and dairy farming.

**Table 1.1: Occupation of men by generation, Sadar Bazaar<sup>19</sup>**

	Men	Father	Grandfather
Professionals	6%	3%	4%
Government jobs	24%	35%	19%
Business	42%	35%	31%
Manual	24%	14%	14%
Agriculture	4%	12%	32%
Number	191	225	225

Source: Mathura Survey

Notes: Table entries for 'Men' are based on the pooled male sample of all men in work (responses of male respondents combined with the responses of female respondents who provided information about their husbands). Non-workers (9% of all men) are not included to ensure comparability with previous generations. The entries for 'Father' and 'Grandfather' are based on information that male and female respondents gave about their fathers and grandfathers.

**Table 1.2: Occupation of men by caste, Sadar Bazaar<sup>20</sup>**

	Profess- ional	Govt. Jobs	Business	Manual	Agriculture And dairy	Non worker	N
Brahman	32%	44%	8%	8%	-	8%	25
Bania	-	4%	86%	4%	-	7%	28
Other Upper Castes	5%	21%	42%	21%	-	11%	19
Yadav	4%	18%	46%	13%	10%	10%	61
Other OBC	-	30%	30%	30%	-	10%	10
SC	-	36%	14%	37%	-	14%	22
Muslim	-	18%	28%	44%	3%	8%	39
Other	-	-	33%	50%	17%	-	6
All	5%	21%	39%	21%	3%	9%	210

<sup>18</sup> Significance tests were run on all tables. The words 'more likely' or 'less likely' are used to indicate that a difference exists between two sub-groups, or between a sub-group and the average, which is significant at the 0.05% level or above.

<sup>19</sup> 'Professional' includes Doctors, Lawyers, Accountants and Teachers. 'Government jobs' is mainly Class III and Class IV employees. 'Business' is mainly medium and small businessmen and petty shopkeepers. 'Manual' includes Mechanics, Electricians, Tailors, Dhobis, Ayahs and Sweepers. 'Agriculture' includes Livestock farming and Dairy farming.

<sup>20</sup> The category 'other upper castes' includes mainly Rajputs, Jats, Punjabis and Saxenas; the category other OBC, mainly Malis while the category SC comprises Dhobis, Chamar/Jatavs and Bhangi/Valmiki.

Source: Mathura Survey

Notes: Table entries are based on the full pooled male sample (no information was recorded for 8 cases).

**Table 1.3: Education of men by caste, Sadar Bazaar**

	Illiterate	Up to 9 <sup>th</sup>	Matric and plus two	Graduate	Number
Brahman	-	4%	31%	65%	26
Bania	-	21%	43%	36%	28
Other Upper Castes	12%	24%	59%	6%	17
Yadav	7%	40%	39%	14%	57
Other OBC	10%	40%	30%	20%	10
SC	36%	23%	32%	9%	22
Muslim	24%	49%	20%	7%	41
Other	67%	17%	-	17%	6
All	14%	31%	34%	21%	207

Source: Mathura Survey

Notes: Table entries are based on the pooled male sample (no information was recorded for 11 cases).

**Table 1.4: Education of women by caste, Sadar Bazaar**

	Illiterate	Up to 9 <sup>th</sup>	Matric and plus two	Graduate	Number
Brahman	5%	16%	42%	37%	19
Bania	-	40%	25%	35%	20
Other Upper Castes	31%	54%	15%	-	13
Yadav	52%	29%	17%	2%	52
Other OBC	29%	57%	14%	-	7
SC	67%	17%	6%	11%	18
Muslim	56%	31%	6%	6%	32
Other	80%	-	-	20%	5
All	41%	30%	17%	12%	166

Source: Mathura Survey

Notes: Table entries are based on the pooled female sample (no information was recorded for 7 cases).



**Table 1.5: Wealth and caste in Sadar Bazaar<sup>21</sup>**

	Poorest	Middle	Richest	Number
Brahman	14%	43%	43%	28
Bania	7%	61%	32%	28
Other Upper Castes	16%	74%	11%	19
Yadav	24%	55%	21%	66
Other OBC	20%	50%	30%	10
SC	23%	64%	14%	22
Muslim	24%	56%	20%	41
Other	38%	63%	-	8
Total	20%	57%	23%	222

Source: Mathura Survey

Notes: Table entries are based on all respondents (no information was recorded for 3 cases).

The Banias are traditionally a merchant community. Even today, most of them (86 per cent) are involved in business (see Table 1.2). They are one of the richest communities in Sadar Bazaar (see Table 1.5), and both men and women are well-educated (see Tables 3 and 4). They now have shops in the Holi Gate market in the centre of town. Sadar Bazaar has become the place where they tend to live, but not the setting of their business. In Sadar Bazaar there are 250 Bania (Agrawal) households, mostly located on Bazaar Street. The Bania residential area revolves around Sadar Bazaar Street and the Hanuman temple, where the local Brahman community also usually go for *puja*. The local Bania-Agrawals have their own caste association which is very active, and in particular facilitates marriage arrangements at the regional level (see Babb 1998).

The Brahmans live mainly around the main bazaar street. They are the most well-off community in the area (see Table 1.5) and they are largely involved in professional jobs as doctors, teachers, lawyers, civil servants, journalists,

<sup>21</sup> The wealth index is constructed by combining which assets people have with how much money they spend on food and other household necessities per month. Assets range from 1 to 5, with 5 the richest and 1 the poorest. People in the richest category own a car or a jeep or have a servant. People in the next category own a scooter AND a colour television, people in the middle category own a scooter OR a colour television, people in the fourth category own a radio, or a black and white television, or an electric fan and people in the poorest category do not own any of these things. Household expenditure also ranges from 1 to 5. People in the richest category spend more than Rs.5000 per month, and people in the poorest category spend less than Rs.1500 per month. The wealth index is the sum of these two different measures and is split into three categories: poorest, middle, and richest.

priests and so on (see Table 1.2). They are well educated, and a high number of both men and women have been to university (see Table 1.3 and 1.4). Besides the Bania and the Brahmans another numerically important community are the Dhobis (washermen), classified as a Scheduled Caste. Local Dhobis (100 households) are still mainly engaged in their traditional profession, even if in recent years new environmental laws prevent them from washing clothes in the Yamuna river. This caused a lot of resentment amongst the community, which in 1999 went on strike twice. Many Dhobis are now engaged in the tailoring profession and they encourage their sons to study and obtain a place in government service. Overall, the Scheduled Castes are mainly either involved in their 'traditional' manual occupations or in government jobs, where they have benefited from the reservation policy (see Table 1.2). As shown in Tables 1.3 and 1.4, there are still high levels of illiteracy, particularly among Scheduled Caste women (67%).

Amongst the OBC, the Mali community (300 households) which traditionally grew vegetables on the banks of the Yamuna river have begun in recent years to be attracted by other professions. Local Malis are strong supporters of the BJP and they run a local branch of the RSS, where Hindu activists meet daily for their exercises. A large part of Sadar Bazaar is inhabited by Muslims who live in Chota Kasai Para, Bara Kasai Para, Zaharkana, and Mewati *mohallas*. They belong to different castes. Traditionally, they used to be butchers and sold meat. The Bara Kasai used to sell cow and buffalo meat, and the Chotta Kasais mainly goat and chicken meat.

In the last fifty years, local Bara Kasais have begun to call themselves Qureshi and to adopt pure Islamic practices through the influence of 'Tablighi Jamat'. The Qureshi movement is a large one. According to the vice-president of the All-India Jamiat-UI-Quresh, who resides in Mathura, there are sixty-five million Kasais in India and forty million in U.P. In Sadar Bazaar, local Muslims are mainly involved in small business or they are tailors, mechanics and rickshaw pullers (see Table 1.2). The last abattoir in Bara Kasai was closed fifteen years

ago for reasons of hygiene.<sup>22</sup> A small number of local Kasai/Qureshis are still involved in the cattle and buffalo trade.

Thus in the past and to some extent in the present the interaction between the Ahir/Yadavs and the Kasai/Qureshis was (and is) based on business, with the selling and buying of cows and buffaloes. However, the cow is not only a commercial link connecting the two communities; it is also the symbol that draws the line between them. I have often been told, 'Muslims eat cows and Yadavs worship them'. With this statement the separation between the two communities was asserted. No Yadav would ever sell an old or an ill cow to a Kasai/Qureshi and this is because they believe that Kasai/Qureshis will slaughter and eat it.

Historically cow protection movements have significantly shaped the formation of the Yadav community in northern India. Gyanendra Pandey (1983) describes how, since the end of the nineteenth century, the protection of the cow was central to the Ahir/Yadav movement in the Bhojpuri area (see Pinch 1996: 118-138). Archival material and secondary sources illustrate that cow protection was also a major concern for the Ahir/Yadavs of Braj and Ahirwal (Rao 1979).<sup>23</sup> As a matter of fact, the cow protection issue is still a lively one in Mathura town. In the following chapters I explore a number of instances in which the symbol of the cow is used to draw boundaries between local Ahir/Yadavs and Kasai/Qureshis, and other instances when it is downplayed to consolidate the Yadav-Muslim alliance which supports the Samajwadi party.

With regard to local relations between Ahir/Yadavs and Kasai/Qureshis, most of the local mythology that I collected portrayed the Yadav community in perennial struggle with the 'barbaric outsiders': the Muslims. These narratives argue that if contemporary Yadavs have a middle-low status and some of them are poor it is because of the Muslim invasion of the past. The basic theme of these

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<sup>22</sup> Mathura town is also under the Cow Protection Act. In December 2001 U.P. state's Cow Protection Commission totally banned cow slaughter in the state and reinforced the Prevention Act of 1975 by making the killing of a cow a criminal act. Local Kasai/Qureshi have not slaughtered buffaloes and goats for more than thirty years now.

<sup>23</sup> NAI Home Department, Political A. Proceedings, June 1910, File 138, *Petition against the slaughter of cows in the city and district of Muttra*. NAI Home Department, Political, Deposit, January 1918, File 33, *Memorial protest against the slaughter of cows in the city of Muttra*.

narratives is that Yadavs were Rajput and wealthy, but in order to protect their women and cows from the Muslim invasion they had to take refuge in the jungle where they became herders and nomadic tribes. This anti-Muslim folk rhetoric is extremely widespread amongst Sadar Bazaar's Yadavs and other Hindu communities. In particular it is young people who describe the Muslims as fanatics 'without heart'. Contrary to this, older generations are more prone to portray a peaceful and harmonious cohabitation.

This generational dualism is also evident at the level of popular religion. Written sources and oral histories collected in Mathura say that years ago the local temples dedicated to Gogaj and to Salvar Sultan attracted both Muslims and Hindu followers. Nowadays only Hindus worship at these shrines. In Sadar Bazaar Hindus still visit local *dargahs* (Roshan Baba Pir, Dinka Baba and Viran Majsid) on Thursday. Many Yadavs visit these shrines regularly. However, I never met members of the local Bania and Brahman communities in these settings. Generally when members of the Yadav community pass by the local *dargahs* even if they do not stop to offer *puja* they bow their head as a sign of respect. However, the younger generations of Yadavs has stopped visiting Muslim shrines because they consider them 'Muslim gods'. On many occasions I have been told that since they already have so many gods, Hindus do not need to worship Muslim ones.

If religious syncretism is drifting away, separating Hindu from Muslim, the same is also happening in the day-to-day practices of castes which have for generations maintained Muslim and Hindu traditions. I am referring to the local Meo and Bishti/Abbasi communities. The case of the Rajput-Muslim Meos has been widely illustrated (see for example Jamous 1996). In Braj and surrounding areas Meos, Gujars, Jats and Ahir/Yadavs share the same kind of kinship and claim descent from Krishna. Locally, in the Mewati *mohalla*, which borders Ahir Para, local people still claim to be Rajput and to share with their Ahir/Yadav neighbours a similar clan system and preferential hypergamous marriage pattern (see Chapter 3). The Bishti/Abbasi, traditional water-carriers, also maintain similar customs. The local Bishti community of Sadar Bazaar look down on the Qureshis because they practise cross-cousin marriages. The Bishti community celebrates Hindu festivals like Diwali, Goverdhan Puja and Holi. During their

marriage ceremonies it is customary to offer money both to the local temple and mosque. For example, the family of Babbu Abassi, who is a cattle-trader, regularly visit the Zahar Khana mosque on Fridays, and on Monday they visit the Chamunda Devi shrine, and on Thursdays they visit the Hanuman temple. They absolutely do not eat beef and they consider Kasai/Qureshis ritually inferior to themselves because of their habit of eating cow and buffalo meat. Like the Yadavs they do not sell an old cow or an ill cow to the Kasai/Qureshi, but they donate it instead to Cow Protection houses (*goshala*) (see Lodrick 1981). However these Hindu Muslim syncretic practices are strongly criticised by the Qureshi community, and there is a strong social pressure to conform to 'proper' Muslim customs.

I now turn to the largest community of Sadar Bazaar: the Yadavs. It is worth noticing that within Mathura, Sadar Bazaar is now considered a Yadav 'small town' and the presence of other communities is often downplayed. Sadar Bazaar/Ahir Para Yadavs traditionally belong to the Nandavanshi-Ahir subdivision. During British times, they immigrated to Mathura from the neighbouring districts of Mainpuri, Etah, Farrukhabad and Kannauj. At the time, Mathura was an important army-training centre for Ahir soldiers. In addition, they were employed as bullock-cart and/or truck drivers. However, military service was not the only source of employment and income offered by the Army structure. The civil and military population of the Cantonment demanded regular milk supplies. Consequently, Ahirs and Goallas from nearby districts migrated to Mathura and began to work in large numbers for the Cantonment dairy, or they set up their own milk business (see Salzman 1989). After Independence, the shift of an important battalion caused a sudden fall in demand for milk supplies. This together with the lack of grazing land, the reinforcement of rules implemented to regulate the commerce of milk, and the establishment of a public dairy brought about important socio-economic changes in Ahir Para.



Plate 2: Dairy Business, Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar



Plate 3: Transportation Business, Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar

Several milk vendors began to use the surplus milk to make sweets and they set up *halwai* shops (sweet-shops). They then began to invest their profits in other types of business such as transportation and small-scale construction industries. This economic transformation followed a recurrent pattern: a shift from cow-herding and milk selling occupations to the transportation business (from bullock-cart to motor vehicle) and then to the construction business. A significant number of Yadavs in the Braj-Ahirwal area are involved in the real estate and building sectors.<sup>24</sup> Since the 1970s, when the Mathura Oil Refinery opened, a substantial number of Ahir Para Yadavs began to transport oil for the Refinery on a contract basis (see Plate 2 and Plate 3). Those Yadavs who did not set up their own business sought jobs in the army and the police, the other two traditional spheres of occupation for Ahir/Yadavs in northern India. More recently, the government has become one of the most esteemed sources of employment, especially amongst the new generations who benefit from caste reservation (see Table 1.2).

In Ahir Para the number of people involved in the milk business is not very high and has decreased with the years. In the economy of Ahir Para, parallel to these activities, there is a realm of illegal activities: extortion, protection-rackets, usury, and petty criminality. These activities are prominent, even if difficult to assess in a systematic way. The Yadavs of Ahir Para are often described by outsiders as *goondas*. They are commonly referred to as thugs who base their strength on muscle power. Such comments, rumours and stereotypes say a lot about how Ahir Para Yadavs are perceived in the collective imagination: they are numerous, strong, united and aggressive towards others. Casteism (*jativad*) and violence are the other two attributes with which they are generally credited. Such a reputation is linked to the political involvement and connections of a number of local Yadavs as fixers and brokers and to their *dada* (strongman) culture (see Hansen 2001).

At least five persons belonging to the Yadav community act locally as brokers and fixers (*dalal*) in Sadar Bazaar and at the same time they occupy local

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<sup>24</sup> Similarly Hansen (2001: 102) has described how Shiv Sena's backbone members and organisers are 'builders cum politicians'.

political positions.<sup>25</sup> The important role of politicians (local caste/clan leaders, party activists, ward representatives) as the link between the state and society in India has been widely recognised (Ruud 2000: 115). In Uttar Pradesh ‘politicians’ are often the link between criminality/corruption, the police and society (Brass 1997a; see also Jeffrey and Lerche 2000; Fuller and Harriss 2000: 12-13). Ahir Para Yadavs are connected with the *political* network of central Uttar Pradesh. At the base of these connections are kinship ties. Jaleshar, Etah, Mainpuri, Etawah, Kannauj and Farrukhabad are the districts of origin of the main lineages present in the neighbourhood. This area is also the space of the ‘kindred of recognition’ and the territory within which women are usually exchanged (Mayer 1960:161) and, as mentioned above, it is popularly known as the ‘Yadav belt’ (English word) (see Chapter 3).

In this area over the last fifty years local Yadavs have strongly benefited from state land reforms: from being cowherders, petty cultivators or tenants they have become the major landowners of the region. This economic progress has been accompanied by growing political success. Today, a significant number of MLAs and MPs in the districts of Jaleshar, Etah, Etawah, Kannauj and Mainpuri are from the Yadav caste. Their leader and mentor is Mulayam Singh Yadav, who is originally from a village near the town of Etawah. He is a Kamaria-Nandavanshi-Yadav and he belongs to the same Yadav subdivision as the Yadavs of Ahir Para. ‘We give our daughters to Mulayam’s *parivar* (family)’ my informants often said proudly. Kinship ties (real or fictive) are viewed as important channels through which political power and economic resources are controlled and distributed. By being ‘close’ to the centre of Yadav power, the Yadavs of Ahir Para are said to be in a position to get more benefits from the new redistribution of state resources than, for example, the other Yadavs of Mathura town living in the neighbourhoods of Sathgara and Anta Para.

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<sup>25</sup> As Hansen suggests ‘these men and their networks constitute the elementary units of popular urban neighbourhoods. They embody the opacity of urban life, and some of them, and some of their activities, also form units of “criminal racket”-gangs of slumlords, bootleggers, extortionists and smugglers’ (2001: 188).



## **Mahadev Ghat Akhara: the local Yadav ‘political’ stage**

Yadav males in Sadar Bazaar have two main public meeting points: Mahadev Ghat gymnasium (*akhara*) and Ahir Para garden (*bagica*). *Akharas* and *bagicas* are at the heart of Mathura local culture (see Lynch 1990, 1996). These gymnasiums/gardens, where there is a wrestling arena, provide a space for exercising, worship and also engaging in other social activities (see also Kumar 1988). These places are the locus of local political activities and they are important stages where politics is locally performed (see Hansen 1996). In Sadar Bazaar these settings are also the informal headquarters of local Yadav caste associations. The two main Sadar Bazaar gymnasiums are the focii for Yadav factionalism and internal feud-like disputes. Different factions visit different *akharas/bagicas*. However, whenever the community meet to discuss issues that transcend internal factions and rivalries they meet at Mahadev Ghat. And it is Mahadev Ghat that this section is about. It is by spending long hours in this setting that I witnessed many of the political performances described in the following chapters. Indeed, this political stage condenses many of the symbols and values which serve as primary reference points in the development and performance of the Yadav political rhetoric explored in this thesis. Central to this rhetoric are Krishna’s muscular pro-socialist deeds and Yadav martial qualities. Mahadev Ghat is the place where local Yadavs produce and cultivate their sense of community, their fighting spirit and *goonda* reputation.

Mahadev Ghat lies on the bank of the Yamuna river in the Yamuna Bagh locality. The religious complex comprises a wrestling area and a number of shrines which lie in a forest-like landscape. The main shrines are dedicated to Shiva, Hanuman and Krishna. Indeed the morphology of this religious landscape, the position of the trees, of the wrestling arena, the *lingam* of Shiva are said to have been designed by Krishna himself. Small alcoves are dedicated to Kali and to Jahavir Baba (Gogaji), a Rajput (Ahir) hero-god. Adal and Udal, the two protagonists of a well-known martial oral epic (the Alha) are said to wrestle on the *akhara* pitch during the summer nights (see Chapter 5). Mahadev Ghat’s religious space is also occupied by a number of tombs (*samadhi*) of ‘Yadav’ ascetic and wrestler gurus (*ustad*) who died in the last hundred years.



Plate 4: 'Yadav' Sadhus, Mahadev Ghat, Mathura

The complex is maintained by Yadav *sadhus* who mainly belong to the Ramanandi *sampraday* (see van der Veer 1988 and Pinch 1996) or are followers of *Pusthi Marg* (Bennett 1993) and by local Yadavs. In April 1999, a Ram temple was inaugurated on the outskirts of Mahadev Ghat. The temple was constructed with money donated by a Yadav businessman from Etawah who is the son of Babaji, one of the main caretakers of the *akhara* complex. Babaji is the follower of Bal Ram Das Maharaj (a former Yadav) who fifty years ago set up a Ramanandi *ashram* in nearby Vrindavan. Both Bal Ram Das and Babaji are Yadav by caste and come from the nearby district of Etawah (see Plate 4).

In Vrindavan there are five Ramanandi *ashrams* whose recruits are mainly Yadavs. Indeed a large number of Yadav ascetics from different parts of North India, in particular from Eastern U.P., Bihar and Gujarat, stop for brief periods at the Mahadev Ghat. They use this place as a base during their stay in Mathura. In the last forty years this network of 'Yadav' *sadhus* has collected money for the construction of the Yadav guesthouse (*dharamshala*) in Ahir Para. Nowadays this place is used by Yadav pilgrims who come to Mathura, and as a venue for local marriages and the meetings of the MYS. Thus, despite choosing to lead an ascetic life and, hence, to renounce their caste, Yadav *sadhus* still maintain strong relations with their community. This is particularly evident in their overwhelming presence at local Yadav caste meetings. Moreover, during the Lok Sabha election campaign of 1999, the followers of Bal Ram Das (Yadav) campaigned for the Samajwadi Party throughout western and central Uttar Pradesh. The Yadav *sadhus* political network transforms Mahadev Ghat into a public socio-religious arena where regional Yadav politics and community issues are discussed before being internalised in the local political fabric.

At Mahadev Ghat Yadav men from different generations come and meet up. They often complained about 'the aggressiveness' of their women and their dominant role in the household. Mahadev Ghat is often ironically described as a place where men could escape their women's complaints. During the day the oldest come to exercise, to sunbathe and to take *bhang* (an intoxicating beverage made from cannabis leaves), or *laddu* (little balls made with cannabis leaves and flour). By five o'clock the youngest begin to arrive. They exercise, have a bath, do *puja* and then stop to chat till late.

Plate 5: Bodybuilders and wrestlers at Mahadev Ghat, Mathura.



Mainly men visit Mahadev Ghat. Women do not go to the temple because they say 'it is an *akhara*' and hence men are always indecent (i.e. almost naked). Indeed, the absence of women is determined by the public and 'political' character of the place.<sup>26</sup> As mentioned previously, women are not part of the public political life of Sadar Bazaar/Ahir Para locality. However, in the private sphere they actively support their men's ethos of honour and virility which informs a great deal of Yadav political discourse. Yadav women appreciate tough and strong men and they raise their male children to be so. They often stressed to me that it is because of the way they feed their sons that they are so strong, tall and beautiful. Emphasis is placed on milk products and especially on cow milk. Yadav women do not work outside the house. However, within the house one of their main duties and 'privileges' is to take care of the cows which provide the milk (*dudh*) and clarified butter (*ghi*) for the daily family diet. Milk and butter are primarily meant for male consumption. Drinking milk is part of Yadav macho culture.

Mahadev Ghat is not only the place where 'politics' is usually discussed but also the place where local Yadavs build up their image of men of strength. Local Yadavs are generally extremely body conscious and exercise regularly. Although only a few of them are proper wrestlers (i.e. earn their living from wrestling competitions), almost every young Yadav in the neighbourhood practises wrestling and body-building as a form of exercise and leisure activity. In conversations young Yadav informants often point out the importance of physical strength and muscle power (see Plate 5). They are proud of being 'a caste of wrestlers' and of having an 'innate' fighting spirit.<sup>27</sup> They portray wrestling as a Yadav prerogative. Alter (1997: 45-46) underlines how in North India the majority of the members of *akharas* are of Yadav caste. He explains the preponderance of Yadav wrestlers because of their involvement in the milk business and dairy farms. Yadavs traditionally had access to two of the most important and otherwise expensive ingredients in a wrestler's diet: milk and

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<sup>26</sup> For comparative ethnographic data on the public/politics and private divide see Chowdhry (1994: 283-292).

<sup>27</sup> For comparative ethnographic data on local forms of essentialism see Osella and Osella (2000a: 231: 237).

clarified butter. Thus paramount to Yadavs' conception of masculinity is the idiom of milk which is associated with both physical strength and virility (see Alter 1997: 148-149).<sup>28</sup> Local Yadavs think that 'milk' has helped the members of their caste to become strong and thus they indirectly recognise the role of their women as providers of 'first class' milk and strength. They also hold the idea that besides the 'milk factor' Yadavs are by birth particularly predisposed to be great wrestlers and also skilled politicians. The symbolic equation between physical strength and political capacity is continuously expressed by informants with the use of metaphors, parables and mythic narratives. Local Yadavs emphasise that their ancestor Krishna was a skilful wrestler and a 'democratic' politician and that Yadav kings were also wrestlers or patrons of wrestling tournaments (*dangal*). However, in the eyes of informants nothing embodies the relation between political skill and physical strength better than the Yadav political leader Mulayam Singh Yadav. Mulayam Singh is said to have paid for his studies and financed the first part of his political career by winning wrestling competitions. He is described locally as first of all a wrestler and then a politician. In August 1999, the Samajwadi Party parliamentary candidate for Mathura was presented in Sadar Bazaar on the occasion of the annual *dangal* organised to celebrate Nag Panchami. Nag Panchami is the festival in which wrestling is celebrated as a way of life for everyone. However, the SP candidate portrayed wrestling as a culturally distinctive feature of the Yadavs and of the strong men voting for the Samajwadi Party.

The images of 'wrestling', 'Krishna-the-socialist-wrestler' and contemporary 'Yadav-wrestler/politicians' enrich the political rhetoric developed by Yadav caste associations and by political parties. The central focus of this rhetoric is to instil self-respect (*svabhiman*) amongst 'ordinary' Yadavs. An outcome of this is the emphasis given by young Yadavs to their muscular bodies and to the creation of a *goonda* reputation within their neighbourhood and town. Young Yadavs portray themselves as physically strong, powerful, brave and bold

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<sup>28</sup> They often recall the story of Krishna who wanted to develop strength. He fed the milk of ten thousand cows to one thousand cows. He then milked the one thousand cows and fed their milk to one hundred cows. He then milked the one hundred cows and fed their milk to ten cows, and finally fed the milk of these ten cows to one cow. Krishna then drank this cow's milk and he ate the combined energy of 11,111 cows.

and hence powerful and fearless. Ram Prasad Yadav (85 years old), once a famous wrestler and today a patron of many of Yadav caste association activities, proudly asserts that Yadavs in Mathura have regained respect since they began to use their sticks (*lathi*) again.

If on the one hand 'brute force' is generally conceived as a legitimate way of getting 'respect' and as an integral part of the Yadav public image, on the other there are also dissenting voices, which mainly belong to elder Yadavs and non-Yadav informants. These people do not approve of the use of 'power' of the younger generations and of their political leaders. They often make a distinction between *bal* (brute and raw strength) and *shakti* (power and energy). Young muscular Yadavs are thus said to have *bal* but not *shakti*. *Bal* is considered a purely physical energy. Gang leaders and anyone who makes a spectacle of his strength or who uses strength to advance selfish interests is regarded as physically strong but morally corrupted (see Alter 1997). These dissenting voices point out how Yadavs are not respected, but feared. Despite these opposed opinions, it is the physical strength and physical presence in the streets of Sadar Bazaar that shape local Yadav public image and inform the public space within which most of the Yadav political performances described in the following chapters have taken place.

## Chapter 2

# Competing Demands of Power and Status: from 'Ahir' to 'Yadav'

### Introduction

In the last thirty years, historians have widely documented how caste (as we know it today) is 'the product of history and particularly of colonial history' (Fuller 1996: 5). Many have emphasised the role of colonial administrative classifications and ethnographic knowledge in shaping and freezing identities along caste and religious lines (Cohn 1990; 1996; Kaviraj 1992; Raheja 1999b; Pels 1997). By the same token, the process of ethnicisation of caste is also often represented as a novel reality rooted in colonial caste politics (Ghurye 1932; Srinivas 1962). Similarly, there is extensive documentation of how colonial knowledge about caste still plays a role in shaping political and social identities in post-independent India (Dirks 2001; S. Bayly 1999). In particular, in recent years the colonial legacy of contemporary caste reservation policies and its role in the reifying and politicising of caste have been widely debated (Béteille 1992; Appadurai 1993).

If on the one hand it is impossible to summarise all the general literature published on the subject, on the other there is a remarkable lack of works which explore, both ethnographically and historically, how social classifications, government policies and 'official' ethnography have empirically affected (and are affecting) ideas and practices related to caste. In particular, to my knowledge there are few anthro-historical studies (see Dube 1998 and Chowdhry 1994) which illustrate the encounter between caste and colonialism on the one hand, and post-colonialism on the other, from the perspectives of communities that have actually been 'classified', 'ethnicised' and 'politicised'.<sup>29</sup> How do these processes

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<sup>29</sup> A number of socio-historical studies have explored the relation between specific caste communities and colonial classifications. For example Conlon's (1977) work on Saraswat Brahmins, Leonard's (1978) monograph on the development of the Kayastha caste community, Washbrook's (1975) study on caste organisation in South India and the recent work of Datta (1999) on the formation of Jat identity. For an ethnographical



work empirically? How did (do) 'classified people' manipulate caste knowledge and re-classify/essentialise themselves? Why do some castes find classificatory models more attractive than others? And finally, which are the continuities and changes from the colonial time to the present? These questions still need systematic exploration.

The present chapter looks at the impact of administrative caste forms of social classification and ethnographic knowledge on the construction of a Yadav community. By exploring Yadav caste historiography through the lens of the ethnography I recorded in the late 1990s, my aim is to elucidate the socio-cultural relations that constituted and constitute the Yadavs' understandings and uses of particular texts, administrative categories and theories of caste (see Sundar 1999: 100-127 and Bénéï 1999). The chapter thereby unravels the central political-ideological and socio-cultural features of the Ahir/Yadav caste/community and highlights how they relate to colonial and post-colonial politics of caste reification. This exploration shows how a specific folk theory of religious descent has been shaping the way Ahir/Yadav caste associations and individuals manipulated and manipulate caste forms of social classification.

The analysis of such complex relations departs from the ethnographic exploration of the ways contemporary Mathura Yadavs use, manipulate and understand the Other Backward Classes administrative classification. This exercise highlights how a Yadav 'community' discourse based on descent allows local Yadavs to simultaneously claim Other Backward Class status (which is locally understood as synonymous with low caste and untouchables), and Kshatriya (or Vaishya) status, without giving rise to contradictions. At present, the policy of 'protective discrimination' no longer causes inconsistencies between Mathura's Yadavs competing demands of status and power. This perspective contrasts significantly with past accounts. Till fifteen years ago a significant number of Ahir/Yadavs in the Braj-Ahirwal areas viewed their inclusion in the OBC list as incongruent with their claimed status of 'Kshatriya'. In recent times this 'problem' has been resolved.

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exploration of caste community formations and their relation to post-colonial classifications see Hardgrave's (1969) study on the Nadars of Tamil Nadu and Molund (1988) on the Koris of Kanpur.

Today, local Yadavs represent themselves as ‘sons of Krishna’ as ‘Kshatriyas’ or as ‘Kshatriyas who behave like Vaishyas’. Mathura Yadavs do not find it demeaning to be classified as members of the Other Backward Classes and to describe themselves in petitions and memorandums as a ‘low status’ and almost ‘untouchable’ caste/community. This is because such classifications and representations do not interfere with their self-image as *sons of Krishna*. Today, as descendants of Krishna, and as members of the ‘Yadav dynasty’, their social status is proved by their distinctive ancestry and by the presumed quality of their blood more than by purity-based hierarchy. Accordingly, amongst Mathura Yadavs, the OBC representation is usually conceived of as another state resource to be exploited. To make sense of this ethnographic data I ask the ‘Yadav archive’ why and how Yadav folk theories of religious descent were able to work so effectively and, besides allowing the transformation of a congeries of lineages into a fairly ‘homogenised’ community, contributed towards nullifying the contradictions between competing demands of status and power? And, whether the emphasis on descent and blood rather than on ritual purity should be considered a ‘modern’ phenomena?

The argument of this chapter is discussed in two sections. To begin with I document the internal heterogeneity and fragmentation of the Ahir/Yadav caste-cluster, its ambiguous status, its traditional military Rajput-like culture and descent view of caste. I show how such characteristics shaped the ways first the pre-colonial Hindu-Muslim states and then the British classified the Ahirs. Thereafter, I examine how the Ahirs’ specific socio-cultural features have influenced the way the Yadav intelligentsia have read their colonial caste representations and social classifications and then transformed a diversified ethnographical portrayal into a homogenous and essentialised account of their community. The chapter concludes by exploring contemporary Yadav understandings of the category of Other Backward Classes and how it interrelates with processes of Sanskritisation and community ethnicisation.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Srinivas has defined the process of Sanskritisation as ‘the process by which a “low” Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, “twice born” caste’ (1972: 6).

## The Ahirs: 'ethnography' in the archives from pre-colonial times to Independence

Ahir/Yadav caste historiography illustrates a fluid and complex system. The heterogeneity inherent in the caste, in terms of socio-economic and ritual status, has been depicted in many ways by colonial ethnographies and the petitions and memorandums which historically document the dialogue between the colonial government and Yadav individuals or caste associations. Colonial ethnographers left a legacy of hundreds of pages of ethnographic and ethnological details which portray the Ahir/Yadavs as 'Kshatriyas', 'martial', and 'wealthy', or as 'Shudras', 'cowherders', 'milk sellers' and low in status terms. In short there has been no consensus on the nature of the Ahir caste/tribe.

Attention has already been drawn to the ambiguous status of pastoralist groups which are generally constituted by large '*jati*-clusters' scattered in extended areas. Colonial ethnographers were undecided if they were 'castes' or 'tribes' (Tambis-Lyche 1997: 148; Basu 1957). In the case of the Ahirs, they also wondered whether they were a 'martial race' or not, whether they were a 'criminal tribe', whether they were 'Rajput' or 'Shudra', and finally whether herding and milking were pure or impure activities. During fieldwork I discovered that such general 'confusion' is still a lively issue. Whenever I asked non-Yadav informants for the rank of Yadavs in the local caste hierarchy, their answers were systematically ill defined: 'they are not real Rajputs but they do not belong to the Shudra *varna* either', or 'they are *chote* (small/inferior) Rajputs' or more commonly 'Yadavs are a *bare jati*' (big/superior caste), or 'they are not a 'backward caste'. By the same token, almost without exception, Yadav informants in Mathura think of themselves as Kshatriyas, as heirs of the local Rajput kings, as dutiful former military clients of local kings and as descendants of local martial hero-gods. In the following chapters I explore ethnographically how the relation between Ahir and Rajput culture is today conceived and expressed in everyday life. However, due to the paucity of historical sources, it is impossible to fully reconstruct the history of their relations. The point of the following discussion is, therefore, not to prove or to disprove the Ahirs' Rajput origin, and thereby to indulge in speculative history, but rather, to highlight the

complex socio-political dynamics at work in the Ahirwal-Braj area in the last two hundred years. In addition, this section explores the implications that such processes had in influencing the way Ahir/Yadavs represented and represent themselves as well as the way 'others', first the Hindu-Muslim states, then the British colonial officers and finally the post-colonial government, have chosen to represent them.

### **Rajas, sepoys and cowherders: Rajput-like culture and the making of the Ahir category**

The status *ambiguity* of today's Yadavs and their Rajput-like military culture and religious traditions can be plausibly traced back to the historical phases that witnessed the transformation of martial pastoralist communities into more defined caste-like groups. In recent years, many historians have broken new ground in the study of such important social dynamics (see Kolff 1990; C. Bayly 1983; S. Bayly 1999; Dirks 1987). The gradual employment of specific 'caste' titles by pastoral warrior groups has been explained as an outcome of the formation of powerful Rajput status groups and by the ensuing spread of 'the Kshatriya ideal' in the Gangetic plains by the Moghul elite (S. Bayly 1999: 25-63). The Rajputs are regarded as perfect exemplars of the Kshatriya *varna*, the Hindu social category of rulers and warriors. By the ninth century AD, in West India, to be Rajput was gradually linked to values of honour and shame and to a particular lifestyle and social organisation centred on territory and lineage power (Thapar 1984; Fox 1971). Lordly elites were absorbed into the Mughal state structure by becoming employed as tax collectors and military clients. This process implied the gradual assimilation of a number of Mughal customs and practices. Importantly, Rajputs' clients began to use bards to legitimate their 'pure' genealogy and aristocratic pedigrees in the same fashion as their Muslim lords did (Kolff 1990: 72). As a consequence, the language of kinship and descent began to be used by lordly Rajputs to legitimate their being 'aristocratic'. However, the marginal pastoral-agricultural groups whose landholding rights were minor and who did not succeed in acquiring 'proper' genealogical legitimisation were cut out from what Kolff

calls 'the new Rajput Great Tradition' and as a consequence their 'Rajputisation' was never fully achieved.<sup>31</sup>

The social history of the Ahirs from the Ahirwal region provides an exemplary case study in line with the broad trends mentioned above. On the one hand it shows how a number of segments of the Ahir cluster were at times included in 'the new Rajput Great Tradition' and on the other it shows how the rest of the community maintained a 'fringe-like Rajput culture' through their warrior songs, ballad and legends (see Chapter 5). In the first case, what we observe is precisely the manipulation of the Kshatriya ideal that facilitated the creation of internal subdivisions within what was the loose Ahir category. In the Braj-Ahirwal area, by the early eighteenth century the Ahir title, rather than defining a 'caste', was used as a description for people with a pastoral background, with military power and with landholding rights. In this period the label 'Ahir' was used by military recruiters of the Hindu-Islamic states to define a 'status category' with specific liabilities to military service, and as such it appears in the Indo-Islamic revenue records (S. Bayly 1999: 40).<sup>32</sup>

During the eighteenth century, the Ahirs of Ahirwal rose in prominence and became military clients of what was an Empire in disintegration (Francklin 1803; Malik 1977). More specifically, the Yaduvanshi-Ahirs of Rewari, located in the district of Mahendragarh (present Haryana state) were able, to a certain extent, to be included within the emergent 'Rajputs' and within what the Mughals recognised as 'Rajput aristocracy'.<sup>33</sup> Rao's work (1977) provides a description of the socio-political organisation of the little kingdom of Rewari. At the end of the

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<sup>31</sup> As Kolff points out, by focusing on the Rajputs of western India as the main 'model' of 'Rajputness', academics neglected the study of the marginal Rajput phenomena, especially in Hindustan (1990: 72). This trend began with the historical and ethnographic description of Rajasthan's *rajās* by James Tod and by other British Officers, such as Francis Hamilton who in the early nineteenth century produced the book: '*Genealogies of the Hindus Extracted from their sacred writings*'. These works are a significant expression of the British fascination with Kshatriya history, and it is a clear example of how the British contributed to construction of the Kshatriya 'ideal model'.

<sup>32</sup> In the Mughal encyclopaedia *Ain-i-Akbari*, Ahirs are described as 'cunning but hospitable, they will eat food of the people of every caste, and are a handsome race', quoted in S. Bayly (1999: 104).

<sup>33</sup> Tambs-Lyche (1997: 60-95) describes similar socio-political dynamics amongst Khatiwar's Ahirs in Western India.

nineteenth century, Man Singh, a bard at the court of the Rewari kingdom wrote a book entitled *Abhir Kul Dipika* (The Enlightenment of the Abhir Dynasty).<sup>34</sup>

Most of the following description draws from the work of Rao and from Man Singh's book which is considered one of the first Yadav self-historiographies. I integrate these secondary and primary textual sources with interviews with contemporary members of the former royal family.

The history of the Rewari family is of particular importance for the present study. Their members were amongst the first promoters of the formation of a Yadav community and today they still represent Yadav-Rajput heritage and royalty. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Rewari kingdom was established by an Ahir military chief, Rao Nandaram. He received a *jagir* (assignment of land revenue) of 360 villages around Rewari, and the Mughal emperor Farrukhsiyar (1713-19) conferred to him the title of *Caudhri*. 'Status' at that time was strictly connected with military power. As already emphasised, the Mughals constantly acknowledged the distinctiveness of the clans which claimed to be Rajput by birth and blood. The Aphariya, the Kausaliya and the Kosa were the major Ahir aristocratic clans who had direct contact with the Mughal state representatives. They were locally conceived as Yaduvanshi-Kshatriya. The term Yaduvanshi derives from Yadu, one of the ancestors of god Krishna. The royal clans represented the Rewari kingdom as part of the mythical 'Yadava Hindu State' and they portrayed themselves as descendants of Krishna, the 'cowherder-Rajput god'. They claimed to originate from Mathura town: Krishna's birthplace. They named Rewari's fort *Gokulgarh* and their coins *Gokul sikka*, in honour of the village of Gokul where Krishna spent part of his childhood. Finally 'they took the name of Krishna in marching against their enemies' (Rao 1977: 88).

The inclusion of Yaduvanshi-Ahirs in the local Rajput aristocracy implies a change of marriage patterns. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Rewari royal clans began to establish marital relations with acknowledged royal lineages of Bikaner, in Rajasthan. These marital relations legitimised their being

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<sup>34</sup> The original is in Urdu. An original copy is with Col. Karnal Singh Yadav, Rewari. In the 1990s, a Hindi edition of the book was published by the Rao Tula Ram Samark Samiti and edited and translated by Rao Jasvan Singh. Throughout the text I use the Hindi edition, *Yadav-Abhir Kul Dipika*.

‘aristocratic’ and ‘Rajput’. What we observe in the Rewari dynasty is a manipulation of the Kshatriya ideal. The Ahir ‘royal’ clan of the Aphariya became a reference point in the assertion of more formalised ranked groups. More precisely, the Ahir clans’ social status was determined by their proximity to the king. The royal clans had a prominent position and dominated the other subdivisions and segments. The closer a clan was to the royal clan (in political terms), the higher in status it was.<sup>35</sup> Nowadays, the *Rewari raja* is still taken as a point of reference to judge the social status of the different Yadav subdivisions of the Gangetic plains. It follows that the further we move eastwards, away from the *raja* clans’ territory and from the traditional Ahir political centre, the lower the traditional ritual status of the Yadavs is conceived. However, today, the Rewari *raj*’s powerful image is in competition with a new centre of power -that created by the new ‘democratic *rajas*’ of the so-called Yadav belt. This shift has dramatically influenced contemporary Yadav marriage patterns and processes of fusion within the community (see Chapter 3).

The political organisation of the Ahir kingdom was based on clan-territorial ties and marital alliances. The clans were locally organised under the *tappa* system, a territorial grouping. The areas of the clans were controlled by local dominant Ahir landlords. Rao (1977) describes two relevant clan typologies: the ‘royal or chiefly clans’, which established small kingdoms and acted as revenue collectors directly for the Mughal state, and the ‘*sardar* clans’, which gained dominance on the basis of military service (*sardar*) to the royal clans. The headman of the clan, the *Caudhri* (leader of the clans), controlled between 20 and 30 villages. These dominant clans were served by smaller clans which provided military help and tax collection services at lower levels. Each clan had a compact geographical area of its own and members of the same territorial clan were considered as ‘brothers’. The villages had a joint land tenure system: a mixture of *pattidari* and *bhaiachara* systems.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> See Dirks (1987) for a comparable ethnographic example.

<sup>36</sup> In the *pattidari* system the shares of the estate are calculated on the basis of genealogical reckoning from the founder of the estate; while in the *bhaiachara* system they are distributed on the principle of equality. See B.H. Baden-Powell (1892).

The stress on 'brotherhood' suggests the presence amongst the different members of the community of a strong ideology of equality. At village level the dominant lineage was the basis of social organisation. The maximal lineage was divided into minor lineages and these formed the basis of *thoks* or *pannas* within it. Representatives from each *thok* formed the council of the village. This council was responsible for the collection of revenues.<sup>37</sup> The 'networks of lineage-clan ties and martial links played a significant part in the internal dynamics of power relations within the Rewari kingdom. The clan areas had a high degree of internal autonomy with external allegiance to the king' (Rao 1977: 84). Moreover, this structure was highly flexible, and a '*sardar* clan' had the possibility of becoming a chief clan and vice versa. Military force was of key importance in this status process. In this 'federative' system the units of social mobility were individual families (namely segments of lineages) rather than entire lineages, and the key factor for social mobility was the ability to render military service to the king or the emperor. Furthermore, different exogamous lineages could join together to form localised subdivisions or they could split off and form smaller subdivisions (cf. Rao 1989).

These dynamics are similar to the ones discussed by Fox (1971) in his study of Uttar Pradesh Rajputs. Fox shows how the Rajput lineage was subject to developmental cycles to maintain the balance between the lineage and the state structure. However, Rao suggests that the alignments and cleavages in Ahirwal were not always between networks belonging to the same kin group and social category: 'the framework resembles a federative structure with internal autonomy and external controls or allegiance rather than segmentary structure' (1977: 85). Lineages, clans, subcastes and castes appeared, therefore, to be linked by a *federative* framework rather than a *segmentary* one. Rival factions within a lineage or a cluster of lineages led by individual leaders tended to draw their additional political support from adjacent lineages. This created competing alignments in which personal networks of influence and power ran along and across clan/lineage networks. This process produced crosscutting loyalties within the broad framework of the Ahir caste: 'The lineage-clan areas provided the

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<sup>37</sup> A similar system was found among the Jats, see Pradhan (1966).



hinges for the operation of the federal organisation of the subcaste, and marital organisation either followed or reinforced lines of political alignments' (Rao 1977: 85). This pattern of organisation, to a larger extent, is today replicated in the organisational structure of the All India Yadav Mahasabha. Different Ahir subdivisions are united together under the Yadav banner by following a federative pattern.

In short, by the early nineteenth century the Ahir pastoral 'tribes' were composed of a number of subdivisions that were quite different in character and were internally fragmented. Whereas some of them were regarded as 'Rajput' and as having elaborated systems of closed marital ranks, for others norms of purity and exclusive marriage practices were still unknown. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the status differences between the royal lineages and the rest of the community (known by the generic term of Goallas) were therefore partly developed but still remained highly fluid. The difference between the Yaduvanshi-Ahir clans and the Ahir-Goalla clans was that the former were direct clients of the Mughal emperor whilst the latter were not part of the military network. However, a Goallavanshi-Ahir was easily recognisable as Yaduvanshi-Ahir after he had acquired military power and land (see Cunningham 1849: 7).

Such opportunities presented themselves on a large scale with the arrival of the East India Company in Ahirwal in 1802. The arrival of the British resulted in a loss of territory and prestige for the royal family of Rewari.<sup>38</sup> However, it provided new opportunities for the members of the Ahir community who had so far remained on the fringes of the Mughal political system. In the acquired Ceded and Conquered territory, the East India Company began to establish its rule by using Euroasian officers who recruited *sepoys* for their cavalry regiments amongst the pastoral arms-bearing peasants.<sup>39</sup> The pastoral communities of Jats and Ahirs, 'who were always well armed with lance, sabre and matchlock to brave the incursions of their unsettled neighbours – the Gujars, Mewatis, Bhattis and

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<sup>38</sup> In 1805, the territory of the kingdom was reduced to 87 villages in *istamari* (perpetual rent) and another part in *sanad* (grant). See K.C. Yadav (1967).

<sup>39</sup> Among the most famous Euroasian officers: George Thomas, James Skinner and William Gardner. See I.O.L., George Thomas Papers.

Rohilla and Afghan mercenaries' (Alavi 1995: 236-37), were taught military discipline in order to improve their indigenous fighting skills.

The East India Company constituted, therefore, a prestigious source of employment not only for the aristocratic Ahirs of the 'old military class', but also for the pastoral communities known in the area by the title 'Goalla'. These pastoral groups '...could remove the stigma of their pastoral background by enlisting in their regiments and aspiring to the rank of Kshatriya and ashraf' (ibid.: 248). Skinner introduced the Mughal custom of granting *jagirs* to the valorous soldiers. On the basis of these *jagirs* groups of Jats, Gujars and Ahirs started a career of upward social mobility (ibid.: 245). Unfortunately, there are no documents available to quantify the number of Ahir-Goallas recruited by the East India Company. There are, however, interesting data which did survive, namely the paintings made by William Frazer for the Company, which illustrate Ahirs, Jats and Gujars in their original herdsmen's outfits waiting to be recruited (ibid.: 245). Skinner's troops appear dressed up in uniforms tailored in the fashion of the Mughal court dresses: the *angarkha*. This yellow dress was very similar to the saffron dress of the Rajput soldiers. Alavi suggests that this was 'to keep alive the memory of the Rajput tradition' (ibid.: 246) The Euroasian officers seemed to succeed in turning peasants into 'gentlemen-soldiers'. Their strategy not only succeeded in expanding and establishing the authority of the Company, but also contributed substantially to the elaboration of a military culture amongst the Ahir of the area.

The Goallavanshi-Ahirs who gained military prestige and *jagirs* were locally absorbed within the large Yaduvanshi-Ahir subdivision, a typical case of lower-ranking groups being absorbed by higher and larger subdivisions in a process of upward mobility. This shows how the process of transformation from Ahir to Yaduvanshi-Ahir has its origins in pre-colonial India and was a direct response to internal patterns present within the community. Smaller units tended to be enclosed into bigger ones and by the same token clusters of lineages tended to join together to form new localised and regional subdivisions. The status process generated by this military culture was not limited to the Ahirwal region but was also found in the nearby areas of the western United Provinces, where the Ahirs worked as mercenaries for local kings and Thakurs (see Stokes 1978).

The spread of such military culture contributed to the Kshatriya-like image of the local Ahirs. In the next section I describe how, in the twentieth century, the Kshatriya model was further reconstructed by the British who linked it to the category of the ‘martial races’, and how the Ahirs of the Braj-Ahirwal area reinterpreted and used it to be recruited to the British army. I explore how Ahir military culture and Rajput-like culture inform in a particular way their process of religious reform and the development of a united Yadav community.

### **‘Collecting the Ahirs’: official ethnographies and theories of caste**

Recent historical research has documented how by the end of the nineteenth century, with the abolition of the East India Company and the creation of a new colonial administrative framework, the control of the British over Indian subjects became stricter and more systematic (Raheja 1999b; Dirks 1992). It is widely assumed that by this time British colonial administrators increasingly felt the need to classify Indians as members of specific social, economic and occupational categories, each possessing its own peculiarities and distinctive qualities. This phenomenon is referred to as the process of ‘essentialisation’ of caste (Inden 1990). However, the data on the Ahirs do not conform to the common view that colonial descriptions were mostly simplistic, and portrayed a homogeneous version of ‘caste’. The Ahirs are in fact seldom described as a homogeneous entity. A number of ethnographic descriptions of the Ahir are indeed sophisticated and interesting. ‘Caste’ and ‘subcaste’ are not described as localised and bounded social units with a similar homogeneous status. In contrast, they are described as territorially widespread and internally differentiated in terms of wealth and power. As a result, Ahirs are portrayed not as a rigid, bounded essentialist group, but rather as a fluctuating, fluid and internally factionalised social category.

The compendium *‘Races of the North-West Provinces’* written by Elliot (1869) presents one of the first colonial ethnographic descriptions of the Ahir caste-cluster in the North-West Provinces.<sup>40</sup> Elliot portrays an internally fluid and

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<sup>40</sup> For a critical exploration of the colonial archive and caste forms of knowledge see Dirks (2001).

heterogeneous agricultural/pastoral 'tribe'. The primary principle of classification used for the census of 1872 and 1881 was that of *varna* (Dirks 2001: 202). However, Elliot finds it problematic to classify the Ahirs within a unique *varna* category: 'In some localities they are described as sharing the same status of the Rajputs, while in others Rajputs would indignantly repudiate all connections with Ahirs' (1869: 6). Further confusion arises when he attempts to assess the nature of the differences between the Ahars, Aheriyas and the Ahirs and between the different clans and subcastes.

In Elliot's description 'clan', 'subcaste', 'caste', 'tribe' and 'race', are used in an interchangeable way and it looks as though he finds it difficult to isolate the social nature and functions of the different Ahir subdivisions. Finally, following locality, Elliot categorises the Ahir agricultural-pastoral 'tribe' in three main subdivisions: 'there appear to be three grand divisions amongst them:- the Nandabans, the Jadubans and the Gwalbans, which acknowledge no connection except that of being all Ahirs. Those of Central Doab usually style themselves Nandabans; those to the West of the Jumma and the Upper Doab, Jadubans; and those in the lower Doab and Benares, Gwalabans' (1869: 3). The Goallavanshi are said to lack a clear cut clan division, while the Nandavanshi and Yaduvanshi are said to share a centrality of territory defined by lineal kinship with similar related castes, such as Jats, Gujars and Rajputs. These subdivisions are based on mythological-ancestral claims and locality (see Chapter 3). The Yaduvanshi-Ahirs are said to descend from Yadu, one of the ancestors of Krishna; the Nandavanshi-Ahirs are said to be descendants of Nanda, the foster father of Krishna; and the Goallavanshi-Ahirs, are said to be the descendants of the Gopi and Gopas amongst whom the God Krishna spent his childhood on the banks of the river Yamuna near Mathura. Elliot goes on to list the major clans (*got*) of the Nandavanshi of Central Doab, and the major clans of the Ahirwal region.

Before exploring what permits the maintenance of a certain unity amongst the Ahir caste cluster I examine the Ahirs' internal heterogeneity and loose social structure. In many ways, 'the problems' that colonial ethnographers and officers encountered in classifying the Ahirs in formal descriptive and analytical typologies mirror their unconventional horizontal organisation. Comments by local officers from 'the field' reveal their inability to define consistent socio-

structural patterns within the Ahirs grouping. The lack of clear-cut endogamous rules and the imprecise and ambiguous status of the caste as a whole were amongst the main 'problems' that colonial officers seemed to face. Ahirs' recurrent structural ambiguities seem in fact to represent a 'hard task' even for such 'classificatory' masters as the colonial ethnographers. The Ahirs could not be classified as Rajputs because they did not follow the 'prescribed' Rajput codes of conduct, or at least part of the community did not. However, to classify them as Shudra would have neglected some of their 'Kshatriya' customs such as kin-based organisation, hypergamous marriage patterns, martial attitudes and landholding rights.

Such dilemmas were constantly reflected in the preparatory reports for the census and in the documentation related to the implementation of specific policies such as the Female Infanticide Act (1870), or the application of the 'Martial Races' theory that guided the recruiting strategies of the 'colonial' government. The search for 'guilty' and 'criminal' clans, and the search for 'martial' clans within the Ahir community produced a valuable source of information on the nature of the kinship organisation as well as on the status dynamics present within the different Ahir subdivisions. This material also indicates that processes of aggregation amongst different Ahir subdivisions are hardly new phenomena. As mentioned previously, by the pre-colonial period small lineages, or clusters of lineages, were continuously enclosed into larger ones in the process of social mobility.

In the following sections I explore how the Ghosi and Kamaria subdivisions began to be absorbed into the Nandavanshi social category, and then the latter into the Yaduvanshi subdivision in the Braj-Ahirwal area. The analysis of the transformation of these social status categories is relevant since the ancestors of Ahir Para Yadavs belonged to them. An understanding of their social nature in the past, and of their reactions to social forms of classification, illuminates contemporary processes of substantialisation and their relation to caste forms of social classification. This analysis also reveals how different theories of caste shaped the way the Ahirs from the Braj-Ahirwal area were portrayed in the 'official' ethnographies and how such portrayals influenced the way Yadav intellectuals and social reformers represent their caste community today. I refer

on the one hand to the functionalist schools led by ethnographers such as Crooke (1896), Nesfield (1865) Ibbetson (1916) and Blunt (1931), and on the other to the race theorists, such as Risley (1891, 1908); and to the ways in which Ahir/Yadav intellectuals and social reformers tended to reformulate a 'racial view of caste' rather than an occupational one (see also Bayly 1995, 1999).<sup>41</sup>

### *Materialist and functionalist ethnographic portrayals*

The implementation of the Infanticide Act generated a massive police control over the Ahirs of the Ahirwal-Braj area. Such government policy produced a large amount of data on the Ahir community, which were published in the 1881 and 1891 Census and in other reports. The Census of 1891 counted 1,767 types of Ahirs (see Census of India 1891).<sup>42</sup> Within this classification both endogamous and exogamous groups were included. In the North Western Provinces eighteen main 'subcastes' were counted. This documentation illustrates how the Ahir caste/community was internally highly differentiated and fluid. The Ahir caste was composed of hundreds of subdivisions and the latter were internally highly heterogeneous in term of economic and political status. The documentation related to the implementation of the Infanticide policy also shows how in searching for 'guilty castes' colonial officers did not, on the whole, apply an essentialised view of caste. In contrast, they often showed a great interest in understanding the internal differences that existed within a single community, and took into account the historical and social conditions that determined their 'rank' rather than assuming the latter as a given essence.

The letters and reports of local British officers clearly suggest that female infanticide was in most cases related to hypergamy, status maintenance and dowry avoidance. Castes such as Rajputs, Jats, Gujars and Ahirs were said to be

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<sup>41</sup> For a comparative study on the reconfiguration of lineage discourses and the emergence of racial social categories, see Dikotter's work (1992, 1997) on modern China.

<sup>42</sup> Such high numbers of subdivisions have been counted only amongst the Rajputs and Pathan castes.

internally highly differentiated. The problem for those at the top of these castes was caused by the fact that in addition to high dowries, the high status lineages had to find eligible grooms in a restricted circle of elite families within their caste. The emergence of royal houses amongst Ahirs in the eighteenth century meant that the royal lineages were faced with an even more restricted circle for choosing grooms for their daughters and perhaps resorted to extensive female infanticide (Vishwanath 1998: 1105). As a consequence, higher status groups practised female infanticide more extensively than lower status groups. The following are a number of comments by British officers engaged in 'collecting' the Ahirs in the districts of Etah, Aligarh, Farrukhabad and Mathura.

'I have always found that Jats, Aheers, Ahars, etc, low castes claiming to be Thakoors, need some special stimulus to commit this crime. Either they are rich and so want no money in return for their daughters and, consequently, begin to imitate the manners of the superior caste, or they are demoralised by living in the vicinity of guilty high class Thakoors'.<sup>43</sup>

'So much is the practice of infanticide associated with the idea of superiority that it has in recent times been accepted as a baggage of that superiority apart from any other reason at all, and has been for this reason practised by parvenu clans, like the Jats and the Ahir, in order to establish their social status'.<sup>44</sup>

The Ahirs of the Braj-Ahirwal area were described as divided into clans and lineages which were hierarchically ordered in economic and political terms. The higher strata tended to claim Rajput (Thakur) status. However, the Ahirs' clan structure was generally not as defined as that of their Rajput counterparts. As a British officer commented: 'In dealing with Aheers, we cannot be guided in deciding on guilt by the same principles as with Rajpoots. The crime must be judged of by villages, and not by *pargana* (*subordinate unit in revenue administration*). The same clannish feeling does not exist with Aheers as with Rajputs' (my emphasis).<sup>45</sup> It follows that amongst the Rajputs, if members of a clan were found guilty of female infanticide the entire clan was put under police control. Conversely, in the case of the Ahirs the Infanticide Act was applied only

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<sup>43</sup> NAI Home Dept. Police A, October 1874, File 46-47.

<sup>44</sup> NAI Home Dept. Police A, May 1874, File 9-12.

<sup>45</sup> NAI Home Dept. Police A, August 1973, File 60-64

to 'villages' or 'clusters of villages' occupied by the localised 'portion' of the clan found to be 'criminal'. This policy was justified by the higher territorial fragmentation of the Ahir clans as compared to the Rajputs. Moreover, an Ahir clan could be considered 'guilty' in one area and not in another since its status depended on historical contingencies and was attached more to a segment of the clan than to the entire clan.

On the whole, this documentation illustrates a phenomenon which is familiar to other large, Rajput-like, caste communities. Pocock (1972) has described that castes like Patidars (but also Rajputs, Bareias and Kolis, and Marathas), which are usually large, territorially dispersed and informed by strong ideologies of descent, present two interlinked characteristics. First, they are subject to infiltrations at the lower level and secondly they can accept a significant level of 'graduality' (Pocock 1957). The concept of *graduality* attempts to theorise the high level of heterogeneity, in terms of wealth, power and ritual, existing within a caste. When size, *graduality* (economic and social), and, I would add, highly valued paternal descent, are combined, endogamy is not a rigid practice and it is accompanied by preferential hypergamy. In the next sections I illustrate how this status game led to the absorption of the Kamaria and Ghosi social categories into the larger subdivision of the Nandavanshi and of the latter into the Yaduvanshi subdivision. In so doing I describe how such processes were influenced by the Infanticide Act and by British recruitment policy in the army.

### ***From Ghosi and Kamaria-Ahirs to Nandavanshi-Ahirs: processes of fusion***

The Ghosis, Kamarias, Phataks and Nandavanshi-Ahirs are the largest Ahir subdivisions in the Braj-Ahirwal area. The majority of my Mathura Yadav informants say they originally belonged to these subdivisions. However, today they do not describe themselves as Ghosi-Ahirs, or as Kamaria-Ahirs, but as Yaduvanshi or Krishnavanshi-Yadavs. Such changes mirror a long process of fusion between different subdivisions. Small lineages or clusters of lineages have been enclosed into larger status categories. The Ghosi, the Kamaria and the



Nandavanshi-Ahirs did not have well-defined endogamous rules. Internal differentiations in terms of wealth and power were continuously readjusted by hypergamous marriage strategies which facilitated the assimilation of lower status groups into higher ones. The prominence of 'class segments' within the caste stimulated internal social mobility (Hardgrave 1968: 1065). In addition, the control of the British on female infanticide facilitated the formation of larger status groups with strong endogamous features. It is plausible to suggest that clans/lineages at the top of the ladder who were forced to stop killing their daughters had to expand their field of endogamy and create a marriage circle of equal clans/lineages (Parry 1979: 244).

The following are extracts from a report written by a government administrator working in the Etah district in 1873. The descriptions provide data on the nature of the social differences existing between the Ghosi and Kamaria subdivisions in the Etah district. The Kamaria and the Ghosi are described as two separate 'tribes'. 'They (Ahirs) are all either Ghosi or Kamariya and the name Kamariya is not that of a mere *got*, such as the Sembarphula, Bhodita, Diswar, Jhinwariya and Barothe'.<sup>46</sup>

The Kamaria subdivision is described as an endogamous group and as having a lower status than the Ghosi:

'The Ghoshi claim pre-eminence for themselves, and say that they are mentioned in the sacred books under the name of Ghoshas, whilst the Kamariyas are nowhere alluded to. They (*Ghosis and Kamarias*) smoke from the same hukka, but cannot eat kacca-khana or cooked food together, but only pakka khana. In both tribes each got is in theory equal in dignity. The social habits of the Ahirs are the same as those of other Sudras' (my emphasis).<sup>47</sup>

Other documents underline that by the end of the nineteenth century the differences between the two groups were disappearing.

'A very old intelligent Aheer in Nugla Datte, near Achalpur, told me he had been informed by his father that the Ghooses and Kumheriyas used to recognise distinction in eating and drinking, but that they gradually became less exclusive in recent times. He himself said he

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<sup>46</sup> NAI Home Dept. Police A, August 1874, File No. 60-64.

<sup>47</sup> NAI Home Dept. Police A, September 1874, File No. 27-31

noticed that the distinctions so strongly marked when he was a boy have gradually become obliterated during the last 20 years'.<sup>48</sup>

'From inquiry I find that the old man's story contains much truth. Many of the lower class of Aheers have abandoned the restrictions as to eating and drinking together, though the better class still observe them. A respectable Ghosee will eat "paka" khana, such as puris, with a Kumheriya, but he will not join in "kachcha khana", such as eating chuppatees with him. Kumheriyas and Ghosees now smoke out of the same hukka. The Ghosees seem to think themselves a grade above Kumheriyas. In only two instances I have found Ghosees and Kumherias living together in the same village. Among the Ghosees and Kumheriya each got is in theory equal in dignity, and it is universally admitted by the highest class Aheers that their only guide in contracting suitable marriages is purse pride' (ibid.).

The following is instead a description of the nature of the Nandavanshi subdivision:

'It may have been a generic term for all the Ahirs, and it probably was, but it certainly has any specification now ... on the other hand the Nandabansi, who claim the name as distinct from the Ghose will give you fine distinctions as for instance that they give daughters to the Ghose, but that none of their sons marry a Ghose girl' (ibid.).

The British officer further affirmed that, among the Ghosis, the Nandavanshi title was quite a prestigious one as well as a synonym of landholder:

'The Ghose zamindars usually use 'the self-laudatory epithet of Nandabanshi' ...and they find wives for their children among wealthier and consequently more respected families, who have also assumed the appellation under such circumstances' (ibid.).

From these data it appears that the Nandavanshi title was a prestigious one, adopted by local wealthy landholders. By the end of the nineteenth century the Nandavanshi social category was in the process of absorbing the wealthy Ghosi lineages. This process was accelerated in the following decades. The continuation of this process through the twentieth century and in particular the impact that the recruitment policy of the British army had on these categories will be analysed in the next section.

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<sup>48</sup> NAI Home Dept. Police A, May 1874, File No.9-12. See also NAI Home Dept. Police A, July 1876, File No. 37; Home Dept. Police A, June 1876, File No 29-39.

## *The Yaduvanshi as the martial Ahirs: military culture and racial theories*

After the Indian Mutiny of 1858, the Ahirwal region became an important recruiting ground for the British Army. In the same period there was a general push to identify the 'manly races' and to identify the 'castes' with appropriate martial qualities (Omissi 1994; McMunn 1911). The Yaduvanshi-Ahirs of Ahirwal together with Jats, Gujars and Rajputs, were identified as a 'martial race'. The colonial government codified the qualities that a perfect soldier should possess. The recruiting handbooks, i.e. ethnographic guides meant to help the recruiting agents on the ground, emphasised the masculine qualities of the martial races and opposed them to the weakness and 'effeminacy' of those who were excluded. One feature common to these various 'martial' communities was their presumed Aryan origin. The British regarded some of their favourite martial races as the descendants of Aryan invaders. Castes were described as 'races', particularly in the case of Rajputs, who had supposedly '...maintained their Aryan racial 'purity' through the caste system' (Omissi 1994: 32).

The Ahirs, together with Jats, Gujars and Rajputs, were considered to be tribal groups originally who had come under the influence of Hinduism and had then become castes (see Kolenda 1978: 21). In this way their tribal customs, which they retained in their internal organisation, were causally explained. A certain kind of kinship and political organisation appears to characterise these 'tribal' castes. Jats, Ahirs, Gujars and Rajputs were divided into patrilans, which were patrilocal, patrilineal and exogamous. The Ahirs, however, fall in to an ambiguous category. They were considered a 'tribal' caste but also a 'functional caste'. Blunt distinguished between 'tribal' and 'functional' castes. The functional castes were said to be composed of persons following the same occupation (for example Sonars (goldsmiths), Nais (barbers)). The tribal/race castes were, instead, composed of persons who were, or believed themselves to be, united by blood and race (for example Jat, Gujar, Pasi...). However, the Ahirs were described as difficult to classify. They had a well-defined occupation (cattle-owning), yet a tribal origin and social organisation (Blunt 1931: 3).

The Ahirs have been equated with the Abhira tribes (Bhandarkar 1911: 16) who were considered to be immigrant tribes from Central Asia and supposedly entered India before the beginning of the Christian era (Rao 1979: 124). Rao (ibid.: 126) has pointed out how one of the most debated issue amongst Yadav 'historians' is whether the Abhira are of Aryan origin or not. 'The significance of this debate is that if it is proved that the Abhiras are not Aryans, then the Yadav claim would fall, as the Yadavas were Aryans' (ibid.). Nesfield ascribed Aryan origins to the Ahirs but this was contested by Bhandarkar (1911). These views were challenged by Ahir/Yadav caste literature. As the next section describes, by the mid-nineteenth century the Ahir/Yadav 'historians' had produced publications in which they argued for the Aryan origins of the Abhiras, and therefore of the Ahirs (see Khedkar 1959; R. Pandey 1968; K.C. Yadav 1967).

The controversial 'ethnic' origin of the Ahirs had a bearing on the assessment of their 'martial' qualities. Sir George MacMunn (1911) describes the Ahirs in the text 'The Martial Races of India' as:

'...a respectable Hindu class rather than a race, but they keep themselves to themselves, and are one of the most reputable classes in their districts in a minor way..., they cannot be described as one of the martial races of renown, yet their reputation is growing' (1911: 283).

However, Bingley (1937), one of the Ahir 'experts' of the time and author of the recruitment 'Handbook for Jats, Gujars and Ahirs', often stresses how distinctions amongst the Ahirs were social and historical rather than ethnic.<sup>49</sup> Accordingly, he described some of the subdivisions within the Ahirs as 'martial':

'Ahir make excellent soldiers. They are manly, without false pride, independent without insolence, with reserved manners but good nature, light hearted and industrious. They are always cheerful and are the sort of people who habitually make the best of things. They are reliable, steady and of uniformly excellent character. After ten years of experience of them, I emphatically endorse the opinion that Ahirs are eminently fitted for the profession of the arms...When you come over the names of the martial races of India and think of the Gurkha, Rajput, Sikh, Brahmins, Dogra, Jat, Pathan, Punjabi Muhammadan, do not forget the Jadubansi Ahirs'. (Bingley quoted in AIYM Platinum Jubilee Year 1924-1999, 1999: 39)

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<sup>49</sup> For an exploration of Bingley's work see Raheja (1999a).

Thus, Bingley considered the Yaduvanshi-Ahirs of Ahirwal as suitable for recruitment but not the Nandavanshi-Ahirs and the Goallavanshi-Ahirs of other localities in the Gangetic plains. The Nandavanshi-Ahirs of the Central Doab and the Goallavanshi-Ahirs of Oudh were not recruited. The application of this policy found its apotheosis in the publication of a list of '*Gots of Ahirs preferable to the others for purpose of recruitment*' (1937: 87-90). It is worth summarising the different criteria applied for the compilation of the list. How were the 'purest' clans identified, and which other idioms, besides belonging to a 'martial' 'race'/clan, were used to assess the new recruits? 'Clan membership' and 'rank' were supposed to be tested by a series of questions. The Ahir candidate was asked his *got*, his place of birth and his family's place of origin; the name of the *got* of his mother and the name of the *got* from where members of his family were married and finally what kind of food he ate and cooked by whom. In the case of the Ahirs, this process of assessment was not as easy and straightforward as it used to be for the Rajputs and Jats:

'The Ahir clans do not correspond exactly to those of the Jats, their clans represent families rather than subdivisions of people'. 'As a rule when asked what kind of Ahir a youth is he will sometimes reply 'Jadubansi' but he is nearly always ignorant of his got. The only ready test as to his sept is to ask whether he has any relation in Rajputana, Eastern Punjab or in Meerut and Bulandshar districts' (1937: 46-48).

Clan membership was, therefore, not a guarantee of martial qualities. The place of origin was at times considered more important than the clan membership:

'Soil and climate, etc. play an important part in alterations in physique and martial character and there is no doubt that the Ahirs of the East and the Gangetic plain do not compare favourably with their brethren of the West' (1937: 47).

Pure racial origin and locality were accompanied by another important criterion, the social status of the *got* or family to which the candidate belonged. This implied that some members of particular martial clans were considered more suitable than others because of their local social status, shaped by the history of their lineage and family.

Both recruitment officers and ethnographers working in the area recognised that being Rajput, and therefore ‘martial’, was often not only a matter of ‘blood’, but was linked to the economic and political power of the lineage and therefore to historical context. Ibbetson (1916) explored the complex link between localities, political power and status in his ethnographic compendium of south-east Punjab.<sup>50</sup> He conceived caste titles such as Jat, Rajput, Ahir and Gujar as ‘occupational’ rather than precise ‘ethnological’ categories. Segments of particular castes were recognised as Rajputs when they attained political relevance (Bayly 1995: 212). It follows that Jats, Ahirs and Gujars were included in the ‘Rajput’ category wherever they had landholding rights, not only because of their insistence on their Rajput ancestry but also because their presumed ancestry was supported by evident high social and economic status. In contrast, the local Ahir intelligentsia emphasised blood and descent as the basis to prove their fighting capabilities as well as to promote the constitution of a Yadav caste community in northern India. Being Yaduvanshi-Yadavs and therefore apt to fight was, for them, a matter of blood and not of socio-economic status and locality.

### **Yadavs and the British army: the emergence of the Ahir Kshatriya Mahasabha**

The British recruitment officers regarded the Yaduvanshi-Ahirs as the *authentic* ‘martial’ Ahirs both on the basis of their socio-economic status and their presumed Rajput ancestry. This recruitment policy, which aimed at keeping a relation between clan status and army rank, was popular till the First World War (see Parry 1979: 273). Before this time, the Nandavanshi and Goallavanshi-Ahirs were hardly enlisted in the Army, except as bullock-drivers in the artillery. The first Ahir caste associations were set up with the specific agenda of lobbying the colonial government for the recruitment of all Ahirs into the army, without any discrimination between subdivisions.

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<sup>50</sup> See 1881 Census of Punjab, published in 1883 under the title Punjab Ethnography. A portion of the report on the races, caste and tribes was published as Punjab Castes in 1916. Ibbetson was the Settlement Officer of the Kamal district. The second important documentation on the Ahirs of Haryana is Rose’s work (1919).

By the early twentieth century, the Ahirs entered public life as political actors, schoolteachers, social reformers, lawyers and sepoys. Many of them began to disseminate the idea of a homogeneous community among Ahir society. Accordingly, all the Ahir subdivisions were said to be descendants of the lineage of Yadu, the ancestor of Krishna. Hence, all the Ahirs were Yaduvanshi and no substantial differences were supposed to exist within the community. This was based on the common supposition that the 'Yadav' subdivisions were the outcome of the fission of an original and undifferentiated group, i.e. the descendants of the god Krishna. This folk theory of descent contributed to the transformation of different endogamous groups into a modern Yadav caste community. Since the end of the nineteenth century, Yadav 'historians', social reformers and ideologues have been shaping the Ahir folk theory of descent to unite hundreds of scattered pastoral groups under the 'Yadav umbrella'. The result has been the creation of a dignified Yadav past and a pure genealogical pedigree based on religious symbols and 'historical' evidence (see Chapter 5).

One of the first steps towards the formation of a united all-India Yadav community was the demand to the British Indian Army for an increase in the quota of Ahirs recruited. The Rewari royal family played an important role in representing the interests of Ahirs in the army. In 1898, Rao Yudisther Singh (the head of the former Rewari royal family) sent a petition to the Viceroy requesting an increment in the quota of Ahirs in the Hyderabad Regiment.<sup>51</sup> Even prior to the Afghan War (1878-80), the Ahirs were enlisted in the Bengal and Bombay army. Nevertheless, by the late nineteenth century their military history has been strictly linked with that of the Hyderabad Regiment (from 1952 renamed Kumaoun Regiment) (Burton 1905).<sup>52</sup> The recruitment of the Ahirs increased after 1904 and during World War I. During the first decade of the twentieth century Ahir recruitment was further increased by Rao Balbir Singh, son of Rao Yudhishter Singh. He was a Captain in the army and was granted the title of Rao Bahadur for his services as a Recruitment agent. In 1910 the Ahir Kshatriya Mahasabha was

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<sup>51</sup> The representative members of the royal family after the Mutiny acted as *zaildars* of *pargana* Rewari as well as recruiting agents. See Gurgaon District Gazetteer (1911).

<sup>52</sup> In 1897, the Ahirs represented 25 per cent of the second and fifth companies (the 95<sup>th</sup> Russell's Infantry and the 98<sup>th</sup> Russell's Infantry) of the Hyderabad Regiment.

established in Rewari and the newsletter '*Ahir Gazette*' began to be published from Etawah town. During the founding meeting of the Ahir Kshatriya Mahasabha the founding fathers of the Sabha placed the sacred text of the Bhagavad Gita in the place of the president. This was to symbolise that Krishna was the president of the Sabha and the president of the Yadavs (see Chapter 5). It was with the establishment of the Ahir Kshatriya Mahasabha that Ahir elites coming from different localities in northern India began to cooperate.

The first such act of collaboration occurred between the Ahirs of Rewari and those of the districts of Mathura, Mainpuri, Etah and Etawah. The Ahir Kshatriya Sabha's main goal was in fact to promote the recruitment of the Nandavanshi-Ahirs from western Uttar Pradesh. In 1910, one regional meeting was held in Kasganji (district of Farrukhabad) and in Shikhoabad (district of Mainpuri). In 1909, in Bihar, the local Ahirs organised themselves in the *Gop Jatiya Mahasabha* and they soon organised inter-regional meetings with the Ahirs of Uttar Pradesh and south-east Punjab.<sup>53</sup>

The main requests put forward in these regional meetings was that all the Ahirs (Yaduvanshi, Nandavanshi and Goallavanshi) were to be recognised as equally eligible to be recruited to the army. Accordingly, mythological and historical accounts were put forward to convince the British officers that all the Ahirs were of the same 'stock' and equally 'Kshatriya' (i.e. martial). The Ahir recruitment agents seemed to be sympathetic to the mythological evidence provided by the Nandavanshi-Ahirs; this in particular, during the First World War, when they were in need of large numbers of soldiers.

The most common myth put forward by the Nandavanshi-Ahirs tells the following story. The son of Yadu had two wives, one of Kshatriya origins and one Vaishya origins. From the Kshatriya wife, Vasudev was born, who then became the father of Krishna. The Vaishya wife's son was named Nanda and became the foster father of Krishna. The story goes on by narrating that a large number of Krishna's descendants believed that Krishna was Nanda's son and accordingly

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<sup>53</sup> See AIYM, Minutes of meetings and resolutions 1924-1999; and also NAI Home Political, Part B, May 1916, File 269. *Resolutions passed at the 6<sup>th</sup> session of the Gope Jatiya Mahasabha held at Bankipur, expressing sentiments of loyalty to the British government and praying for the grant of certain concessions for the Gope community.*



they called themselves Nandavanshi. This story attempts to show that there was no 'essential' difference between the Nandavanshi and Yaduvanshi-Ahirs, except in their names. During the course of the First World War the Army began to accept Ahir soldiers of doubtful ancestry. In this period, Ahirs found advantages in playing up claims of superior clan origins. Members of the Ahir caste who wished to be employed in the army learned to tell the recruitment agents that they belonged to the Yaduvanshi-Ahirs and not to the Nandavanshi or Goallavanshi subdivisions. Bingley (1937) suggests that many Nandavanshi-Ahirs, knowing that Yaduvanshi-Ahirs were accepted in the Army, claimed to belong to the latter division. By 1915, in Etawah, the Ahirs are said to 'have been trying to pass themselves as Rajputs'.<sup>54</sup> The data of the Census reports seem to confirm this trend. In Etah district, the 1908 census recorded 470 Yaduvanshi-Ahirs and 23,434 Nandavanshi. In the years 1914-19, the same district provided a large number of so-called Yaduvanshi in newly raised battalions of the Hyderabad Regiment. By 1915, their number rose from 470 to 62,266 (Bingley 1937: 48-49). The same trend was recorded in the districts of Mainpuri, Farrukhabad and Etawah (see Census of India 1901 and Census of India 1911).

In many ways, the change of recruitment policy acknowledged that the Ahirs of the Gangetic plains shared the same martial essence and it indirectly contributed to the formation of a Yadav community. This transformation can be viewed as a perfect example of a response to colonial essentialising practices and of how state policies can refashion social groupings. Although, as others have already acknowledged, it seems that British colonial perceptions just added a further dimension to concerns that were already there (S. Bayly 1999:102).

As mentioned above, long before the arrival of the British and during the early colonial period, the idea that all Ahirs shared a common ancestry and a Rajput culture was solidly engrained in the social landscape of the Braj-Ahirwal

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<sup>54</sup> NAI Home Dept. Political Deposit, September 1915, File No. 57

NAI Home Dept. Political Deposit, April 1917, File No. 60. 'In the east of the Province Ahir are offering themselves. The commission of Allahabad thinks that Indian volunteering is not likely to be much of a success without some direct stimulus though in the case of castes like Ahirs and Kurmis the movement may spread spontaneously and if it does it might become even embarrassing from the number offered'.

area. These ideas were accompanied by the loose structure of the Ahir caste which facilitated aggregative processes legitimised by a common myth of origin. Despite their heterogeneity, the different caste groupings which composed the Ahir caste-cluster recognised a common origin in Mathura and the dynasty of the god Krishna. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Buchanan had in fact already recorded the Goallas (Ahirs) of Bihar claiming to descend from Krishna (Pinch 1996: 85).<sup>55</sup> This is consistent with the claims of the Yaduvanshi-Ahirs of Rewari who, by the end of the eighteenth century, were also claiming Krishna ancestry. These data therefore suggest that the identification with Krishna predates the twentieth-century campaign for the creation of a united Yadav community under the name of Krishna. This Ahir indigenous folk model of representation based on patrilineal descent and common stock was actively reconfigured by the Yadav intellectuals. They privileged the understanding of caste illustrated by racial theorists over those represented in the ethnographies of Ibbetson and Crooke. In the following section I show how Yadav 'historians' internalise and adapt racial theories of caste to their project and how this is related to pan-Indian movements such as Hindu nationalism and neo-Hindu reformist movements such as the Arya Samaj.

### **The politics of reading and 're-writing': competing demands of status and power**

The transformation of all Ahirs into Yaduvanshi-Yadavs was promoted by the All India Yadav Mahasabha which was founded in 1924. The AIYM federated regional associations based in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Bihar and invited all the pastoral castes of India to unite together on the basis of their common ancestry and to adopt the Yadav surname (Rao 1979). In order to unite castes with different ritual status, the Mahasabha promoted their transformation into pure Krishnavanshi-Yadavs. Yadav ideologues attempted to nullify internal caste hierarchies and cultural differences within the community by encouraging the

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<sup>55</sup> Buchanan. *Bihar Patna, 1813-1813*, I: 326-327.

adoption of Sanskritic forms of Hinduism and the spread of a unifying 'past' linked to the ancestor Krishna (see Chapter 4).<sup>56</sup>

This reformist aspect of the movement which drew its energy from the ideological repertoire of the neo-reformist movements such as the Arya Samaj (Rao 1979; Datta 1999) and Vaishnava devotional movements (Pinch 1996), was complementary to the building of a Yadav Kshatriya-Krishna past. The epic Krishna, the advisor of Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita was chosen as the Yadav icon rather than Krishna-the-cowherder-lover of Braj. Such choice reflected an ongoing process of puritanisation of Hinduism (see Chapter 5). Krishna has been 'purified' by neo-Hindu reform movements, which have attempted 'to demolish Krishna as the personification of the sensual and mystical strand of Hinduism' (Lutt 1995: 149). The puritanisation of Krishna was accompanied by emphasis on the adoption of pure behaviours. Thus, Yadav caste associations and social reformers encouraged the adoption of a vegetarian diet and teetotalism and the rejection of 'evil customs' such as blood sacrifice, spirit possession, female infanticide, child marriage and widow remarriage. Similarly, the substitution of lineage-clan god cults with the cult of Krishna was encouraged (see AIYM minutes and resolutions 1924-1999).

However, Yadav caste reformers did not exclusively think of 'social purity' as an expression of higher rank. The adoption of pure norms and values was also understood as necessary for the re-establishment of the 'pure' Yadav (Aryan) original essence and to create relatedness within a highly heterogeneous community. By transforming all the Ahirs, Goallas and Gopas into vegetarians and followers of a Sanskritic form of Hinduism the purity-pollution barriers and cultural differences existing within the community were supposedly eradicated and thus inter-subcaste marriages were rendered theoretically possible.

I suggest, therefore, that Ahir/Yadav process of Sanskritisation (i.e. adoption of higher forms of Hinduism) should be understood as complementary to the elaboration of a powerful ethnic discourse. Contrary to other caste movements which chose either the path of Sanskritisation or the path of ethnicisation (see Jaffrelot 2000), Ahir/Yadavs simultaneously attempted to forge a community

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<sup>56</sup> For the concept of Sanskritic Hinduism see Srinivas (1965).

front and to uplift themselves in the caste hierarchy. They did so by remodelling a primordial discourse centered on Krishna. In this rhetoric Krishna becomes a kind of 'ethnic' unifying symbol, a community deity and also a vehicle of Kshatriya-isation. In this way traditional processes of upward mobility (i.e. Sanskritisation) are not disjoined from the constitution of a separate collective identity. The following sections unfold this argument.

## **Reshaping primordialism**

This section outlines how the AIYM promoted an ethnic discourse by creating a collective history. The creation and diffusion of a Yadav 'history' was conducted through the publication of caste literature (books, pamphlets and newsletters), local newspapers and caste meetings at local, regional and national level. During the colonial period, the amount of caste publications that portrayed the glorious and noble Yadav was indeed large.<sup>57</sup> Such texts cited early colonial ethnographies (especially Census reports) in order to show their audience how numerous the Ahir/Yadav caste was. Moreover, Yadav historiographies quoted and paraphrased simultaneously Hindu epic works such the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita and the ethnographic and the ethnological works of Elliot (1869), Crooke (1896), Ibbetson (1916) and Bingley (1937).

The narratives of social reformers and caste leaders transformed the diversified colonial ethnography and mythological texts into an immutable and essential tradition which told the story of an undifferentiated body of Yadavs. Yadav authors did not attempt to criticise these sources or to historicise them but rather they 'accumulated' them one after the other in mythical/historical sequences. These narratives are marked by a similarity of structure, language and content. Repetitiveness, which is so characteristic of essentialist rhetoric, is another constant (see G. Pandey 1995). The authors seem to pile up any available detail to prove that the Yadavs were an 'ancient', 'successful', 'numerous' and

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<sup>57</sup> See D.S. Yadav (1915); N.P. Yadav (1921); Khedkar (1959); B.P. Yadav (1928). A number of these texts are collected in the vernacular section of the India Office Library, London.

'historically relevant' community (or race) with exceptional qualities and characteristics.

These texts generally begin with the history of the Aryans and their social system; they move on to describe the history of the mythical Yadavs and the life and achievements of their most famous member, the god Krishna. Finally, they describe the history of the Abhira tribe, of the Rewari Ahir kingdom and of the achievements of contemporary Yadavs. Mythological, ethnographic and orientalist details, even if amassed within a pseudo-temporal framework, produce the effect of an ahistorical tale about Yadav tradition rather than its history. Mythological narratives present the community as beyond time and space. This suspension in time, however, is punctuated by a pseudo-chronological order which traces phases of the Yadav history that last millions of years. Mythical events (in this case also religious beliefs, see Chapter 4) inform the text with an aura of religiosity. The brave acts of Lord Krishna are accompanied by the heroic actions of Yadav historical figures such as Rao Tula Ram (the last Raja of the Rewari kingdom). Sections are also devoted to the Yadavs' social system, social life, rituals and family life. Colonial caste compendia are plagiarised and absorbed in the ahistorical narrative of the texts. Entire sections are then devoted to *Yadav Cultural Achievements* and to their *Outstanding Characteristics* (Khedkar 1959: XI). Moreover, throughout all the texts authors underline how contemporary Yadavs are the descendants, and the replacements, of their mythical ancestors and as such they possess the same characteristics and predispositions.

Emphasis is, therefore, placed on descent. Genealogical charts that trace the bloodline of the present Yadavs to their god Krishna and to famous Yadava kings and princes are invariably present. Lists of the different Ahir/Yadav clans generally follow the mythical genealogical trees. The long sections devoted to clans can appear contradictory in a text whose main aim is to portray Yadav unity and homogeneity. However, Yadavs do not see their clan structure as divisive and this is because clans are exogamous and do not prevent the amalgamation of the whole Yadav community. The central ideological theme is that all Yadavs ultimately descend from Krishna and that they share the same essence and blood. On the whole such narratives seem to accord well with the Yadav conception of caste, which traditionally places much weight on religious descent and quality,

and distinctiveness of blood. In such systems birth is believed to transmit essential and natural qualities. I suggest that the way Ahir/Yadav caste leaders have re-interpreted the material offered by the colonial administrators is socially and culturally informed by such views.

### **Sons of Krishna: the politics of ‘blood’ and ‘numbers’**

The main goal of the theory of religious descent sponsored by the AIYM is to promote the creation of a numerically strong Yadav community by including more and more castes, clans and lineages into the Yadav category or, as their rhetoric says, into ‘the Yadav race’. I call this process: *Yadavisation*. This sociological phenomenon is based on the assumption that all the descendants of Krishna share the same substance and are therefore Yadavs. The following is an extract from a speech held at a Mahasabha meeting. Its content exemplifies Yadav descent ideology and a primordial understanding of their community.

‘We have assembled here from different parts of the country. We speak different languages, quite alien to each other. Our habits and customs are different but we feel one-ness and brotherhood among ourselves where we think that we are the descendants of Krishna. The same blood is running in our veins’ (Presidential address, AIYM 49<sup>th</sup> Convention, Madras, 1983 (Originally in English)).

I suggest that in Yadav rhetoric the figure of Krishna has been historically used as ‘a unifying historical ancestor’ rather than exclusively as symbol of higher Kshatriya status, as has been commonly portrayed (see for example Rao 1979 and Jaffrelot 2000). Several petitions sent by Ahir individuals and Ahir/Yadav Sabhas to the colonial government support this proposition. Yadav caste associations’ petitions to the British representatives did not exclusively demand the recognition of the Yadavs as Kshatriya, but rather they demanded separate enumeration for their community and asked for the merger of several pastoral subdivisions into the Yadav caste appellation (see Census of India 1921). Here, demographic issues rather than issues related to ‘ritual status’ and Sanskritisation were indeed privileged.

During the 1920s Ahir/Yadav social leaders and politicians soon realised that their 'number' and the official proof of their demographic status were important political assets on the basis of which they could claim a 'fair' share of state resources.<sup>58</sup> Chakrabarty (1994) argues that people adapted themselves to bureaucratic classifications as they realised that the numerical strength of their community had become an important political instrument. Ahir/Yadavs become aware of this by the end of the nineteenth century. This is not only documented by the content of the petitions they sent to the census officer but also by their historiographies. Accounts written by Yadav 'historians' emphasised how their ancestors and founders of the community realised the numerical strength of the Ahirs through the early census and made them compete for what they thought to be a 'fair number' of appointments in an ever-growing state bureaucracy (J.L. Yadav 1999: 13; see also Census of India 1871-2; Census of India 1881). The following are extracts from petitions and memorandums sent to the British government during the colonial period.

'...that having regard to the fact that this community which numerically stands only second amongst the various sections of the Hindu communities is most inadequately represented in the public services, suitable representations be made to the authorities concerned, to recognise its claims to have an adequate share in the public service'.<sup>59</sup>

'His Majesty's government have recognised the principle of separate representation as a measure of giving adequate representation to those classes and groups that would have been otherwise unrepresented (or under represented. The government also acknowledge the claim of the backward areas for separate representation. But the government do not recognise the claims of the backward classes in general for example Ahirs, Gujars, etc., for separate representation...I humbly put before Your Excellence the example of only one Province, the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh. In that Province the population of the Ahirs alone is equal to the population of the Muslims, almost equal to the population of the depressed classes. But during the last ten years

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<sup>58</sup> See NAI, Home Dept. Public, May-June, 1926, File No. 706 and Delhi State Archives, Home Dept. May, 1933, File No. 109-b. *Ahir community petition from the Yadav-Ahir Kshatriya Sabha for adequate representation of the Ahir community in the machinery of the reformed government.*

<sup>59</sup> NAI Home Dept. Public, May-June, 1926, File No. 706.

we have not been able in sending more than one representative to the Legislative Council'.<sup>60</sup>

This emphasis on number and on *Yadavness* versus 'status' is also evident in colonial petitions which portray the Ahirs as 'the backward/depressed category' in an attempt to get benefits from the reservation provisions. It looks as if the Yadav intelligentsia not only learnt that Yadav social and economic progress or backwardness could be determined by measuring their share in the number of graduates, official appointments and parliamentary seats (Chakrabarty 1994: 150), but also that economic and social disabilities were not 'enough' and that 'ritual' disabilities had also to be proved. The following is an extract from a petition sent in 1927, to the Simon Commission, in which a member of the Ahir community illustrates how the community suffers from the same disabilities and discriminations as the Chamars (an untouchable caste).

(b) It may be said that the Lower classes are made up of the middle classes and the Lower castes. Amongst the former may be mentioned the Ahirs, Gadariyas, Kurmi, etc. and amongst the latter the Chamars, Sweepers, Dhobi etc. but this classification is the thing of the past and cannot be made castewise now-a-days...The British officers in the Civil and Military employed sweepers and Chamars as their 'ayahs' and thus raised the status of many of the families.<sup>61</sup>

This petition goes on to describe how 'Lower classes' (Shudra and untouchables) have certain religious and social customs such as drinking wine; re-marriage; caste *panchayats*; caste gods and the non-use of Brahman priest in their religious rituals. Mr Ram Prasad Ahir, the memorandum's author, concludes his petition with a rhetorical question: 'The question that arises is why others (*namely castes like the Ahir*) are regarded to be a little better than the untouchables' (ibid. my emphasis). In the post-colonial period, on occasion of the implementation of the

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<sup>60</sup> Delhi State Archives, Home Dept. May, 1933, File No. 109-b. Ahir community petition from the Yadav-Ahir Kshatriya Sabha for adequate representation of the Ahir community in the machinery of the reformed government.

<sup>61</sup> *Memorandum submitted by Mr. Ram Prasad Ahir, Pleader, Sultanpur*. In Indian Statutory Commission Volume XVI. *Selections from memoranda & oral evidence by non-officials (Part-1)*, 354-355. See also IOR, L/PJ/9/108.



Other Backward Classes provisions, this rhetorical query often recurred while the Yadav 'backward' status was re-defined and 'proved'.

These petition suggest that to understand Yadav colonial caste politics only within the framework of Sanskritisation can be misleading. In fact, there is more continuity between Yadav colonial and post-colonial caste politics than has actually been recognised. Pinch (1996: 142) has pointed out how the call for a Kshatriya past lost its voice with Independence and, in the last fifty years, Yadavs and other castes like Kurmi and Kushavaha have begun to privilege a rhetoric based on democratic and demographic realities. This is not entirely correct. First, because during the colonial period Yadav caste associations lobbied the government to obtain separate representation and government jobs and they did so on the basis of their numerical strength rather than on their Kshatriya origins. Secondly, following Independence, as the next section illustrates, Yadav caste associations never abandoned the Kshatriya rhetoric. In fact, both during colonial and post-Independence periods, Krishna-the-warrior-prince did not only serve as the basis for a process of Sanskritisation but, importantly, as the basis for the formation of a larger and larger all-India Yadav community. Demographic and democratic realities and the rhetoric of *Kshatriyahood* do not therefore contradict each other and are indeed extremely complementary.

### **Yadavs, the Other Backward Classes social category and the Yadav regiment**

After Independence, the Constitution gave the government of India the power to legislate in favour of the Scheduled Castes (former untouchables), the Scheduled Tribes (tribal groups) and the Other Backward Classes. While the question of identifying the scheduled castes and tribes was settled before independence, the category 'backward classes' was left, at least at the central level, to be defined. In the early fifties, the Kalelkar Commission made the first attempt to characterise 'backwardness' and in its report made it clear that caste was an important index of economic and social marginalisation. The central government rejected the recommendation by pointing out how the commission failed to apply other criteria such as income, education, and literacy in determining backwardness. On

the wave of the rejection, the Yadav caste associations began to lobby the government for the adoption of the caste criterion for determining the status of the Other Backward Classes.

The Yadavs have been playing a leading part in the general Backward Classes' movement. By the early 1960s, both the general secretary and the president of the All-India Backward Classes Federation belonged to the Yadav community and had active roles in the AIYM. At all its annual conferences the AIYM began to pass resolutions demanding the revival of the caste criteria and the implementation of the recommendations of the Backward Classes Commission (Rao 1979: 157). However, in the 1970s, due to internal rivalries within the leadership of the Mahasabha, the backward front lost its strength. At the time there were basically two factions. On the one hand there were the 'traditional' Ahir elite groups from Ahirwal and western Uttar Pradesh who were mainly interested in defending the interests of landlords and the military elite, and on the other the landless and 'poor' Yadavs of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, whose agenda was to achieve 'social justice' and the implementation of reservation for the OBCs (see Jaffrelot 2000).

Hence in the Braj-Ahirwal area there were many Ahir/Yadavs who perceived it demeaning to be considered 'backward'. In the mid 1960s at the AIYM conference organised in Etawah, the president, Rao Birendra Singh (member of the Rewari royal family), said in his speech that 'it was a weakness on the part of the Yadavs to consider themselves a backward community', and that what they (Yadavs) wanted was 'political power and not social reform' (quoted in Dhanagare 1968: 1852; see Rao 1972). With this statement Rao Birendra Singh pushed the issue of Sanskritisation rather than the issue of OBC reservation. However, his opinions were not shared by many of the participants of the convention. As a result, one of the resolutions passed in the meeting said that:

The Mahasabha condemned the Central Government for shelving the Backward Classes Commission's Report and insisted that its recommendations be implemented and the caste criterion for determining backwardness be revived (Resolutions, Etawah 1968 (Originally in English)).

Hence, by the end of the 1960s, the policy of reservation was causing conflict between Yadavs' competing demands for higher ritual status on the one hand, and economic and political power on the other.

Meanwhile, in the following years numerous state commissions were formed to develop methods to identify what 'backward' meant. Finally, in 1978, a new Backward Classes Commission, headed by B.P. Mandal (Yadav by caste), was appointed. Its report identified 3,743 castes as 'backward'. This list was developed out of the last available data on caste, namely the 1931 Indian Census. With the 1941 Census the British stopped using caste categories because it was thought that they contributed to the politicisation of caste. By the same token, the post-colonial government rejected caste tabulation in an attempt to deprive caste of its legitimacy. Constitution makers believed that in a democratic state caste demography had no place. In the absence of reliable data, predictably, the search for 'backward' castes was not a straightforward process. The problems encountered by colonial census officers in defining caste as 'an all-over India' classificatory tool were to be experienced again by the members of Backward Classes Commission. As in the 1920s, when British census officers were overwhelmed with claims from caste groups which attempted to be classified as 'Rajput', 'Kshatriya' or with other higher status caste/*varna* titles, the Mandal commission was engulfed by petitions from communities which claimed to be 'backward' (Pinch 1996: 145). The Yadav caste associations successfully pursued such a path (see K.C. Yadav 1994).

In the 1980s (1980-1983), and then again during the 1990s, the AIYM's pro-reservation front strengthened its power. However, this did not mean that the anti-reservation front, supported by many Ahir/Yadavs in the Ahirwal area, remained without a voice. Haryana was one of the last states in northern India to include Yadavs in the OBC list. This was due to a lack of consensus within the community. The local Yadavs were split into two fronts. One front felt it demeaning to be included in the OBCs, and the other front felt that the economic benefits offered by the OBC policy outweighed the issues concerning ritual status. In the end, the latter front won thanks to the efforts of local caste associations affiliated to the AIYM. Throughout the 1980s the implementation of the Mandal recommendations became one of the major focuses of the All-India Yadav

Mahasabha.<sup>62</sup> The AIYM lobbied for the implementation of the recommendations 'in the name of Krishna'. The following are extracts from publications and speeches published and held in this period.

'Lord Krishna, holding the Gourdhan Giri took the stand of this people against injustice and proposed himself. In the Mahabharata, favouring justice, he rooted out the injustice done to the respectful people of this race. For the progress of the poor people of India below the poverty line, especially for the Backward, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, show the way today!'<sup>63</sup>

Krishna is represented as a social-democratic hero who combats injustice and social inequalities. The Yadav leaders, in the name of Krishna, 'the prophet of social justice', represent the Yadavs as the natural leaders of the OBCs. Krishna was the leader in *Dwapara Yuga*, and the Yadavs, as his descendants, were supposed to lead the society in the *Kali Yuga* and fight the injustice and the exploitation of the Backward Classes by the Forward Classes (cf. Rao 1979). This rhetoric, which would be further developed in the 1990s by Yadav politicians (see Chapter 5), was accompanied by an emphasis on the power of the Yadavs' numerical strength and on the promotion of an all-India process of *Yadavisisation*. The following are extracts from the meeting held in 1983 in Madras, Tamil Nadu.

'All are our habitations. All are our relatives' is the ancient saying. Lord Krishna led us towards such a goal. This is because of various divisions that crept among us in the course of time. The dawn of the need for unity marked the dawn of our Mahasabha'...'at one time Yadav population was 56 crore. Now it is supposed to be 10 or 12 crore. As a result of subcaste subdivisions, it is not easy to determine the exact number of Yadavas. We should all unite and write Yadav

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<sup>62</sup> In 1979, the Mahasabha was highly involved in the organisation of the National Seminar on Backward Classes. The following are extracts from a meeting held in 1979: 2. It is a matter of great regret that the Kaka Kalelkar's report remained shelved for over 25 years. 3...As such the participants in the Meeting strongly demand that pending the submission of the Mandal Commission's report the Govt. should at least reserve with immediate effect certain percent of positions in all India services and in technical and medical institutions as envisaged in the Kaka Kalelkar's report and as promised by the Janata Party's manifesto'. Extracts from Minutes of the National Seminar on Backward Classes, 19-20 May 1979, Delhi, reported in *Yadav Sansar*, June 1979.

<sup>63</sup> Jagadami Prasad Yadav, Member of Parliament, Letter published in the AIYM, 49<sup>th</sup> Session Madras's Souvenir, 1983 (Originally in English).

after our names that will reduce the ambiguity which arises as a result of use of subcaste names'.<sup>64</sup>

In 1990, the Janata Prime minister V.P. Singh implemented the reservations for the OBCs. This provoked disapproval from all over the country. Young students belonging to high castes immolated themselves in a sign of protest. By the same token, Yadav leaders were jubilant. The Yadav caste publications of the period are full of articles which portray Yadav leaders as the saviours of the Backward Classes and B.P. Mandal (Yadav) as their messiah. The latter has become one of the legendary personalities of the Yadav community and he is glorified in the Yadav caste literature. The following is an example of such 'devotion':

'B.P. Mandal was a man with great foresight. He worked for the upliftment of the poor and oppressed. He was a great advocate of social justice. His greatest contribution to the cause of social justice is the Mandal commission report. He is rightly called the Messiah of Backwards'.<sup>65</sup>

In 1999, the AIYM resolved that the portrait of B.P. Mandal, the Messiah of the Backward Classes, should be placed 'in the Central Hall of the Parliament without any further delay'.<sup>66</sup> In the 1990s, the Mahasabha's OBC front led by socialist leaders such as Harmohan Singh Yadav regained power. Harmohan Singh Yadav is described in the words of a caste publication as 'a devoted social activist, a humanist with immeasurable warmth for the poor, the downtrodden and the oppressed. A firm believer in secularism, social justice and democratic values'.<sup>67</sup> At present, he is member of the Rajya Sabha and an active member of the Samajwadi Party. In the 1980s and 1990s under his leadership the Mahasabha revived its local branches and began to focus more on issues of political representation and participation. This massive reorganisation and revival is historically parallel to the implementation of the policy of reservation for the OBCs. The meetings of the AIYM began to be held regularly and their venue

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<sup>64</sup> Flag-hoisting speech by Harmohan Singh, AIYM Convention, Madras 1983 (Originally in English).

<sup>65</sup> AIYM Platinum Jubilee Year, Souvenir, 1924-1999 (1999).

<sup>66</sup> Resolutions voted at the AIYM's Platinum Jubilee Session, Vaishali-New Delhi, 25 and 26 December 1999.

<sup>67</sup> AIYM Platinum Jubilee Year, Souvenir, 1924-1999 (1999).

shifted outside the Hindi-belt to Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala (1993), Secunderabad in Andhra Pradesh (1994), Surat in Gujarat (1995), Guwahati in Assam (1996) and Bangalore in Karnataka (1999). The Mahasabha then reinforced its strength in the South, especially in Tamil Nadu.

Today, the organisational ability of the AIYM lies in its effective national federative structure. At present the Mahasabha has working units in the following states: Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Orissa, Pondicherry, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, Kerala, Maharashtra, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand. To my knowledge, there are no comparable examples of caste associations in India that extend across state boundaries and include members of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds to the extent of the AIYM. In 1999, this decennial groundwork led to the election of D. Nagendhiran from Tamil Nadu as president of the Mahasabha.

In recent years, the Mahasabha began to use the media in an instrumental and systematic way. Its voice began to be recorded by local and national newspapers. New 'historical' and 'ethnographical' texts which discussed the Yadav 'past' and 'culture' were published and old ones were reviewed (K.C. Yadav 1966; R. Pandey 1968; J.N.S. Yadav 1992; S. Yogi Yadav 1997). These publications do not present substantial differences in terms of the structure and tone of their narrative if compared with the colonial ones described above. The main innovation is the introduction of sections about successful Yadav politicians such as Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav and the inclusion of recent sociological material on the Yadav Backward Class movement. M.S.A. Rao's work on the Yadava movement (1979) is highly quoted (or better, plagiarised). So today, a large part of souvenirs or pamphlets which illustrate the Yadav community's historical construction refer to the Yadavs as 'an ethnic group', and the AIYM as the promoter of Yadav ethnic identity, borrowing the social category 'ethnic' from Rao's work.<sup>68</sup> A number of Yadav web sites have also been set up (e.g. [www.yadav.com](http://www.yadav.com)) to mobilise the Yadav *global* community (see Plate 6 and Plate 7). Even in these sites large sections are dedicated to the 'history' of the Yadavas and to their political success.

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<sup>68</sup> AIYM Platinum Jubilee Year, Souvenir 1924-1999 (1999: Preface).

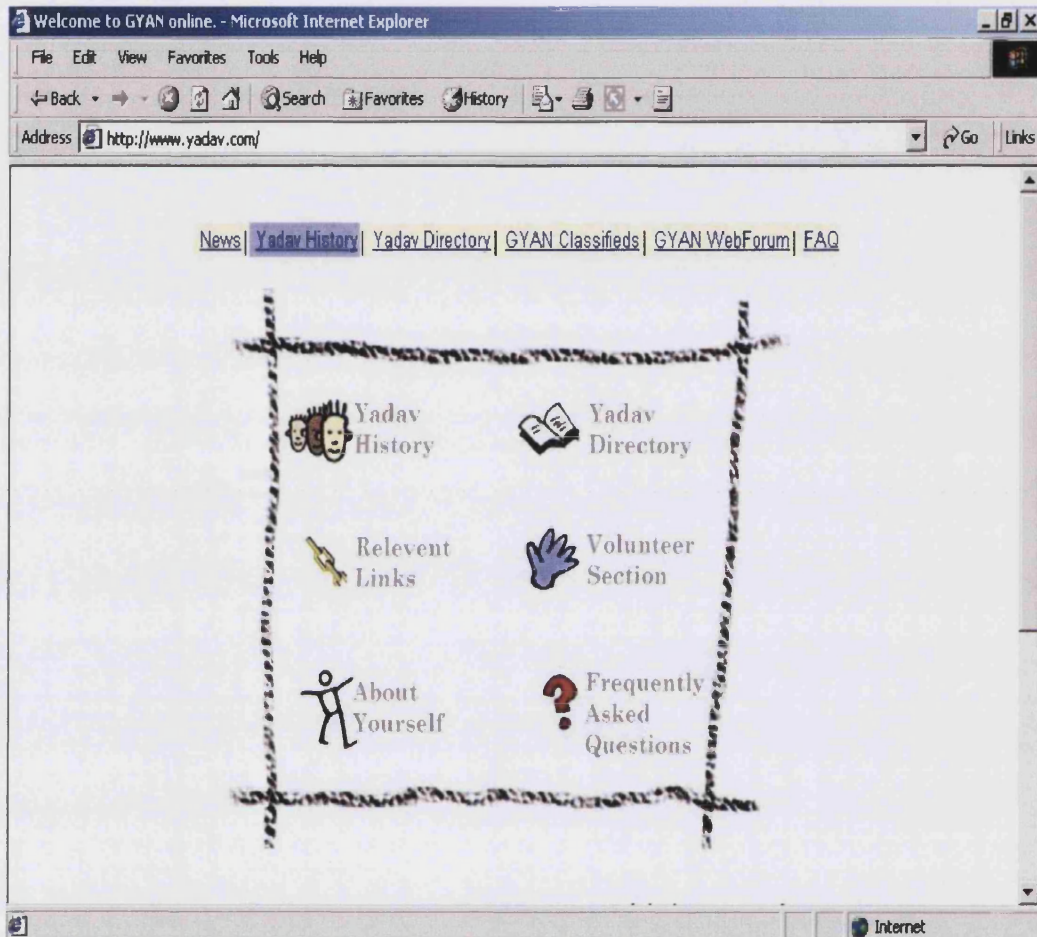


Plate 6: Yadav Global Forum web-page (www.yadav.com)





Yadav politicians portray themselves as the protectors of the oppressed and the defenders of injustice. Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav are often described by their caste supporters as *avatars* (incarnations) of Krishna sent to earth to protect 'the oppressed' (see Chapter 5). It is the natural duty of the Yadavs as descendents of Krishna and Kshatriyas to protect the weaker sections of society. The following is an extract from speeches delivered at national and regional Yadav meetings.

'Lord Krishna in the name of the struggle, was a person who was determined to fight injustice. Lord Krishna fought for the cause of the Backward Classes, the farmers, the cowherders and the economically weaker sections of the society. He fought against powers based on injustice and malign intentions. The question at the time was to find warriors with the courage to fight injustice. He gathered the children of the milkmen along with Yadavs and cowherders to create an army to fight against all social evils. Lord Krishna was the person who was born in jail and who fought against social odds' (Laloo Prasad Yadav, AIYM Convention, Vaishali-New Delhi 26 December 1999).

When they deliver speeches Yadav politicians generally wear the Rajput turban as a symbol of *Kshatriyahood*. Moreover, they also participate in the meetings of the Kshatriya Mahasabha, and Rajput leaders participate in Yadav meetings (see Chapter 1). Yadavs' social democratic politics remain, therefore, solidly ingrained in their traditional Rajput-like culture.

The AIYM acts as a pressure group to gain government positions for its members in the Indian state apparatus on the basis of their 'backwardness' and at the same time asks for the creation of the Ahir/Yadav Regiment, on the basis of their Kshatriya military culture. The following resolutions approved at the last general meetings of the Mahasabha are indicative of this double political engagement. On 25 October 1998, in Gurgaon (Haryana) on the occasion of the inauguration of the Haryana State Yadav Sabha, fourteen resolutions were approved by the Executive Committee of the AIYM. Amongst these, five were directly related to issues of political representation and reservation and two to the Yadav regiment:

(ii) It was resolved to request all the political parties to allot at least 15% of seats to Yadav candidates in the ensuing Assembly elections in Delhi, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh in view of the preponderous Yadavs in these states.

(iii) It was resolved that the Hon'able Prime Minister, Sh, Atal Vajpay be requested to nominate at his earliest convenience, at least, two Yadavs in his Council of Ministers as Cabinet Minister. It was further resolved to impress upon the Hon' able Prime Minister that there was no Yadav Minister of Cabinet Rank. Therefore, Yadavs may be adequately represented in his Cabinet, as the Yadav are the single largest community in the country numbering 15 crores.

(v) Resolved to request the President of India to appoint Yadavs as Governors.

(vi) Resolved to request the Government of India to undo the grave injustice to the community by not appointing any Yadav as member of the Union Public Service commission, or Judges in the high Court and Supreme Court.

(vii) It is resolved to request Government of India to provide reservation of 27% for the OBC women in the proposed 33% reservation for women.

(viii) Resolve that the provision of "Creamy Layer" which goes against the letter and spirit of the Constitution of India providing reservation for 'Educationally and Socially Backward Classes" be scrapped off forthwith.

(xiv) Resolved that keeping in view of the supreme sacrifices made to the Nation by our people in India, we be given a regiment forthwith. Resolved further that an Ahirwal regiment be also made at once as is being done for other regions these days. Further resolved that the quota of the Yadavas be increased in the Indian army in view of their strength- i.e. over 12% of the national population (Originally in English).

At the Platinum Jubilee Session of the AIYM at Vaishali-New Delhi on 25 and 26 December 1999, four resolutions identified under the subtitle 'political', and four under the agenda Yadav Regiment were approved, as well:

(ii) Resolved that the vested interest which has been denying the 16-crore strong Yadav community its rightful space in national polity be shown its place once for all. The political parties, no matter whether left winged, right oriented, pro-social justice or any other hue, be opposed tooth and nail if they work against the interests of the Yadav community.

(iii) Resolved that the discrimination that the Yadavs are being subjected to in the matter of appointments as governor, ambassadors and heads of statutory bodies including the UPSC, and state public services commissions, and other national outfits must stop forthwith. They must get their due share in these appointments.

(iv) That the provision of 'creamy layer' in the OBC reservations which goes against the letter and spirit of the constitution of India providing reservation for the socially and educationally backward classes be done away forthwith.

(v) Resolved to appeal to the Yadav community to exercise utmost care in the use of its vote. In no circumstance should one be voted

who does not serve the interests of our community in particular and the weaker section of the society in general.

(vi) Resolved that keeping in view the supreme sacrifice of the Yadavs in defending the nation's borders, honour and integrity, we would be given a Yadav Regiment forthwith as was done for Jats, Rajputs, Dogras etc in the past and for the Nagas in the present.

(vii) Resolved that an Ahirwal Regiment be also established as had been done for other regions.

(viii) Resolved that Yadavs being over 15 crore, their quota in the armed forces be raised on the strength of their numbers (Originally in English).

The focus on the implementation of the OBC provisions and on the formation of the Yadav regiment mirrors the 'socialist-Kshatriya' language of the Mahasabha and Yadav political leaders. In the next section I explore how this language is played out in the local political arena of Mathura town.

### **Manipulating 'status' in Mathura**

Most of the AIYM resolutions reported above are related to the reservation policy. At the time of my fieldwork as expressed in resolution numbers (viii) and (iv) respectively, the issue of the 'creamy layer' was already topical. According to the Supreme Court judgement and the Mandal Commission Act, it is mandatory that from sometime in 2002 state governments shall begin to identify communities in the reservation list that are no longer backward and accordingly remove them from the OBC list. By 1998, the AIYM began to campaign against the creamy layer provision. The general argument against it is based on the fact that the economic criterion is not contemplated by the Constitution and therefore is unconstitutional.

Actually, there are no real criteria to determine what constitutes *backward*. As has been acknowledged by academic debates on reservation policy and the effects of the Mandal commission (Béteille 1992), the 'backward' concept as well as the criteria used to choose 'who to include and who to exclude' are vaguely specified. The constitution says that reservations are provided to the socially and educationally backward classes. If on the one hand educational backwardness can

be quantified 'by counting the number of graduates or matriculates from a caste, the number of children in school, how many dropouts', etc., *social backwardness* is, on the other hand, very difficult to quantify or assess. The Mandal Commission provides some guides by listing certain social behaviours (namely the practice of child marriage or widow marriage) as characteristics of *socially* backward castes. However, overall, the understanding has been that people who have been discriminated against because of *their low ritual status*, and which in turn has led to their deprivation in society in terms of access to education and other opportunities, deserve special help and action through policy.

In line with such understanding, Yadav informants in Mathura conceptualise the category 'Backward Classes/Castes' as synonymous with Shudra, with non-twice-born castes (*avarna*), i.e. untouchables or very low castes. Administrative classifications such as 'Backward Classes' and 'Scheduled Castes' have been assimilated in everyday conversations in the neighbourhood and replaced terms such as Shudra and untouchables. During fieldwork informants seldom mentioned the word Shudra, but they often used the term Backward Classes/Castes or Scheduled Castes when they referred to low castes like the local Dhobis and Jatav/Chamars. In Mathura, differences of rank based purely on a purity and pollution hierarchy are almost non-existent amongst the so-called *bare jati* category. This category of continuous hierarchies includes Brahmans, Banias, Rajputs, Jats, Yadavs, Malis and all the other 'clean' castes. Yadavs are not concerned how they might be ranked in relation to the other *bare jati*. However, they are very strict about the pollution barrier. The pollution barrier between these clean caste communities and the former untouchables (generally called 'backward castes' or 'scheduled castes') is still a lively social reality (cf. Osella and Osella 2000a: 240-241). Mathura's ethnography is consistent with Susan Bayly's observations: 'the paramount manifestation of caste in Indian life today is not so much of the phenomenon of "substantialisation" as it was reported in the 1970s, but the distinctions between those who can proclaim clean-caste origin and those whom higher-caste people can stigmatise as *avarna*, i.e. innately unclean and polluted' (1999: 340).

However, in order to prove their 'social backwardness' to the government authorities Yadav social leaders and politicians depict the Yadavs as Shudra and

as a low, almost 'untouchable' caste. In doing this, they draw upon ethnographic details which portrayed them as Shudra and low. The *Questionnaire for Consideration of Requests for Inclusion in the Central list of the OBCs* (1994) asks explicitly for caste details about the social disabilities of the caste. The following passage is an extract from the 'Memorandum for inclusion of Ahir/Yadav in the OBCs' in the state of Haryana. The document was written by a Yadav social leader and active member of the AIYM and submitted to the National Commission for Backward Classes in 1995. The 'social backwardness' of the Ahir/Yadavs, was described as follows:

'The Ahirs, for reasons which fall beyond the scope of this memorandum stand to a very low social position in the society by the Brahmanical order during the ancient and medieval periods. The Ramayana calls them fierce looking wild race called dasyu (= they were untouchables (Valmiki, XXII, 30-36). The Mahabharata records them as Vrisaalas (akin to Shudras) (Ashvamedhka parva, XXIX, 830-320). They are found to be occupying the same position in the medieval age. They were not included in the Varnashramadharm'. Kashka, a medieval commentator of Mahabhashya goes even further and describes them as Mahasudras (Kashika Vivaranapanjika 1913, Vol. I, p.809). The position has improved a little in the modern times. But still they occupy a low social status... The Ahirs, who were ranked as Shudras during the ancient and medieval time were not 'allowed' to go for education...The position has improved a little in the modern times. But still they occupy a low social status. A socio-educational-economic survey conducted by me recently has substantiated this position quite figuratively. In reply to the following three questions based to 'high castes' and the Ahirs throughout the Ahirwal, the reply was in negative:

Do Brahmans and other high caste share food with Ahirs?

Do they smoke hooka with Ahirs?

Do they accept Ahirs as of equal social standing?

The social injustice of thousands of years has made the caste backward by robbing its members of self-confidence, and positive will to upward social-economic-cultural mobility'.<sup>69</sup>

The descriptions of the Ahir/Yadavs in these extracts emphasise Ahir low and 'unclean' status within a Brahmanical model of hierarchy. As described in the previous sections Braj-Ahirwal Yadavs belong to the Yaduvanshi category and are mainly landlords or employed in the army. During an interview with the

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<sup>69</sup> Memorandum for inclusion of Ahirs in the OBCs, Copy address to the Director, Welfare of Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes, Haryana (1994).

author of the memorandum, in which I questioned him on the plausibility of his claims, he read to me passages extracted from colonial ethnographies which described 'the Ahirs' as Shudras and as low caste people whose main occupation was milk-selling. Soon after, he proudly showed me a file which contained all the memorandums sent to the different ministers of Defence, demanding the creation of a Yadav regiment.<sup>70</sup> Extracts from A.H. Bingley's recruitment Handbook were quoted to prove Yadav fighting abilities and their being Kshatriya and martial. Moreover, the royal status of Ahirwal clans was emphasised. The different use of ethnographic details in the memorandum addressed to the Backward Classes commission and those sent to the Ministers of Defence are a further example of how the ambiguous status of the Yadav is manipulated in the contemporary political process.

During conversations with local political leaders about the principle of the creamy layer, details from colonial ethnographies, and in particular extracts from a Mathura Gazetteer, were shown to me to prove 'the low status' of the Yadavs. Often I have been told that the Ahirs in eastern U.P. and Bihar are looked down upon, so much so that they have been included in the category of Shudra and are thus oppressed by the higher castes. Mathura Yadavs use the allegedly low status of their caste mates in other parts of the state to legitimise their inclusion in the OBC categories. The reality is that many Yadavs in Mathura benefit from the reservation even if they are on the whole all well-off, politically powerful and locally recognised as a *bare jati*. Accordingly, local Yadavs think of themselves as Kshatriya and/or as 'Kshatriya who behave like Vaishya' (see Chapter 4). Almost without exception Mathura Yadav informants say that they are by no means a 'backward caste'. Whenever I pointed out that as members of the OBCs they benefit from the government reservation they usually dismissed my argument by saying that 'those are Delhi classifications' which they are happy to use for economic reasons, but this use does not mean that they are in fact a 'backward caste'.

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<sup>70</sup> AIYM's memorandums submitted to the minister of Defence: November 1968; August 1982, March 1984; July 1996.

Academics have emphasised the ‘dilemma’ of the OBCs. They have described how individuals are caught between the claim of ‘backwardness’ in order to benefit from special allocations, and the quest for upward social mobility which would improve social status yet compromise eligibility for preferential treatment (Béteille 1969). The issue is whether to cling to a ‘backward’ identity in order to gain access to compensatory privileges from the state, or to pursue social mobility through the ‘traditional’ mechanism of Sanskritisation, which means denying one’s low origins and hence repudiating these privileges. This dilemma is certainly more prominent amongst former untouchable castes, as the caste studies of the Koli (Parry 1970) and of the Kori (Molund 1988) illustrate. However, the case of the Ahir/Yadavs shows that ‘backward castes’ also face similar dilemmas.

Today, Yadavs of Mathura generally do not find it demeaning to be members of the OBCs, and seem to have resolved the conflict between claims for status and power. They are not concerned with the fact that the denomination ‘backward’ is locally understood as synonymous with low status and Shudra. I suggest that the way contemporary Mathura Yadavs relate to the category of OBC should also be understood by taking into account the emphasis they generally place on the ‘quality’ and ‘distinctiveness’ of their blood, rather than on matters of ritual purity. It follows that the powerful ethnic discourse developed and diffused by Yadav intellectuals, politicians and social reform leaders allows local Yadavs to think of themselves as ‘Kshatriyas who behave like Vaishyas’ and to think about the Shudra label as another state resource to be exploited.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has unravelled a number of aspects of Ahir/Yadav history in relation to the use of bureaucratic social classifications and ethnographic knowledge. In particular I have illustrated the socio-cultural relations that constitute the understanding and the reinterpretation of particular texts, categories and government policies. I began the chapter by investigating the factors that facilitated the successful formation of the Yadav community in the Braj-Ahirwal area and Mathura town. In doing so I departed from the situation I recorded in the

late 1990s and asked 'the Yadav archive' to shed light on my ethnographic data. In particular, I analysed how a caste is able to represent itself as possessing a high status in the caste hierarchy, and at the same time claim a low status in order to gain access to state benefits without seeing any contradiction. The exploration of Ahir/Yadav history and its relations with different types of social categories and ethnographic portrayals teases out this apparent contradiction. I suggest that central to this is the Ahir/Yadavs' view of caste centred on religious descent and its effective manipulation by Yadav historians and socio-political reformers.

Contemporary Mathura Yadavs have a primordial view of their community. They place emphasis on 'the community' aspect of their caste rather than on the ideology of purity and pollution. This emphasis should not be interpreted as a 'modern' change. In the pre-colonial period, processes of aggregation (today called processes of ethnicisation) were phenomena solidly ingrained within the Ahirwal-Braj area. Such processes were legitimised by the assumption that, despite their subdivision and rank, all Ahirs had the same origins: the ancestor Krishna and his place of birth, the town of Mathura.

Particular characteristics of the community, such as loose endogamous rules and strong exogamy, facilitate processes of inclusion and aggregation. In addition, religious reforms such as Vaishnava *bhakti* movements, the Arya Samaj, and Sanskritic Hinduism, have contributed to the transformation of Ahirs into 'pure' Yadavs, and linked their descent structure to a sacred kinship via the god-ancestor-Krishna.

I suggest that the AIYM interpreted and manipulated colonial classifications through the lens of historically familiar folk theories and practices of caste. The emphasis on primordialism and blood by colonial caste forms of classification seem to have had an elective affinity with the Ahir/Yadavs' own understandings of their caste/community. Hence, Ahir/Yadavs did not only find themselves in particular historical circumstances which 'invited' them to gradually homogenise their community, but they also had specific kinship and religious structures which contributed to facilitating their gradual process of ethnicisation. In particular, the 'unconventional' character of the Ahir caste, i.e. its internal economic and social heterogeneity and its imprecise ritual status helped the Yadav intelligentsia to 'define' and 're-define' themselves according



to their political agenda. Ahir/Yadav historians and ethnographers have on the one hand transformed a diversified ethnographic knowledge into an essentialised tale, and used it to promote a unified and numerically strong Yadav community. On the other hand, they still manipulate, at their convenience, the various 'essentialised' essences ('Kshatriya', 'martial' and 'Shudra') offered by the colonial portrayals and by the multivocality of the symbol of Krishna. This complex process of identity renegotiation has been present throughout the colonial and the post-colonial periods.

Thus, the formation of the Yadav community should not be studied as a mere orientalist fabrication, or as just the product of post-colonial government classifications. I should emphasise that it is not the interest of this work to challenge arguments which view contemporary caste ethnicisation processes as responses to colonial and post-colonial constructions of caste. In contrast, what this chapter has shown is *why some Indians find these models so attractive and why some castes find them more attractive than others*. This chapter has shown that Ahir/Yadavs had, and have, a specific way of reinterpreting social classifications and texts (cf. Sundar 1999: 105). This understanding, linked to their descent-centered conception of caste, together with the availability of significant economic and political resources, facilitated Ahir/Yadavs' successful manipulation of social classifications and texts.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The internal structure of the Yadav caste/community and processes of fusion**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter provides an empirical description of the contemporary system of Yadav subdivision and of the importance of the ideology of descent in the construction of a 'horizontal' and 'ethnicised' Yadav community. It documents how an increasing number of Yadavs in Mathura town view themselves as members of a large descent group - the Krishnavanshi - which recognises common descent from the god Krishna. Further it shows that the expansion of local Yadav endogamous units is both linked to 'traditional' hypergamous marriage patterns and to ideas propagated by the caste associations. Finally it shows how the Yadavs' newly acquired political power has influenced the status of a few Ahir/Yadav subdivisions and hence marriage patterns.

The chapter is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the internal structure of the Ahir/Yadav community. It examines the peculiarities of its segmentary system and the changes and continuities it has experienced in the past fifty years. Following on from the discussion begun in the previous chapter concerning the passage from Ghosi, Kamaria and Nandavanshi-Ahir to Yaduvanshi and Krishnavanshi-Yadav, I explore how the boundaries between different subdivisions are locally defined by locality/territory, ideologies of blood, concepts of purity and pollution, wealth and power and historical contingencies. The second part of the chapter is about ideologies of marriage and processes of fusion amongst the Yadav community. In the concluding section I examine the kinship structure of the Ahir/Yadav caste/community in terms of the academic debate about the modern transformations of the morphological aspects of caste and its conversion into 'horizontal' and 'separated' quasi-ethnic groups.

## The Ahir/Yadavs' horizontal organisation and lineage view of caste

The historiography of the Ahir/Yadavs highlights a number of important socio-structural features present in the organisation of this large and heterogeneous community. First, it shows that the Ahir kinship system was traditionally informed by openness which meant that Ahirs constituted a 'loosely structured' caste (Orenstein 1963). Although rules of endogamy were present at some levels, the community was mainly united by 'fictitious kinship', i.e. local alliances and affinities that bound groups of Ahirs internally and established links with other subcastes and castes (cf. Rao 1977, 1979).

Within the Ahir/Yadav 'caste-cluster', alliances between different segments, or sections of segments, amongst which no specific *real* genealogical relationship or connection existed, were common. Accordingly, the endogamous units within the community were never rigidly bounded and ranked; nor were they ordered following a sharp purity-pollution hierarchy. Rather, subdivisions within the caste were maintained by claiming different patterns of descent and different habits and customs related to territory and political power.<sup>71</sup> In addition, each subdivision was internally characterised by differentiation of status, power and wealth. Such features contributed to the absence of a clear-cut ranking based on the ideology of purity-pollution and, importantly, to the attachment of status not only to endogamous groups but also to exogamous groups and cluster of lineages. Thus, different segments of the Ahir/Yadavs were not of the same order. This social system led to preferential hypergamous marriage patterns and to the breaching of the ideals of endogamy at the lower and higher levels of the caste/community hierarchy.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> See Gupta's treatment of castes as 'discrete' groups (2000: 54-85).

<sup>72</sup> Chowdhry's (1997) work on inter and intra-caste marriages illustrates how in marriage members of the Jat caste historically accepted women of lower castes. A local belief says that 'the Jat is like an ocean and whichever river falls into this ocean loses its identity and becomes the ocean itself' (1997: 1023). Men 'engulfed all and determined the status of a woman' (ibid.: 1025). Accounts of Ahirs marrying low caste women are also available in folktales found in Haryana and U.P.

This structure is not dissimilar to the one I recorded in Mathura in the late 1990s. Bhagvand Das is 35 years old. He is a Nandavanshi-Yadav of the Phatak clan and lives in Ahir Para. He is a moneylender and wrestler. When asked to describe how the patrilineal system of his caste community works he summarises it by saying:

We (Yadavs) are Chandravanshi, we descend from the Lunar dynasty. The Chandravanshi are divided into different smaller *vanshs* (lines of descent). The Yadavs are divided into three main *vanshs*: the Yaduvanshi, the Nandavanshi and the Goallavanshi. Each *vansh* is formed by different *gots* (clans). You can marry with the people of your *vansh* and out of your *got*. Nowadays, people belonging to different *vanshs* can intermarry. We (Yadavs) are all Krishnavanshi and we belong to the same *parivar* (lineage)...Yadavs are not a caste they are a race (English word).

Local Yadavs stress the ‘uniqueness’ of their caste structure by saying that Yadavs are not a *jati* but a *vansh*. When they use English they translate the word *vansh* as ‘race’. Informants claim common stock with the Jats, Gujars, Marathas and Rajputs.<sup>73</sup> The members of these allied castes are considered ‘brothers’ because they also descend from the Yadava dynasty, and because they share many customs and practices.

Hence, despite the fact that Yadavs view their world as segmentary, the boundaries that mark divisions within their caste/community and allied castes are not considered as having the same nature as those that mark divisions between their *vansh* (understood as a social category which includes Rajputs, Gujars, Jats and Marathas) and other castes. Accordingly, local Yadavs apply different terms (and understandings) to different units of the caste system. The same word, for example *jati*, is not used to describe groups at all the levels of segmentation; rather it is used to describe other castes and communities: ‘the Brahman *jati*’; ‘the *chote jatis*’ as opposed to the ‘Yadav *vansh*’.

By describing their community as a *vansh*/race, informants stress the horizontal ‘caste-cluster’ character of their caste, thereby stressing the idiom of kinship and descent rather than the idiom of religious hierarchy. Béteille (1969: 45) has shown convincingly how the ideas of descent and race (understood in

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<sup>73</sup> For contemporary ethnographic data on the Gujar community see Raheja (1988).

sociological rather than biological terms) are inseparably combined in the concept of *jati*; and in the light of available ethnographic data, I suggest that amongst Rajput-like 'caste-cluster' communities such a link is stronger than in other castes.<sup>74</sup> Fox (1971) and more recently Unnithan-Kumar (1997: 3) have shown how castes related to a Rajput-like culture '... share a centrality of territorially defined lineal kinship in their lives which leads them to experience caste in ways both similar and, at the same time different from caste as we know it generally, i.e., as a set of agnatic and affinal groups dispersed over a wide territory' (Unnithan-Kumar 1997: 3). Similarly, the subdivisions of Rajput-like castes are of a different order than other caste communities. They generally have few 'endogamous' subdivisions (Mayer 1960; Blunt 1931) and, conversely, are divided into numerous 'lines', 'branches' and 'clans' which have an exogamous character. In such a system status is ascribed not only to endogamous groups but also to exogamous groups (Dumont 1970: 123). Paramount to this structure is a preferential hypergamous marriage system which operates at regional level.

Despite class differences amongst Rajputs and fringe-Rajput communities, their members maintain that they are all related to one another however distantly, either by descent or marriage (see Harlan 1992). Similarly, Ahir Para Yadavs speak about the members of their community in terms of two interrelated social institutions primarily defined by descent. They draw attention to their relationships with their own patrilineage (their line of descent (*vansh*), their clan (*got*) and their lineage (*parivar*)), and their relationships with other patrilineages (other *vanshs*, *gots* and *parivars*). 'Descent' and 'marriage' are therefore the central organisational institutions in the Yadavs' everyday life.<sup>75</sup> The largest segment of Yadav organisational structure is the *vansh* of the Moon (the *Chandravanshi*). Encompassed by the *Chandravanshi* category are various smaller *vanshs*. I have identified three main *vanshs* among Mathura Yadavs: the *Yaduvanshi*, the *Nandavanshi* and the *Goallavanshi*. Each *vansh* traces its origin

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<sup>74</sup> For comparative ethnographic data on Rajputs see Fox (1971); on the Girasias (a Rajput-like tribe) see Unnithan-Kumar (1997); on Marathas see Orenstein (1963); Lomova-Oppokova (1999); Jaffrelot (2000); Hansen (2001); and on Patidars see Pocock, (1972, 1973).

<sup>75</sup> For a comparative ethnographic example see the case of the Girasias explored by Unnithan-Kumar (1997).

to a heroic ancestor related to the mythology of Krishna. Progressing down towards smaller kinship units, the next unit after the *vansh* is the *got* (clan). After the *got* comes *parivar* (lineage and sub-lineage).

The exploration of Rajput-like horizontal cluster organisations leads me to suggest that to understand caste as a perfect segmentary system is an oversimplification which obscures the complexity presented by many caste/communities where a less clear-cut internal hierarchical and vertical social organisation is evident. Furthermore, such a perspective conceals how processes of fusion are facilitated within caste/communities which traditionally were informed by horizontal alliances rather than by vertical ones. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the most visible ‘substantialised’ and politically powerful Indian caste/communities: the Marathas in Maharashtra, the Patidars in Gujarat, the Yadavs in northern India, have a strikingly similar social organisation and regional character. Thus I suggest that their horizontal cluster type organisation has found a new vitality in a ‘modern’ caste society that recognises *difference* and *equality* rather than a language of ritual hierarchy as an acceptable manifestation of caste. I shall return to this point in the concluding part of the chapter after having explored how a particular segmentary system is helping to merge different Ahir/Yadav subdivisions and to extend local endogamous boundaries.

### **The *vansh* (line of descent): the Yaduvanshi, the Nandavanshi, the Goallavanshi and the Krishnavanshi-Yadavs**

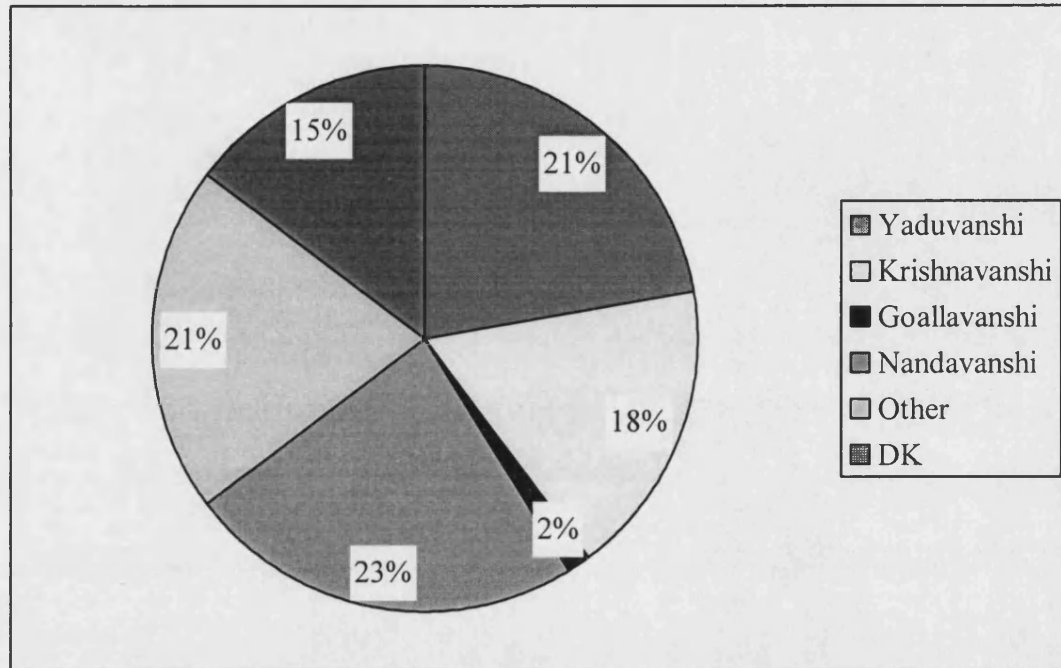
Informants translate the term *vansh* with the words: ‘dynasty’, ‘lineage’ or ‘race’. Mathura Yadavs trace their origins to the *vansh* of the Moon: the Chandravanshi. The Chandravanshi together with the Suriavanshi (the line of the Sun) and the Agnivanshi (the line of Fire) represent the typical three-tier structure of the Rajput castes. By saying that they descend from the line of the Moon, informants simultaneously make multiple claims of ancestry. They claim to belong to the Kshatriya *varna*, to descend from Krishna and to share common descent with Rajputs, Jats and Gujars. More specifically, at the local level they relate their ancestral origins to regional Rajas such as the Raja of Hathras, the Raja of Karouli

and the Raja of Mahaban, and to regional pastoral hero-gods (see Chapters 1 and 4).

The Chandravanshi line of descent is subdivided into different patrilines. These have been described with different terms such as 'races' (cf. Tod 1873) and 'clans'. In the literature about the Ahir caste so far examined these subdivisions have been described as 'sub-castes' (cf. Rao 1979) or as 'tribes' (cf. Elliot 1869). Fox has correctly pointed out that '... strangely, in all the varied literature on the history, martial traditions, distribution and customs of several Jat, Rajput, Bhuinhar and Ahir "clans" spread throughout Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar, no clear definition of "clan" appears, either in native Indian terms or in anthropological terminology' (Fox 1971: 19). Even the 'Yadav amateur ethnographers' do not escape from this confusion. In the ethnography of their own community they use the English word 'subcaste' or the Hindi words *vansh* and *got* (clan) to define both endogamous and exogamous subdivisions: 'now almost all *vanshs* (*gots*) call themselves Yadavs' and 'now members of different *vansh* inter-marry' (J.N.S. Yadav 1992: 179). Thus, although the word *vansh* is generally used to describe quasi-endogamous units, at times it also refers to exogamous social categories. A number of Yadav informants in Mathura said that their *vanshs* were in the past exogamous units, and originally had the same functions which the exogamous *gots* have at present. Accordingly, many use the word *vansh* to indicate their caste endogamous units. However, when the concept of *vansh* is locally used to express rules of endogamy it is usually understood as the concept of 'kindred of recognition' illustrated by Mayer (1960: 161). Accordingly, the boundaries of the *vansh* are subjectively perceived, and it is within its boundaries that marriage takes place. However, how fixed these boundaries are is very subjective and, as the discussion in the previous chapter showed, historically constructed. In Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar within a sample of 68 Yadav families, which according to caste colonial classification and contemporary informants historically belonged to the Nandavanshi subdivision (with the exception of one Goallavanshi family), when asked to which *vansh* their

members belong 21 per cent said Yaduvanshi, 23 per cent, Nandavanshi, 18 per cent Krishnavanshi and 21 per cent other (see Figure 1).<sup>76</sup>

**Figure 3: *Vansh* distribution among Yadavs of Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar**



Source: Mathura survey

The social category of the *vansh* is evidently ill defined and in the light of these data a question should be posed: is it really relevant to which *vansh* you belong? And what kind of status, if any, is attached to this social category? I attempt to answer these questions by exploring how the boundaries of the *vansh* are locally defined by notions of locality/territory, ideologies of blood, concepts of purity and pollution, wealth and power and historical contingencies. In so doing, I aim to illustrate how ‘individuals and groups construct boundaries (differences) within (inside) the community both in terms of hierarchy and in terms other than hierarchy’ (Unnithan-Kumar 1997: 6).

In particular, I explore why people belonging to the Nandavanshi subdivision represent themselves as members of the Yadu or Krishna *vansh* and how these new identifications are in line with changes in marriage patterns and

<sup>76</sup> The most common answers included in the category ‘Other’ consist of names of *gots* (eight respondents); the name of subdivisions such Kamaria and Ghosi (four and two respondents); and the category Ahir (one respondent).



processes of fusion within the community. We know from the previous chapter that this phenomenon is hardly a new one. One hundred years ago members of the Ghosi subdivision began to represent themselves as Nandavanshi-Yadavs. Conversely, by the beginning of the twentieth century, in order to be recruited to the army the Nandavanshi-Yadavs of the same region began to represent themselves as Yaduvanshi-Yadavs. The following sections show a process of caste fusion which is not yet fully completed. At the moment Yadav local subdivisions (Yaduvanshi, Goallavanshi and Nandavanshi) are neither separated nor fully united. Such a situation is reflected by an ethnography which presents contradictory and at times confusing data. Through an exploration of such 'disorder', the following sections attempt to document what is an ongoing process of fusion.

### ***Locality (place and territory) and subdivisions***

Ahir Para, Anta Para and Sathgara are the traditional residential areas of the Ahir/Yadavs of Mathura town. Ahir Para is mainly inhabited by Nandavanshi-Yadavs; Anta Para by Yaduvanshi-Yadavs and Sathgara by Goallavanshi-Yadavs. Despite claims of 'common descent' and 'equality of rank', the spatial distribution of Mathura Yadavs reveals that there is still a residential demarcation between the people belonging to different *vanshs*, and that this residential separation is also accompanied by a moderate concern to mark 'differences' through the language of locality and territory. Locality is commonly used to express relatedness (see Ostor, Fruzzetti and Barnett 1992; Lambert 1996, 2000), and importantly to regulate marriage alliances. Moreover, informants (Yadav and non-Yadav) often use this idiom to mark peoples' physical and moral qualities (see Sax 1991: 72-77), and to evaluate caste statuses (Mayer 1960:159). Consequently, the link between Yadav lineal kinship, locality (and territory) is

significant for a deep understanding of current transformations in the internal structure of the Yadav community.<sup>77</sup>

For centuries, Mathura town and the cultural area of Braj played an important role in Ahir/Yadav community imagination. It constituted a special landscape filled with icons of Ahir/Yadav caste historiography which have been used by Yadav caste associations to support the claim that all Yadavs originally come from the town of Mathura and are descendants of the god Krishna and hence, fundamentally the same. These claims are usually formulated simultaneously. Concepts of common descent, common place of origin and common substance overlap, reinforce each other and support the unitary ideological foundations of the Yadav community. The complex relation between descent, status, persons and places in the Indian context has been widely explored (Dumont 1964; Sax 1991: 72-77; Lambert 1996). The fact that Yadav social leaders heavily used such an idiom to crosscut the social categories of Yadav subdivisions can only reconfirm the importance of locality in constructing social identities.

Ahir caste historiography shows how territory and locality have been used historically to define and mark boundaries inside the community. The first 'official' descriptions of Ahir subdivisions emphasised 'geographical origins' and 'territorial distribution' as primary markers of differentiation amongst the various Ahir branches: '...those of central Doab usually style themselves as Nandabans, those to the west of the Yamuna and the Upper Doab, Jadubans and those in the lower Doab and Benares, Gwallabans' (Elliot 1869: 3). Similarly, the application of the 'martial race' theory when applied to the Ahirs followed 'locality' rather than clan membership (Chapter 2). This policy privileged the recruitment of Ahirs from Ahirwal and contributed to creating an image of them as a superior kind of Yadav. The martial race discourse was in line with indigenous notions of rank which regard the Yadavs from the 'west' (namely Braj, Ahirwal, Rajasthan and Gujarat) as more prestigious than the Yadavs from the 'east' (namely Agra

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<sup>77</sup> For comparative ethnographic data see Beck (1972); the importance of the relation between territory and subdivisions is underlined by Fuller (1975: 305-306).

division and Kanpur division).<sup>78</sup> In northern India it is well known that the geographical origins of Rajput-like 'castes' or 'subcastes' says something about their status. In general, it is regarded that eastern Rajputs are 'lower', 'backward' and 'underdeveloped' compared with the Rajputs of 'the West' (see Mayer 1960: 154; Parry 1979: 279). Presumably, in the case of the Ahirs, such understandings have been reinforced by colonial recruitment policies which favoured 'western' Yadavs, but certainly have not been created by them.

At the beginning of my fieldwork an elderly Yadav woman told me that if I was keen to know the 'correct' *vansh* of a Yadav I had to ask where his ancestors had come from and where his/her affines were living. The place of origin of a member of the community together with that of his/her affines are locally considered as synonymous with his/her subdivision and the prestige and status attached to it. It follows that when informants wished to tell me to which subdivision one of their caste mates belonged, they tended to mention his/her geographical place of origin: 'he is from western U.P.' meant he is a Nandavanshi, or 'he is from Bhojpuri' meant he is a Goallavanshi. Some subdivisions are, therefore, confined to certain localities. Ancestral places are also believed to have a bearing on the quality and status of their natives. Accordingly, Mathura informants often identify certain areas as the motherland of superior Yadavs, and other areas as the motherland of lower status Yadavs, generally using the classic 'east'/'west' barometer. Hence, the western territory of Ahirwal-Braj was conceived as the place where 'real' Yadavs reside.

The following is a description of how such notions are locally expressed in day-to-day caste behaviour. In the neighbourhood of Ahir Para, which is traditionally dominated by Nandavanshi-Yadavs, the members of a local Goallavanshi-Yadav lineage are still known as the *videshi parivar* (the foreign family) regardless of the fact that they have been living in Mathura for the past three generations.<sup>79</sup> They come from Bihar, I was told, they are not 'real' Yadavs; they were originally Mahipal, i.e. herders of buffaloes and not of cows like the

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<sup>78</sup> For an exploration of environmental determinism see Caplan (1995) and Robb (1995: 24).

<sup>79</sup> A similar example is described by Mayer in his ethnography of the village of Ramkheri (1960: 158-159).

Ahirs. Moreover, they are not considered as 'Kshatriya' (Warriors) like the Nandavanshi and the Yaduvanshi-Yadavs of the neighbourhood: 'They come from the East...they are Bihari...they are not 'real' Rajputs' (Arjun Yadav, 18 years old).

Arjun belongs to the Nandavanshi-Yadav subdivision and views 'eastern' Yadavs as inferior to the Yadavs of Braj and central Uttar Pradesh. When asked about the status of the Goallavanshi-Yadavs who live in the neighbourhood of Sathgara, he said that they were superior to the members of the *videshi parivar*, and Bihari Yadavs in general. He explained his statement by saying that: 'Mathura Goallavanshi Yadavs are the original Yadavs of Mathura, they do not come from the East, they are from Braj like the Nandavanshi'.

Arjun's understanding of status in terms of locality and ancestral place of origin is widely shared in Ahir Para. It appears to be almost popular knowledge that 'western Yadavs' (i.e. coming from Ahirwal-Braj, Rajasthan, Haryana and Gujarat) are a superior category of Yadavs. Locality and territory also reflect the internal hierarchies of Ahir/Yadav subdivisions by marking who is marriageable and who is unmarriageable. Members of the three Mathura *vanshs* generally recruit grooms and brides in different localities. The Nandavanshi-Yadavs of Ahir Para have marriage alliances with the Ahir/Yadavs of western-central Uttar Pradesh (namely the districts of Jaleshar, Hathras, Etah, Mainpuri, Farrukhabad, Kannauj, Etawah); the Yaduvanshi-Yadavs of Anta Para, with the district of Alwar and Bharatpur in Rajasthan and Mahendragarh in Haryana; while the Goallavanshi of Sathgara have marriage relations within Mathura town or the nearby Braj area (in particular within Agra town). Accordingly, the *vansh* is often represented as the territory within which women are exchanged. However, these spatial categories are quite flexible and are often adjusted according to political and economic changes.

In Chapter 2, I showed how the Ahir kingdom of Rewari and its royal clans represented the apex of the internal social hierarchy of the Ahir caste. The closer a clan was to the royal clans (in political terms), the higher its status was. The imagery of the Ahir/Yadav Rewari Raj is still used today as a point of reference to judge the quality of different Ahir subdivisions. In Mathura, the Yadavs of the district of Mahendragarh and Gurgaon are always described as the

heirs of the royal family and of warrior clans, and hence as having a noble descent and pedigree. In Ahir Para the families that married their daughters 'in Ahirwal' are extremely proud of their affinal relations. By the same token, in Anta Para informants never tired of reminding me that the neighbourhood was founded by Anta Rao, a relative of Rao Tula Ram, the last king of Rewari, who escaped to Mathura during the mutiny (see Chapter 5).

Despite the ongoing appeal of the former royal family and of Ahirwal as an area inhabited by a superior category of Ahir/Yadavs, Ahir Para Yadavs as well as Yadavs belonging to the other town neighbourhoods were equally proud of telling me that they sent their daughters to the districts of Etawah, Kannauj or Kanpur, which have 'traditionally' been considered 'east'. Today, this area is called the 'Yadav belt' (English word). I suggest that this terminology entered in the conversations of my informants thanks to the influence of the media, in particular of local newspapers. This terminology is often used by vernacular publications to label the 'territory' ruled by Mulayam Singh Yadav: the kingdom of Mulayam. Today, this region is considered the 'territory' of the Yadavs *par excellence*. As mentioned in Chapter 1 in this area Yadavs have recently acquired economic and political power.

As a consequence, brides from the 'Yadav belt', who until twenty years ago were not considered suitable for matches with Mathura Yadavs, are now in great demand. In addition Mathura Yadav girls are also given in marriage to Etawah and Kanpur families. Thus, the 'Yadav belt' no longer appears to be associated with low status Yadavs: 'now that we have money and power the Yadavs from Haryana and Braj are happy to send their daughters to east Uttar Pradesh' (Rakesh Yadav, 40 years old, and teacher).

Similarly, in recent times Ahir Para Yadavs have improved their economic status. Today they are the most economically and politically well off amongst Mathura Yadavs. A number of them take particular pride in identifying their subdivisions with the Nandavanshi and, by association, with 'the family' of Mulayam Singh Yadav. Their improved economic and political status and their association with important political leaders seem to have increased their ritual status locally. The Yadavs from the old part of the town (Anta Para and Sathgara) traditionally thought of Ahir Para Yadavs as 'U.P.-*vala*': from Uttar Pradesh, and

therefore as inferior to the Yadavs from Braj. Yadav political success locally and in 'the Yadav belt' have refashioned this idea. Now Yadavs from the old part of the city are happy to send their daughters to Sadar Bazaar, and in this way they recognise the superiority of the Ahir Para Yadavs. In the following section I shall return to this point.

Thus, politicised power has, to a certain extent, changed the low status of 'the eastern Yadavs' both at local and regional levels, although such a shift has not affected the status of the 'west', which is still highly valued locally. I suggest that what we are witnessing is a gradual homogenisation of status within the Yadav social category. 'Differences' within the Ahir/Yadav subdivisions are gradually becoming less pronounced as all Yadavs are transformed into superior kinds of Yadavs (see Chapter 4).

It is not only Yadavs who are aware of such trends. Surprisingly, non-Yadav informants were always prone to explain to me the differences between 'the different types' of Yadavs. In their explanations they also use the language of locality. They relate different qualities and ritual status to different places of origin. They usually distinguish two main subdivisions: the 'Uttar Pradesh Yadavs' and the 'Braj-Rajasthan-Haryana Ahirs'. The latter are described as 'Ahirs' and as upper castes (Kshatriya), the former as 'Goallas' and 'Yadavs', and as lower castes (Shudra). For my non-Yadav informants, the title Ahir has much more of a positive connotation than the title of Yadav.<sup>80</sup> The latter is linked to the Yadavs of Uttar Pradesh and to the 'bad' popular image promoted by the *goonda* style of their politicians.

It follows that the Nandavanshi-Yadavs of Ahir Para are described by non-Yadav informants as 'the real' Yadavs. Here, 'real Yadavs' stands for *goondas*

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<sup>80</sup> On the contrary for the Yadavs the term Ahir does not have good connotations. The Yadavs are considered to be different from the Ahirs. This pervasive perception shows how the passage from 'Ahir' to 'Yadav' has been both a technical change of community denomination and a substantive change in behaviour and self-description. Although, Yadavs in Ahir Para defend their traditional profession, they do not like to be called Ahirs, their traditional pastoral name. They perceive it as derogatory and 'backward' because it does not contain the aura of historicity that is associated with the name 'Yadav'.

and for people 'with muscle power'. In this regard, numerous times, I was told that my choice of Ahir Para as a site for my research was an excellent one, not only because the Yadavs were very numerous in the neighbourhood, but above all because the Yadavs of Ahir Para were of the 'right type'. In particular, with this statement they meant that due to the agnatic and affinal ties with the *political* network of the 'Yadav belt', Ahir Para Yadavs had political and economic power. By saying this, they suggest that the kinship structure of the Nandavanshi subdivision was still very strong and it was the main channel through which the new political power was controlled and distributed. By being 'close' to the centre of power, the Yadavs of Ahir Para were considered more likely to benefit from the distribution of the 'new' opportunities and wealth.

I consider the fact that non-Yadav informants were often vividly interested in pointing out different 'kinds' of Ahir/Yadavs as significant ethnographic data. Firstly, this data is not consistent with the available literature (Mayer 1960: 159). Internal caste differences are not usually perceived by outsiders because they do not usually have a bearing on their caste behaviour. The question therefore arises of why non-Yadav informants are interested in Yadav internal subdivisions, and whether they treat different Yadav 'types' differently.

If, on the one hand, I collected innumerable comments about the differences between the Ahirs and Yadavs, I never observed explicit caste behaviours related to such normative views. What I can suggest is that when non-Yadav informants distinguish between Yadavs and Ahirs, or between *goonda*-Yadavs and Ahirs, and point to the latter as superior in rank they implicitly contest the recent power and influence acquired by local *goonda*-Yadavs. Most of these statements generally come from people belonging to higher castes such as Baniyas, Brahmans and Rajputs. In particular, in the last fifty years the local Bania community has lost political control of Sadar Bazaar (see Chapter 6). Such political shifts have caused a lot of resentment, and this is often expressed by pointing out how the status of the contemporary Uttar Pradesh *goonda* Yadavs is lower than the status of, for example, the Rajasthani Ahirs who are not yet so publicised as their Uttar Pradesh counterparts.

## *Commensality*

It is difficult to assess if there were marked commensal restrictions between different Yadav subdivisions in Mathura in the past. A number of elder informants said that the Nandavanshi-Yadavs of Ahir Para did not have commensal relations with 'the Yadavs of the city'. However, others said that these statements were not true and that local Yadavs had always shared food and smoked from the same *hukka* (water pipe) with other Ahir subdivisions and related castes such as Jats, Gujars and Rajputs.

If commensal restrictions amongst the members of different *vanshs* have been abandoned and the rule of commensality is more lax, what still represents an important marker of difference between subdivisions is the kind of food eaten. The eating of meat, fish and eggs is considered polluted by the Yadavs of Ahir Para and Anta Para who in the last three generations have become strictly vegetarian. However, a small number of Goallavanshi *parivars* (families) are still non-vegetarian. These families are considered lower in status because they indulge in eating non-vegetarian food. The Goallavanshi themselves hold a different opinion. They claim that they are Krishnavanshi and Rajput and they say that as Rajputs they eat meat and do blood sacrifice. Vegetarian Yadavs who think of non-vegetarian Goallavanshi as ritually low and shameful for the whole community do not take the Goallavanshi Kshatriya claim seriously.

Despite verbal statements I have never observed subcaste ritual differences manifesting themselves in day-to-day 'caste behaviours'. Now only *pakka* food is served during marriages and it is cooked by specialists. This allows members of different castes and subcastes to eat the food offered on the occasion of wedding or funerary feasts. I was present at the marriage of the daughter of an extremely wealthy Jatav (an ex-untouchable) in which representatives of all Sadar Bazaar castes participated. They did not have a problem eating at the marriage because, as they told me: all the food was *pakka* and cooked by a clean caste man. At the regional meetings of the AIYM and local caste associations attended by Yadavs



from different regions both *pakka* and *kacca* food is served. This menu is often used as a public statement of the ‘unity’ of the Yadavs.

### ***Indigenous theories about Mathura Yadav subdivisions: functional explanations and ideologies of blood***

This section explores how the boundaries of the Mathura Yadav *vanshs* are drawn, nullified or contested by various local narratives. It describes the most popular explanations of the origins of the *vanshs* provided by informants and how these, in turn recognise, reinforce or invalidate differences of rank amongst Mathura Yadavs. These explanations are basically of two types. The first emphasise history, power and wealth as the basis of differentiation and rank, and the second emphasise ideologies of blood and ancestral origins. These explanatory theories often conflate, overlap and coexist in the understandings and manifestations of internal community hierarchy. To begin with I illustrate the views of Yadavs who believe in the occupational and material basis of their subdivisions. I then go on to describe the views of informants who privilege an ‘ethnological’ theory of caste and for whom ancestry matters more than other attributes of internal caste hierarchy.

The supporters of the first line of explanation say that the descendants of Krishna were employed in different professions and hence had different economic and political statuses. Accordingly, the Ahirs who were big landlords and petty *rajas* were named Yaduvanshi. The Nandavanshi caste title was instead attached to owners of large herds. Finally, the milk-sellers and simple cowherders were named Goallavanshi. Informants thereby firmly link the origin and status of their local branches to occupation, wealth and power. In addition, they also add that once a lineage/*parivar* (family) achieved economic wealth, their members were likely to adopt a higher caste title such as Yaduvanshi or Nandavanshi; and then they were gradually accepted into the marriage circles of higher ranked segments. In order to prove their explanations informants drew my attention to the current marriage alliances of local wealthy Goallavanshi-Yadav families with Nandavanshi and Yaduvanshi-Yadavs. These examples were used to describe

how the *vansh* categorisation is flexible and its status achieved rather than ascribed.

Materialistic and functional folk explanations are accompanied by equally popular theories which emphasise blood and descent as the basis of *vansh* origins, and rank rather than profession and achieved status. Accordingly, *vansh* membership is determined by birth, and its status by the deepness of the genealogical and affinal ties with the ancestor Krishna. Hence, members of the three *vanshs* claim to be descendants of Lord Krishna or of his kin and affines: the closer the genealogical ties with the god Krishna, the higher the status of the subgroup seems to be conceived.

For instance, the Nandavanshi-Yadavs claim to descend from Nanda. The story goes as follows. In order to protect Krishna from the evil designs of Kamsa, the king of Mathura who wanted to kill the little god, Vasudev (Krishna's father) asked the cowherder Nanda to protect the newborn child.

Vasudev, the father of Krishna ...who belongs to the Chandravanshi branch and was therefore a Yadav... married Devaki (the cousin sister of Nanda). Vasudev saved the life of the just born Krishna. He carried him to Gokul, the village nearby Mathura, where Nanda Baba lived. Nanda was the head of the cowherd village; he and Yasoda, his wife, were king and queen. (Hari Singh Yadav, 75 years old, milk seller).<sup>81</sup>

Nanda Baba was a Gopa who possessed *lakhs* and *lakhs* of cows. The Gopas were not mere servants and slaves just engaged to clean the cattle-shed as *Shudras*. They were previous *Devas* and friends of Lord Krishna. They were very rich and very devoted to the god. Nanda went to Kamsa to pay his tributes, and he asked Nanda's tribe to protect Gokul. This shows that the Nandavanshi were valorous Kshatriya warriors (Gopi Chand Yadav, 60 years old, former civil servant, Mathura Electric Board).

Thus, Nanda is described as a 'king' and as a wealthy man with the qualities of a brave warrior. These tales illustrate the wealth and military status of the ancestor of the Nandavanshi-Yadavs. Importantly, they also illustrate the status of the Goallavanshi-Yadavs, whose ancestors were simple people who 'clean the cattle-sheds' and were not Kshatriya. The Nandavanshi-Yadavs of Ahir Para at times use this story to prove the superiority of the Nandavanshi over the Goallavanshi.

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<sup>81</sup> Vasudev's wife, Devaki, who is an *avatar* of Aditi, is the mother of Krishna; his second wife Rohini gave birth to Balram, Krishna's elder brother.

However, the Yaduvanshi-Yadavs and the Goallavanshi-Yadavs hold different opinions. A significant number of informants from the Goallavanshi community of Sathgara claim to be the descendants of the cowherders: the mythical Gopas and Gopis of Gokul among whom Krishna grew up. They think of themselves as the 'real' Yadavs, and again use ideologies of blood.

When Lord Krishna left Braj to go to Dwarka in Gujarat, all his kindred followed him and they dispersed all over India... we the Yadavs of Mathura town are the only direct descendants left (Ragu Yadav, 55 years old, Sweet-shop owner).

They claim that their ancestors had been in Mathura since its very foundation. From the Goallavanshi point of view, those who remain in the city are the 'real' Yadavs. They say that the Yadavs who left Mathura diluted their pure blood by intermarriage with other communities (Prahlad Yadav father, 60 years old, cowherder, milk-seller). Others support the same argument, although instead of linking it with the epic Mahabharata war they link it with Muslim invasion and rule. 'During the centuries of various Muslim invasions in Mathura, there were different migrations of Yadavs to other parts of the India. The marriage relations were therefore broken off and a number of different Yadav subgroups were established' (Bhagvan Das, 60 years old, cowherder, milk-seller and moneylender). From the Goallavanshi-Yadavs' point of view those who remained in Mathura and Braj are the 'real' Yadavs and the direct descendents of Krishna. This is also supported by their marriage practices which until twenty years ago privileged marriage alliances within Mathura town or Braj.<sup>82</sup> Thus, Sathgara Yadavs see themselves as the autochthonous Yadavs, and look down on the Yadavs of Ahir Para who in contrast emigrated almost one hundred years ago from adjacent districts in Uttar Pradesh. In such statements the idiom of locality and descent mix together and reinforce each other.

If the Goallavanshi-Yadavs consider themselves as superior, the same also applies to the Yadavs of Anta Para who consider themselves superior to both the Goallavanshi and the Nandavanshi. Anta Para Yaduvanshi-Yadavs are also known as '*gari-valas*' – conductors and drivers. Traditionally their profession was

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<sup>82</sup> Similar practices are found amongst the Chaube caste/community. See Lynch (1990, 1996).

transportation. 'Krishna in the Mahabharata, and in the famous episode of the Bhagavad Gita, was the conductor of Arjuna's chariot. The *gari-valas* carry on his profession' (Satya Prakash Singh Yadav, *ibid.*). The Yaduvanshi of Anta Para served the local Mathura royal family, the Seth, as transport-dealers and also as administrators. Moreover, they claim to descend from members of the lineages of the Ahir royal clans of Rewari town in the district of Mahendragarh in Haryana; and finally from Krishna.

'The ancient Kshatriya had two branches: the Suryavansha and the Chandravansha. King Yayati was born in the Chandravansha. During King Yayati's reign there were 32,000 princesses who ruled throughout the country. Yadu was his eldest son. Yadu had four brothers. Their descendants were called Yaduvanshi' (Satya Prakash Singh Yadav, 50 years old, English teacher).

To sum up, Anta Para Yadavs claim to descend from Yadu, the founder of the Yadav dynasty, the Nandavanshi-Yadavs claim descent from the foster father of Krishna, i.e. Nanda, and the Goallavanshi-Yadavs from the Gopis and Gopas amongst whom Krishna grew up. In their narratives they all stress 'their special' relation with Krishna and each subgroup argues it is more close to Krishna than the others. On the whole, a large number of informants think that the closer the genealogical ties with the god Krishna, the more prestigious the subdivision. Rank is therefore thought of as organised according to the perceived purity of the mythological ancestral blood of the king, and god from whom they claim descent. Such understandings show how ultimately patrilineal descent is privileged over matrilineal descent and affinal ties. The highest rank is attributed to the descendants of Krishna. Such assumptions constitute the basis of the Yadav caste/community descent ideology diffused by the Mahasabha, which states that all Yadavs equally descend from Krishna and hence are all Krishnavanshi (or Yaduvanshi). The fact that 18 per cent of Ahir Para Yadavs define themselves as Krishnavanshi-Yadavs shows how the ideology of blood and descent is working successfully. This is largely because it is congruent with the way members of different *vansh* have ranked their subgroups for centuries.

So far I have described the two most popular models and narratives used by Mathura informants to describe the origin of their subgroups and their ranking in relation to the others. However, the way such models are articulated varies

according to the informants' social background, and importantly, their age. It is, therefore, extremely problematic to make any systematic descriptions of the intentions and beliefs that my informants attach to internal group differentiations. In the next section I attempt to overcome this problem by analysing the attitudes of different age groups in Ahir Para. This exploration shows how internal subdivisions are important for many old informants, but not for the younger generations. This generational decline suggests that subdivisions are likely to die out in the near future.

### ***Talking about vanshs and the internal social hierarchy in Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar***

Hari Singh Yadav belongs to the Jaweria *got* and to the 'Chaudhri Parivar'. He is 70 years old and nowadays spends most of his days with his friends at the Mahadev Ghat, bathing in the Yamuna and chatting. His father was in the milk business and his grandfather was in the army. At times he told me that he belonged to the *vansh* of Nanda, while at other times he represented himself as a Yaduvanshi-Yadav. According to him, there are two main subdivisions: the Yaduvanshi and Nandavanshi on one hand, and the Goallavanshi on the other. The first two are considered synonymous with 'wealthy men' or 'men of power', while the latter is synonymous with milk-sellers and cowherders and is hence inferior.

Similarly, many informants in their seventies and eighties tend to define themselves as Yaduvanshi-Yadavs even if other members of their families state that they are Nandavanshi-Yadavs. I suggest that this trend is in tune with the political and historical environment in which people belonging to different generations grew up. Older people are sons or nephews of army officers and the roots of their values and thoughts should be explored in the context of the military culture which I described in the previous chapter. Many of the grandfathers or great-grandfathers of my informants were in the army and identified themselves more with the Yaduvanshi category, in which the colonial administration recognised special racial and martial attitudes, than with the Nandavanshi one,

which was excluded for a long time from military recruitment. The previous chapter illustrated how at the beginning of the century the Nandavanshi started to represent themselves as Yaduvanshi in order to be recruited to the army and how such subcaste identity acquired new importance by becoming a political and economic asset.

Ahir Para Yadavs who define themselves as Yaduvanshi-Yadav consistently told me that there are no differences between the Nandavanshi and the Yaduvanshi-Yadavs. They told me the same stories that their ancestors told to the British Army recruiting agents. They said that since Krishna was believed to be the son of Nanda his descendants were called Nandavanshi. The Nandavanshi and Yaduvanshi were therefore two caste titles which define the same 'kind' of people. Hari Singh Yadav often pointed out to me that even the British recognised that the members of the *vansh* of Nanda and the members of the *vansh* of Yadu were fundamentally the same: 'Balbir Singh Yadav of the Rewari family, the descendant of the Raja Tula Ram, was a friend of a British military officer who was posted in Mathura. He often used to pay him visits. During these visits he promoted the recruitment of all the Ahirs and he used to say that the Nandavanshi title and the Yaduvanshi title have the same meaning' (Hari Singh Yadav).

Balbir Singh Yadav is 80 years old and claims to be a Yaduvanshi-Yadav. He used to be a well-known wrestler. His vision of Ahir/Yadav subdivisions is different from that described above. He refers to the Yaduvanshi subdivision as ritually superior to the Nandavanshi one. According to him the Yaduvanshi-Yadavs are the 'real' Ahirs. They come from Ahirwal and they are Kshatriyas and valorous soldiers. He considers the members of different *vansh* as members of different 'species' (*jati*). On the whole, he shows a strong attachment to what has been represented as the 'traditional' caste system. He is one of the persons in the *mohalla* who represents the different subsections of the Yadavs as truly bounded and separated social units. He is still preoccupied with defining ranked subcaste barriers. For him Nandavanshi and Yaduvanshi are not mere titles defining men with a certain social and economic status, but define two 'subcastes' in which membership is by birth.

So far I have illustrated the views of elder informants. However, amongst the persons who define themselves as Yaduvanshi-Yadavs there is also a large

number of young persons who are mainly in their twenties and thirties. In most cases when they portray themselves as Yaduvanshi they do not intend to present themselves as members of a more prestigious subdivision. In fact, most of the time they really think of themselves as Yaduvanshi-Yadavs. What young people know is that they are 'Yadavs' and that they are the descendants of 'Yadu' the progenitor of Krishna. They know about their *got* but do not know about the existence of other endogamous subdivisions; for them all the Yadavs are 'sons of Krishna'. Thus, they are not interested in marking differences between the *vanshs*. What they do stress is the martial quality of Yadav blood. The mythological tales of the Yaduvanshi are considered more like 'histories of the Yadav community' rather than of particular sub-groups. Such stories do not possess the normative power of the 'traditional' mythological *vansh* tales, which contributed to the creation of status barriers between the different *vanshs*. Claiming to be Yaduvanshi in this fashion is equal to claiming to be Krishnavanshi. I further explore such positions in the next section.

### ***The Krishnavanshi-Yadavs***

So far I have illustrated on the one hand how contemporary Mathura Yadavs still differentiate themselves in terms of *vansh*, and on the other how an increasing number of people view their community as internally undifferentiated. Such ideas are accompanied by the popular assumption that contemporary Yadav subdivisions are the outcome of the fission of an original group: the descendants of Krishna, and that all the Yadav belong to a unique stock. It is to this vision that people refer when they claim to be Krishnavanshi-Yadavs. I did not encounter the Krishnavanshi caste title in any of the ethnographies of the Ahir/Yadavs recorded in colonial times, nor in ethnographies collected more recently (Rao 1979). For the Yadavs of Ahir Para, being Krishnavanshi-Yadavs means belonging to the Krishna line of descent. Although, the Krishnavanshi social category is at times interchangeable with the Yaduvanshi title (both define a 'Yadav' of higher pedigree and pure descent), the former is not used as a descriptive title for *zamindar* or for 'wealthy' lineages. Being Krishnavanshi means descent from

Krishna; no occupation or title are specifically connected with it. Accordingly, Nandavanshi, Yaduvanshi and Goallavanshi-Yadavs are all indisputably Krishnavanshi-Yadavs and hence are heirs of an immutable essence which is unique to the entire community.

The Krishnavanshi social category is not connected with a specific territory; the territory is India, or at least northern India. It is not connected with a specific endogamous unit either. The entire Yadav *vansh* is viewed like a large endogamous group. In many ways the Krishnavanshi caste title and its connotations reflect the ideology spread by the All India Yadav Mahasabha which states that all the Yadavs are equal and that they all descend from Krishna. Moreover, since the Krishnavanshi caste title is considered synonymous with Yaduvanshi, and hence with Yadavs of a superior status, this social category equalises all the members of the community at the higher level of internal hierarchy of the Ahir/Yadav caste/community. Nandavanshi-Yadavs with different backgrounds choose this self-representation. However, it is difficult to describe a general trend and to make specific abstractions.

Those who are more politically involved tend to use this terminology more often, but it is also widespread among other people. Prahlad Yadav is 45 years old and he works for the Mathura Electric Board. He describes himself as a Krishnavanshi. He belongs to the generation that started to contest the 'traditional' leadership of the elders. This generation has been strongly influenced by the changing politics of Independent India. Social and economic justice is their motto. Like most of his contemporaries, Prahlad Yadav was an active member in the promotion of the implementation of the Mandal commission. He is committed to the idea that institutionalised social inequalities should be abolished. He represents the Yadavs as the leaders of the Backward Classes of the whole of India. His caste consciousness and pride has been bolstered more by the political success of members of his community than by its 'lustrous martial origins', which was the case for his father and grandfathers. He recognises the importance of the unity of the caste. He sees these divisions and separations as obsolete, as something of the past and synonymous with 'backwardness' and 'non-progress'. He portrays himself as a 'modern' and 'developed' Krishnavanshi-Yadav.



I met a large number of people like Prahlad, for whom caste distinctions in general, and subdivision distinctions in particular, are viewed as values which should not be publicly supported. These divisions are supposed to be bad and have been eroded and substituted by the overwhelming importance of the innate and immutable Yadav identity. Caste amalgamation is considered almost a moral value. So-called traditional caste values are regarded as synonymous with an immobile society and a backward social order. The Krishnavanshi-Yadavs see themselves as 'modern' members of a national Yadav community. They adhere to a 'substantialised' idea of caste and such a position is continuously reinforced by their promotion of subcaste fusion. The next sections explore the ways in which 'modern' identifications with the Krishnavanshi social category have been translated into practical behaviour and have changed values attached to endogamy, exogamy and hypergamy.

### **The Clan (*got*)**

Up to now I have illustrated how the social category of the *vansh* is ill defined and open to manipulation. Contrary to that, this section shows how the *got* (clan) is unambiguously defined as a patrilineal group whose membership is strictly by birth.<sup>83</sup> There is no way of changing *got* membership. Until marriage the *got* of a woman is the *got* of her father; then she assumes the *got* of her husband. *Got* membership is, therefore, by blood and descent and it cannot be acquired in other ways. But *got* membership can be lost by an individual if, for example, he marries a Muslim or a member of an untouchable caste. The *got* is strictly exogamous (see Tiemann 1970; Alavi 1994). Members of the same *got* are like 'brothers and

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<sup>83</sup> *Got* is the local pronunciation of *gotra*. The *got* is a patrilineal group and it is strictly exogamous. The Yaduvanshi and Nandavanshi subdivisions are subdivided into exogamous *gots*, while the Goallavanshi social category does not have such a consistent *got* system.

The Rajputs of Kangra described by Parry (1979) are divided into patrilines. Several patrilines share a common *gotra*. Clans are exogamous to a similar extent to *gotra*. This system has some similarities with the system found among the Goallavanshi. The Goallavanshi-Yadavs of Mathura declare to belong to the same *gotra*, named after a *rishi* Kashap. Within this *gotra* there are further subdivisions, which can be identified as *gots*.

sisters', and brothers can not marry their sisters. The Yadavs of Ahir Para tend to follow the 'four-*got* rule': a man must not marry a woman of his own, his mother's, his father's mother's and mother's mother's *got*. Nowadays the 'four-*got* rule' is more relaxed and generally people only tend to avoid marriage into the *got* of their father and their mother. These exogamous rules determine who is unmarriageable.

Informants often underlined how 'scientific' their *got* system is. According to them, this was 'proved' by the example of 'farming'. If you cultivate the same crop on the same piece of land year after year, the production will decrease and the earth will become sterile. However, if you cultivate different seeds every year the production increases. This metaphor was used to explain to me that children born of parents of the same *got* were not healthy and strong. Similarly, in the 'Yadav ethnographies' written by Yadav amateur 'historians', there is always a large section devoted to the social category of the *got*. Usually long lists of the most famous *gots* are accompanied by essays which stress the need to preserve the *got* as symbol of Yadav culture; and to preserve the vigour of the Yadav 'race' (see for example *Yadav Kul Dipika* 1999: 23). If, on the one hand, the rhetoric used by Yadav social and political leaders encourages the dissolution and amalgamation of all the different Yadav subdivisions, on the other, it encourages the protection of the institution of the *got* viewed as a symbol of Yadav culture. Following the rules of exogamy is strongly prescribed for the preservation of 'the Yadav spirit' and the reproduction of the community. The rules of exogamy are said to guarantee 'the circulation of blood' (see also Parry 1979: 223). Again there is emphasis on patrilineal descent as a feature of the Yadav caste community. Local understandings of the *vansh* and the *got* conflate, therefore, into different but complementary ideologies of blood.

Amongst the Yadavs the *got* usually has a dispersed territorial membership. In Ahir Para almost everybody knew his or her *got* and could provide its myth of origin and the story of its lineage deity. However, the importance informants give to patrilineal descent, the way they identify themselves with a common mythical ancestor or with a common clan deity and the grade of complexity of the rules of exogamy followed, varies from lineage to lineage. Such *graduality* renders it extremely complex to identify a consistent

social hierarchy amongst Ahir Para local clans. At the localised level what is more salient is the status of the different lineages.

Despite this general pattern, which I describe in detail in the following sections, there are a number of clans that are locally considered to be prestigious independently from the economic and political status of their localised segments. For example, the Aphariya and the Kosa *gots* of Ahirwal are locally still considered 'royal' clans. The marriage of the nephew of A.P. Yadav, the local Samajwadi Party leader, with a girl belonging to the Aphariya clan was a topic of conversation for days in the neighbourhood. The prestige of the *got* was endlessly drawn to my attention more than the fact that the bride's father was a powerful politician in the nearby Etah district. The Motha *got* is another clan locally considered 'prestigious' because their members were the former *zamindar* of the cluster of Ahir villages in Farah, near Mathura. Similarly, the Phataks are highly respected as the descendants of the Raja of Chittor and the daughter of the Ahir king of Mahabhan (near Mathura). The legend goes as follows: 'once the *Raja* of Chittor was assaulted by the emperor of Delhi. Only the 12<sup>th</sup> gate (Phataks) of the city resisted. To commemorate the signal of bravery of the guard of the 12<sup>th</sup> gate, the king issued a decree that they and their descendants should forever be known after the name of Phatak'.<sup>84</sup>

Locally the Phataks are regarded as 'more' Rajput than the average Yadavs. They wear big moustaches in the Rajput fashion, they run the local *akhara*, and they are at the head of the ritual organisation of the *mohalla*. One afternoon I was at the Mahadev Ghat chatting with some older men who were playing cards. A group of pilgrims from Rajasthan arrived to take a bath in the Yamuna River. Tej Singh Yadav (70 years old, former government employee) began to chat with them and asked where they were from and to which *jati* they

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<sup>84</sup> 'The descendants of the *Raja* and his Ahir lady settled first at Samohan, whence they gradually spread until they established themselves along the banks of the Jamuna, and from this inaccessible stronghold raided the territory to the north, finally obtaining possession of the whole Sirsa and Jamuna Duab in Pargana Shikoabad' (Lupton 1906). In Ahir clans mythologies it is quite common to find that the ancestor of the clan was a son of a Rajput man and an Ahir woman, never the opposite. This suggests the existence of marriage alliances between Ahir and Rajput clans. The relation was not of reciprocity, but hypergamous, with presumed wife-givers lower in status than wife-takers.

belonged. They were Rabaries, a pastoral caste from Rajasthan. When they came to know that Tej Singh Yadav was Phatak they immediately touched his feet in a sign of respect. This is only one among a number of episodes I witnessed in which extra respect for the member of the Phatak *got* was shown. Other than that I was not able to reconstruct any consistent hierarchy among the different *gots* present in the neighbourhood and generally people said that *gots* were equal.

### **Lineage (*parivar*)**

Locally, prestige is attached to *parivars* (lineages) rather than *gots* (clans) and there are *parivars* which are more prestigious and wealthier than others.<sup>85</sup> If the term *got* is the most used in conversation about marriage, whenever members of a *got* wish to refer to the localised level of the *got* (sub-*got*) the term *parivar* is most commonly used. *Parivar* is used to talk about the localised segment of the *got* and about the group of agnates with whom individuals normally have direct contact. With the term *parivar*, therefore, people in general indicate a lineage which traces descent from the ancestor who first settled in the neighbourhood, or alternatively, a maximal lineage. In the latter case, different *parivars* claim descent and agnatic ties to the same ancestor.

Besides defining the extension of agnatic kin in the neighbourhood, *parivar* is also used to define the extended family which also recognises affinal relations. Moreover, *parivar* can indicate a less defined category of 'social contacts'. The use of the term and concept is indeed highly flexible. Kinship and fictive kinship relations defined as *parivar* are expanded in a very manipulative way. At times *parivar* substitutes the category of community: 'the Yadav *parivar*' or 'the Krishna *parivar*'.

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<sup>85</sup> A similar structure has been recorded amongst the Maratha clans, see Carter (1974: 97).

## ***The Chaudhri Parivar, the Dudh Parivar and the Netaji Parivar in Ahir Para: economic graduality***

The Ahir/Yadavs who migrated to Ahir Para at the end of the nineteenth century were mainly of Central Uttar Pradesh origin. During British times the majority of the Yadav families migrated from the neighbouring districts of Etah, Mainpuri, Kannauj and Farrukhabad.<sup>86</sup> Mathura was an important military training site. Many Ahir soldiers ended up spending some time in Mathura before being posted to other parts of the country. Ahirs, however, found employment not only as soldiers but also as bullock-cart and/or truck drivers. Moreover, military service was not the only source of employment and income offered by the Army structure. The Cantonment administration needed manpower and many Ahirs found employment there as peons. Furthermore, the civil and military population of the Cantonment needed substantial and regular milk supplies. As a consequence many Ahirs worked in the Cantonment Dairy and others set up their own milk business.<sup>87</sup> Local people indicate two families, both originally from Kannauj as the founders of Ahir Para. Today, these two families are known as the 'Chaudhri Parivar' (the Head Family) and the 'Dudh Parivar' (the Milk Family). The first belong to the Javeria *got* of the Nandavanshi/Ghosi subdivision, the second to the Deshwar *got* of the Nandavanshi/Kamaria subdivision. At the end of the nineteenth century the founding ancestor of the 'Chaudhri Parivar',<sup>88</sup> Gopa

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<sup>86</sup> Historical data on the migration pattern from the district of Farrukhabad suggest that by the end of the nineteenth century the population of the area started to decrease visibly. In 1877-78, there was a big famine and in 1888 a disastrous flood. Entire Ahir families left their villages to reach Mathura where their kin were employed as *sepoys* or in the Cantonment administrative bodies.

<sup>87</sup> The military authorities in part regulated this business. There was a Military Dairy Farm a couple of kilometres distant from Sadar Bazaar and a milk dairy in the Cantonment itself which provided milk for the troops and also for the civilians. In the latter the milk was procured with the help of contractors on fixed commission basis. The contractors were big milk producers engaged in herding livestock and in collecting milk from producers of nearby villages through assistants and/or subcontractors.

I have collected most of this information from documents preserved in the Archives of the Cantonment, Cantonment Board Office. *Meeting Board Registers*: From 1924 to August 1999.

<sup>88</sup> For a comparative ethnographic description of the uses of nicknames in referring to lineages or segments of lineages see Parry (1979: 136-137).

Baba Ahir, arrived from the village Dai Ka Pura near Kannauj. He was a simple soldier. I was not able to trace which Regiment he belonged to. Gopa Baba Ahir had two sons. One died without descendants while the other, Hari Baba, had two sons: Sona and Uda. Today Ahir Para is almost completely inhabited by the descendants of these two main maximal lineages.

The ancestor of the 'Dudh Parivar' of the Deshwar *got* was Tulsi Ram. Tulsi Ram is said to have come to Mathura from Kannauj. He was a *sepo*y. Unfortunately, I was not able to collect further biographical data. Since the descendants of Tulsi Ram used to manage the Cantonment Dairy, the 'family' is locally known as the 'Dudh Parivar'. Today the *parivar* is split into two maximal lineages. The members of one lineage live in a single group of houses in Ahir Para, while the other lives in the neighbouring *mohallas*.

The third numerically strong *parivar* in the neighbourhood is that of the Phatak. There are four maximal lineages belonging to the Phatak *got*. They immigrated to Mathura at different times and they do not recognise any common direct genealogical link. They are known locally by their *got* name: Phatak. Finally, among the big 'families' that make up the population of Ahir Para is the 'Netaji Parivar' of the Vadya *got*. The leading member of the family is the president of the Samajwadi Party of Mathura district and a 'professional' politician (*net*a alias Netaji Parivar). After Independence his father came to Ahir Para from Agra. The 'family' is constituted by a single large lineage consisting of six households.

The 'Chaudhri Parivar', the 'Dudh Parivar', 'the Phatak Parivar' and the 'Netaji Parivar' are the main 'families' of Ahir Para. However, they do not make up the entire Yadav population of Sadar Bazaar. There are many other small *parivars* which live in Ahir Para itself, or in the other *mohallas* of Sadar Bazaar. These lineages are the localised segments of a significant number of *gots* (see Table 3.1).

**Table 3.1: Yadav Clan Distribution in Sadar Bazaar**

<i>Got</i>	Percent	Number
Jaweria	27%	18
Phatak	14%	9
Shepavan	5%	3
Gudava	5%	3
Kullahd	5%	3
Badaun	3%	2
Yadu	3%	2
Ghorchara	3%	2
Bhilanta	3%	2
Vadya	3%	2
Bhurgude	3%	2
Chora	3%	2
Sondele	2%	1
Kshayap	2%	1
Nandavanshi	2%	1
Deshwar	2%	1
Balotia	2%	1
Gangapanthi	2%	1
Dulbatta	2%	1
Dhomaria	2%	1
Jebra	2%	1
Mauadhar	2%	1
Badsat	2%	1
Rawat	2%	1
Don't Know	6%	4

*Source:* Mathura Survey, 1999

Notes: Table entries based on all Yadav respondents. Column percentage does not add up too 100 due to rounding errors.

The bulk of my ethnographic data comes from the four main *parivars* described above. In Chapter 6, I discuss the political salience of the *parivar* in the factionalised world of Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar. Chapter 4 looks at the religious nature of the *parivar* and *got* and the changes it has undergone. The following sections illustrate how the Yadav community's internal economic graduality combined with their shared value of paternal descent results in flexible endogamous practices informed by preferential hypergamous marriages.

## **Ideologies of marriage and processes of fusion**

To this point I have shown how the boundaries of Yadav subdivisions in Mathura town are quite blurred. Gradations of subcaste rank no longer exist in commensal situations. By the same token, high economic and political status no longer corresponds to particular subdivisions. In addition, subdivision myths of origin tend to be conflated with the encompassing story of Krishna. Younger generations increasingly understand their community as a kin community or as a large descent group with a common ancestor. In the next chapter I illustrate how the Hinduism local Yadavs follow has become more Sanskritised, and how this phenomena has led to greater status homogeneity within the community. These transformations have contributed to the creation of a community in which, at least ideally, different subdivisions are conceptualised as equal and not ritually ranked.<sup>89</sup>

However, this does not mean that contemporary Yadav society is not permeated by hierarchical values. In contrast, it is highly competitive and hierarchical. Differences in the ritual sphere are not very sharp, so that inequality among local Yadavs are today primarily a product of economic and political conditions. Competition between different *parivars* is usually expressed by marriages and by a preference for hypergamous marriage alliances. The ideal is for the parents of a girl to marry their daughter into a family of higher prestige. During fieldwork, whenever marriage arrangements were made, my attention was regularly drawn to the status of the bride's family and of the groom's family. What was mostly at stake was the wealth and political power of the affines and not the subdivisions to which they belonged (e.g. Yaduvanshi, Nandavanshi or Goallavanshi). Locally, the members of the different *vanshs* are so heterogeneous in terms of wealth and power that wealthy members of the Nandavanshi often pointed out to me that there were more differences between them and other Yadav *parivars* in their neighbourhood, than between them and a number of wealthy Goallavanshi *parivars* in the neighbourhood of Sathgara.

In Sadar Bazaar, Yadavs' economic graduality is extremely visible. Well-off segments of *parivars* live close to poor ones and their different economic status is reflected in the outside appearance of their houses, in their internal

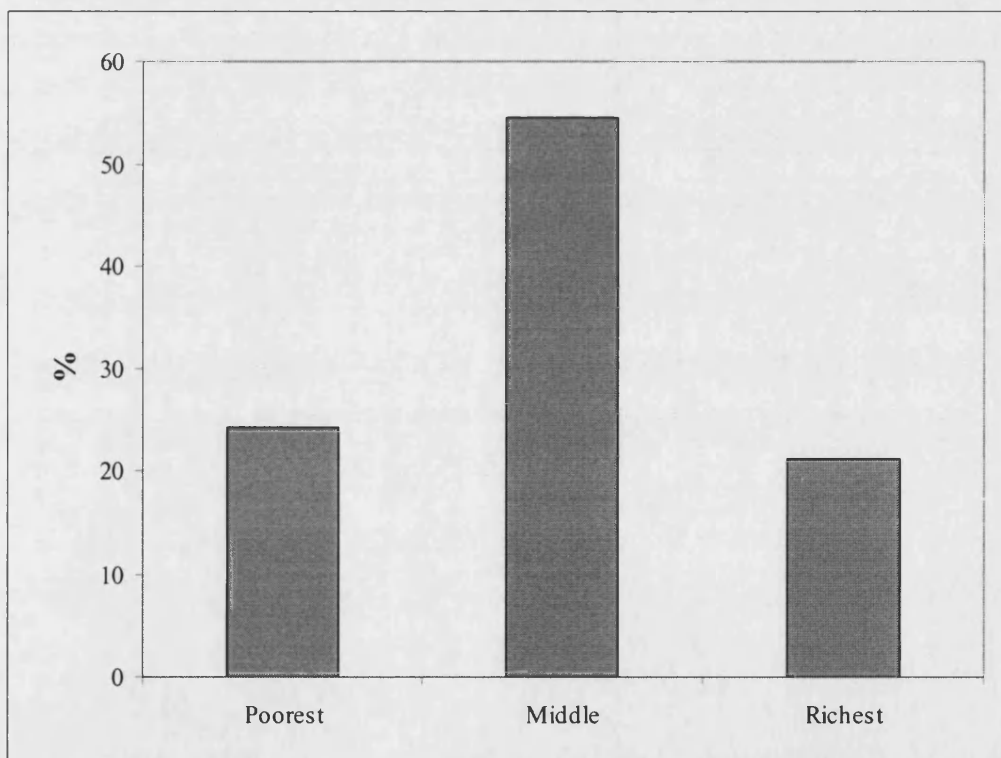
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<sup>89</sup> As Pocock suggests: 'the major difference between economic graduality and graduality of social practices is that in the latter respect, as far as any one village is concerned, the tendency will be towards a greater homogeneity' (1972: 64).



decorations, and in the food they offer to visitors. This visible wealth disparity is supported by economic data collected amongst different Ahir Para Yadav *parivars*. These quantitative data not only show the economic heterogeneity present within the community but also that the Yadavs are amongst the most economically diverse castes in Sadar Bazaar. In Chapter 1, Table 1.5 shows how Brahmans are the richest caste in Sadar Bazaar (43% rich compared with 14% poor), closely followed by Baniyas (32% rich compared with just 7% poor). The other upper castes are fairly concentrated in the middle category (74%) with relatively few rich and poor, as are the Scheduled Castes (64% middle), although to a slightly lesser extent. The Yadavs and the Muslims are the most economically heterogeneous castes in Sadar Bazaar. The substantial proportion in both the poorest and richest categories illustrates this.<sup>90</sup> Figure 1 shows the economic distribution of the Yadavs in Sadar Bazaar.

**Figure 4: Economic distribution of Yadavs, Sadar Bazaar**



Source: Mathura Survey

<sup>90</sup> Interestingly, the majority of the Muslims interviewed belong to the Meo caste community who claim Rajput ancestry and share a similar kinship structure with the Yadavs, Jats and Gujars, see Mayaram (1997: 132).

The Ahir/Yadav caste/community presents a significant level of graduality. As described in Chapter 2, such a trend is not a novel phenomenon. In many ways, Mathura Yadavs' internal organisation is consistent with Pocock's description of the Patidars in Gujarat. Yadav economic graduality is reflected in their marriage ideologies. As in the case of the Patidars, for any particular Yadav there are true Yadavs with whom he or his family has, or would like to have, a marriage connection (Pocock 1972: 2). 'The good marriage' is hypergamous.

### **Endogamy, hypergamy, exogamy: the reproduction of *vanshs* and the creation of the Yadav community**

As mentioned previously, 'loosely structured castes' (see Orenstein 1963 and Lobo 1989) which are internally heterogeneous and privilege paternal descent are characterised by flexible endogamous practices, which are informed by preferential hypergamous marriages (see also Yalman 1969). In such amorphous castes there is a general unconcern with the reproduction of subcaste groups through endogamous marriages. Such unconcern can be reinforced by modern caste ideologies which encourage inter-subcaste marriages.

Mayer (1960, 1996: 57) showed how 'the concept of kindred of recognition' has not changed over the years. Contrary to that, Mathura Yadav ethnography suggests that there has been a transformation in the way notions of subcaste endogamy are today understood; and these transformations are linked to changes in marriage practices. Moreover, although cross-caste marriages are still very rare, a large number of informants think that marriage outside the caste community is theoretically possible as long as it is 'arranged' and 'hypergamous'.

Many have already recorded the expansion of endogamous units which unite different groups with equal status (e.g. Fuller 1975; Kolenda 1978: 151; Mandelbaum 1970: 2:653; Vatuk 1982). Most often endogamy is described as the most vital attribute of caste and at the empirical levels the principal regulator of marriage alliances (Kolenda, 1978; Mayer 1996; Bayly 1999). B eteille's (1996) work is one of the few dissenting voices. He illustrates how, amongst the

metropolitan middle class, rules of endogamy are no longer rigorously followed. However, very little material documents changes in ideologies of marriage and marriage patterns in urban and semi-urban contexts. Notable exceptions are the work of Sylvia Vatuk in Meerut (1972) and the recent work of Jonathan Parry on marriage and sex in an industrial environment of the Chhattisgarh region in Madhya Pradesh (2001). In urbanised (but not metropolitan) centres like Mathura the breaching of endogamy in the case of inter-subcaste unions has gradually become more accepted, and in the case of inter-caste and inter-community unions is considered theoretically possible. My ethnographic material suggests that Sadar Bazaar's residents lie 'in-between' ethnographies which portray endogamy as the last bastion of the caste system (Mayer 1996), and others which instead emphasise its steady decline (Béteille 1996).

Before exploring the case study of the Yadavs I briefly illustrate the outcomes of a survey which looked at attitudes to marriage amongst the residents of Sadar Bazaar (Mathura Survey 1999). Table 3.2 summarises the answers to three separate but interlinked questions. Respondents were asked to express their opinion about marriage between people of different religion, of different caste and different subcaste. Table 3.2 shows the percentage who said they were 'against' such marriages.

**Table 3.2: Disapproval of marriage between different religious communities, castes and subcastes**

	Religions	Castes	Subcastes	Number
Brahman	57%	36%	14%	28
Bania	54%	32%	21%	28
Other upper caste	68%	63%	21%	19
Yadav	76%	68%	15%	66
Other OBC	70%	60%	50%	10
SC	50%	41%	32%	22
Muslim	59%	49%	27%	41
Other	80%	70%	30%	10
Average	64%	53%	22%	224

Source: Mathura Survey

Notes: Table entries based on full sample (no information was recorded for 1 case)

The results show that marriage between people of different subcastes is highly tolerated amongst all the communities. Overall, only 22% said they were against marriages between people of different subcastes. Yadavs were significantly more

likely than average to say that they were against inter-caste marriages (68% of Yadavs compared with 53% average). There is also evidence to suggest, although not significant at the 0.05 level, that Yadavs are more likely than average to say they were against inter-religious marriages (76% of Yadavs compared with 64% average), and less likely than average to say that they were against marriages between subcastes (15% of Yadavs compared with 22% average).

Such results are consistent with ethnographic and historical data which show on the one hand the successful diffusion of the ideology of the Yadav caste association, and on the other a strict concern to conform to caste *dharma* and to arrange hypergamous marriage alliances. Before exploring the influence of Yadav caste association marriage ideologies, and their contribution to the creation of a united Yadav community, I briefly explore Yadav views about inter-caste marriages.

### **Yadavs' views about inter-caste marriages**

Table 3.2 shows that Yadavs were significantly more likely than average to say they were against inter-caste marriages. In the words of Mr Sharma, a Brahman resident in Sadar Bazaar, Yadavs and other Backward Classes 'are today more orthodox than other castes...they are extremely traditional' (English words). The adjective 'orthodox' here is used with a derogatory connotation, and stands for 'non-modern' and 'backward'. 'They still live as if they were in a village; Ahir Para after all is like a village; women have to veil themselves and most of them are in *parda*; they (Yadavs) pay large dowries, their marriage ceremonies are lavish...these are old customs; in our community we are more modernised' (Lakshmi, 23 years old, student). Lakshmi is a Bania girl and throughout my stay kept drawing my attention to how 'underdeveloped' and 'backward' the Yadavs were compared to her community. She said their religious behaviour and customs were stricter than in her own caste community and in other high status castes such as the Brahmans. Yadavs were also considered 'un-modern' because of their

'violent' disapproval of inter-caste love affairs and marriages.<sup>91</sup> Locally, Yadavs had such a reputation both because of episodes that occurred in Sadar Bazaar and because of events that happened in the Uttar Pradesh and Haryana countryside, which were heavily reported by the local press and TV.<sup>92</sup>

One of the first stories I was told on my arrival to Sadar Bazaar was the saga of Arjun (a Saini boy) and Deepa (a Yadav girl). The couple fell in love, and were discovered to be having an affair. The boy was promptly moved to his relatives in Aligarh town and a marriage was arranged for the girl in Mainpuri district. This story provoked a violent response from the local Yadavs who aggressively attacked Arjun's family members and his community fellows. This episode happened five years ago; however still today local Yadav boys pick any excuse to begin a fight with members of the Saini community. The girl's family and the boy's family refused to talk about the episode. When I asked about details of the love story between Arjun and Deepa, informants provided different and contradictory stories. Yet despite the heterogeneity of the accounts, one consistent comment emerged: the girl was unmarried and the union was hypogamous and therefore intolerable.

During fieldwork I closely witnessed another love story which also did not have a happy ending. The story involved Radha, a Rajput girl, and Sudarshan, a Kumar (potter). Sudarshan comes from a 'Backward caste'. However, his family is highly educated and wealthy. Sudarshan's father studied in the USA and he is currently in the Civil Service. In 1998, Sudharshan opened a successful computer shop, one of the first in Mathura town. Radha was employed in the shop as a secretary. Soon the couple fell in love and they began to think of marriage. Finally, the day they broke the news to their parents came. Sudarshan's father was not happy, but ready to support the marriage. However, within hours of the announcement Radha was 'kidnapped' by her family and kept first in her father's village near Jaipur and then in Delhi at her sister's place. The fact that Sudarshan

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<sup>91</sup> On love marriages see Osella and Osella (2000a: 107-108) and Mody (2002).

<sup>92</sup> For a summary of events reported in the press, see Chowdhry (1997). In September 2001 a movie entitled 'Hunted Woman' (*Lajja*) was released. The movie tells the story of an old woman belonging to a low caste who was gang-raped by Yadav men in a village in U.P. in June 1999. She was raped and tortured because her son eloped with a Yadav girl.

was wealthy, highly educated and was also offered a job to go to the USA did not count for anything in face of the fact that his caste status was lower than Radha's. After twenty days an arranged marriage with a Rajput boy of a highly prestigious family was arranged and a month later Radha got married. Before the marriage Sudarshan had a couple of meetings with Radha's father and attempted to convince him to let him marry his daughter. Despite his efforts Radha's father did not change his mind. He said that he could not accept to give his daughter to a non-Rajput family. As Sudarshan said to me: 'Rajputs have a custom, they have to marry their girls up; for them it is a question of honour'.

Sudarshan's closest friends, Pramod and Gori, are both Yadavs and reside in Ahir Para. Unsurprisingly, after Radha's marriage Sudarshan was completely destroyed and depressed for months but his Yadav friends were not sympathetic. They kept on saying how it was a question of honour for a family to marry a girl up; and how he was lucky that he was still walking on his legs and how this would not have been the case if he had messed around with a Yadav girl. Sudarshan was extremely surprised by the reaction of his friends and complained to me that although they look 'modern' and 'cool' (English word), at the end of the day they were extremely conservative and traditional. As an example he told me that his friend Pramod accepted to marry a woman whom he did not like just for the sake of the family honour. He recalled the day of the marriage when Pramod saw his bride for the first time. Pramod was shocked; unfortunately the girl was not really a beauty and was not educated. His friends encouraged him to refuse to marry her. Such a situation had precedent and apparently a boy can refuse to marry a girl on the day of the ceremony. Pramod decided, however, to go on with it for the sake of the honour of the family.

Sudarshan said that he never fully understood his decision. He said that the couple have nothing in common; she is an uneducated 'village' girl and Pramod is a city boy. He is educated, speaks English, goes to the local gym and dresses in modern clothes. Sudarshan also drew to my attention the many violent cases against inter-caste marriages which involved members of the Yadav caste. I discussed this issue with Yadav informants and although some were proud of such reactions, others were extremely embarrassed. They said that these actions

were uncivilised and mainly took place in the countryside, whereas Yadavs in the cities were more open-minded.

To prove the open-minded attitudes of their community, they often drew my attention to the inter-caste marriage between the son of the secretary of the AIYM and a Kashmiri Brahman lady. The marriage was celebrated in Delhi in February 1999. It was attended by thousands of guests, including the former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mulayam Singh Yadav, and other important political figures. The executive committee of the MYS was also invited to the ceremony. I attended the marriage accompanied by 'the Mathura delegation'. The groom's family is extremely well-off and politically connected. The groom's father and uncle run a construction and estate business in Delhi and in the nearby Uttar Pradesh district of Ghaziabad. The bride belongs to a well-off family as well. She is a fashion designer and before getting married used to work in Bombay. Her mother is a powerful businesswoman and runs an architect's studio in Bombay.

The groom's father, S.P.S. Yadav, is an active member of the AIYM and since 1995 is its general secretary. I was surprised to hear that his son was marrying a Brahman girl and not a Yadav. This was firstly because of the active role of S.P.S. Yadav in creating and spreading a sense of 'Yadav-ness' throughout the country and secondly because of the strict religious conduct of the family. Its members are followers of *Gaudiya Sampraday*, a Vaishnava sect, and whenever I spent time with the family I was reminded how important it was for them to follow the right *dharma* and how they valued the caste system. Members of the family regularly went to Vrindavan to visit their *pandit* and to collect water from the Yamuna river for home *pujas*. A week before the marriage the son and father came to Mathura for one of these visits. I was present when they met their *pandit*. The priest mildly expressed his disappointment that it was to be an inter-caste marriage. However, S.P.S. Yadav underlined how the girl was a Brahman, a high-caste, and that by marrying a Yadav she was becoming a Yadav as well and that her sons also would be Yadavs.

Similar comments were made during the marriage banquet. People expressed their admiration for the wheatish complexion of the bride and her green eyes. Many drew my attention to how Yadavs were now considered a high caste and even Brahman families were giving their daughters to them. Back in Ahir

Para the comments were very similar. Although older people were not so favourably disposed to the marriage, they underlined the fact that it was 'arranged' and that the girl was higher in status; and that importantly now she was a Yadav and her sons would be Yadavs as well. On the whole, therefore, great distress was caused by affairs which involved unmarried Yadav girls and lower status boys. This characteristic is also present in the second-hand accounts taken from the media or from friends.<sup>93</sup> Unfortunately, I did not record any instances in which a Yadav boy wanted to marry a girl from a lower caste. When I discussed such a possibility with informants they expressed outward tolerance, but only if the girl was not from an untouchable caste.

In Ahir Para, more than the inter-caste marriage of the son of the secretary of the AIYM, it was another Yadav elite marriage that provoked outraged comments and distress: this was the marriage of the son of Rao Birendra Singh, the present heir of the former Rewari royal family. Rao Birendra Singh's son married a woman from his mother's *got*. I happened to be in Rewari soon after the marriage in September 1998. Within a month, three Yadav caste/community meetings were called to express the disapproval of the Yadav community for a non-exogamous marriage. The meetings were organised by Bijender Singh the descendant of the cousin of Rao Tula Ram, Rao Gopal Deo. He is an active member of the Samajwadi Party. The former Rewari royal family is split into two factions, one led by Rao Birendra Singh and his sons, and the other by Bijender Singh. These two factions are political rivals. Bijender Singh claims to be the heir of the Rewari dynasty and accuses Rao Birendra Singh of being an impostor (see Chapter 5). At the time the contested marriage was celebrated the groom was 45 years old and three times divorced. The bride was 35 years old, had a good position in the civil service, and belonged to the Kosa clan, one of the royal clans of the Ahirwal region (see Chapter 2). Those who attended the Yadav caste meetings contested the amorality of the marriage because it did not follow exogamous rules. Rao Birendra Singh's wife belonged to the same clan and village as her son's bride. Moreover, the meetings also drew attention to the

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<sup>93</sup> Similarly, Parry has pointed how in extreme cases of violence directed towards inter-caste couples, described by Prem Choudhury (1997), the girl appears to have been previously unmarried and the union *hypogamous* (2001: 792).



amorality of the royal family; divorce cases and alleged liaisons, which involved various members of the family over the last twenty years, were highly criticised. As Bijender Singh told me: ‘even in America, which is such an open society, people are condemning the behaviour of Bill Clinton; we have all the reasons to express our disregard for such behaviour within our community’ (Bijender Singh, 45 years old, politician).

On my return to Ahir Para I discussed this debate with local Yadavs. Almost unanimously they supported Bijender Singh’s protest. The breaching of exogamous rules is not acceptable behaviour. Many people underlined how the social category of the *got* has never been so important. Because we live in a world in which people tend to move more than before, it is difficult to know to whom a person is closely related. It has become more complicated to cross-check who are consanguinal kin, and therefore to determine who is marriageable. Such concerns are also visible in the rhetoric of Yadav caste associations. As mentioned in the previous section on *got*, if on the one hand the Yadav caste association promotes the amalgamation of different Yadav sub-groups, on the other hand exogamous clans are still considered ‘a heritage’ to be maintained and defended. Generally, Mathura Yadavs tend to give more importance to exogamic rules as salient markers of internal boundaries than to endogamy. Even if ‘the four-*got* rule’ is not consistently followed and only the father’s *got* and the mother’s *got* are considered, I have not recorded any *sagotra* (marriage within the *got*) unions. My data are therefore not in line with other works which recorded a general loosening of rigid *got* exogamy (Vatuk 1972: 94; Mayer 1960: 203). In contrast, the ethnography of the Yadavs shows a greater expansion of the endogamous boundaries and a local amalgamation between different subcastes.

### **Caste associations: encouraging processes of fusion**

Since the beginning of the century, the AIYM, through its local associations, has encouraged intermarriage between different subdivisions. In Yadav caste meetings and in the Yadav caste literature social and political leaders have stressed, and still stress, how Ahir, Goalla, Yaduvanshi, Nandavanshi, Ghosi, Kamaria, and all the different groups encompassed in the Yadav community, are

basically the same. Different metaphors are used to explain the ancestral unity of the dispersed and heterogeneous Yadav community. The following passage is an extract from a popular Yadav booklet:

‘The Ganges is a sacred river of the Hindus. At its source Gangotri it is called Devnadi or Sursarita. In the plains the same is famous as Bhagirathi or Ganga Ji and towards the end of its journey while merging with the Ganga, Saagar.... Despite its various names, the sacredness of the Ganges remains unaffected. Similarly, its origin remains unchanged. Likewise, leaving aside the geographical variance, it makes no difference in the value of the lineage of Yadavas no matter to which place it belongs or by which name it is called. Everyone should keep himself away from narrow mindedness with regard to locality, district, state, branch, lineage, family etc. and should be broadminded in promoting brotherhood and inter-*vansh* relations. And this should lead to unity’ (*Yaduvansh*, vol. 2, 1996: 41).

This argument is supported by other mythical-historical evidence which portrays the ancient Yadavs as ‘modern-minded’ and ready to *mix* and *merge* with other people:

‘Their democratic outlook and readiness to mix and merge with other people enabled them more readily to propagate Aryan culture. They were prepared to make concessions to other peoples by adopting some of their ideas or beliefs and even the worship of some of their deities. In term of adversity these qualities enabled them to preserve their identity and their social organisation, to recruit their strength by intake of fresh blood and to prepare to reassert themselves on return of favourable circumstances’ (Khedkar 1959: XI).

The social system of ancient Yadavas is described as ‘republican’ and based on equality. ‘They (Yadavas) knew no caste. They consisted of one caste only’ (ibid.: XIV) and:

‘The Yadavs are spoken of disparagingly by the orthodox because they treated their sons as equal and allowed their women to join them in eating, drinking, dancing and recreation, and at a later date because they allowed widows to remarry...Not sharing the prejudice of the orthodox against foreign travel and mixture of blood, the Yadavs were able to migrate in large number of foreign countries as soldiers, merchants and missionaries, and assimilating and occasionally being assimilated to other people’ (ibid.: XV).

‘It is perhaps to this capacity and willingness to recruit their strength by the assimilation of other people that the survival of the Yadavs after the fratricidal Yadav war must be largely attributed’ (ibid.: XVI).

The ancient Yadavs are described in the Yadav rhetoric as people ready to assimilate others and therefore prone to inter-caste marriage. According to the same rhetoric such mixed unions produce 'new' and 'strong' blood. As mentioned before, such ideologies of blood are today found in Yadav descriptions of their exogamous system and in the importance they attribute to the social category of the *got*. Thus, Yadav caste rhetoric attempts to present inter-caste unions as a historically familiar phenomenon, and at the same time as a 'valuable' and 'modern' custom. The language of blood and biology is used to prove the benefits of mixed-blood unions and to encourage contemporary Yadavs to arrange inter-subcaste marriages.

In 1999, local and regional Yadav caste associations affiliated to the AIYM organised meetings to celebrate the Platinum Jubilee of the AIYM. The city, village, bloc and district units of the AIYM celebrated seventy-five years of activity of the Mahasabha. During these meetings one of the consistent themes in the speeches of political and social activists was how the Yadavs were, one hundred years ago, disunited and separated into different castes and subcastes and how in contrast today they are united (or re-united). The following is an extract from a speech delivered at a conference in Gurgaon in October 1998 by a Yadav activist.

'...The new leaders, a product of Indian renaissance, tried to string the different Yadav subcastes together to enable them to have a common identity. They told them that no matter whether they were Nandavanshi or Goallavanshi or anything else, they all belong to one dynasty the Yadu dynasty. They were all Yadavas, the great Kula which had the honour of giving Lord Krishna to the world...To strengthen the all India identity; they advocated inter-subcaste marriages, inter-dining, large scale get together of Yadavs groups from different parts of India. They exhorted them to call themselves Yadavs and have strong beliefs in the oneness of their different subcastes. They appealed to them to have one Kuladevta, Lord Krishna and no one else...This has given them self-respect and self-confidence, which has enabled them to be what they are today. ...After few days, the Yadavs will enter a new millennium. They will need a new agenda for a new age...' (B.J.Yadav, AIYM regional meeting, Gurgaon, 28 October 1998).

Yadav social leaders and politicians tend therefore to assume that there are no distinctions between Yadavs, and at least in theory every Yadav can marry any other Yadav in the country. Now, the new challenge of the caste associations is to

encourage 'inter-state marriages' and in particular marriages between North and South Yadavs. Since inter-subcaste marriages at regional level are nowadays considered very popular and no social stigma is attached to them, the Mahasabha is now concentrating its efforts on popularising 'inter-state' marriages which instead are still a minority. The constitution of the Mahasabha, which was revised in 1995, explicitly underlines this agenda. It is stated that one of the aims of the association is 'to improve social affinity in the community by encouraging inter-state marriages and to arrange mass marriages' (AIYM 1995: 5). In an interview with the present President of the AIYM, I was told that the big challenge of the new millennium is to unite the Yadavs from the South with those from the North. He confidently said that in the next twenty years the Mahasabha would achieve this goal. In addition, he proudly told me about the rising number of inter-state marriages. I recorded a large number of such marriages amongst Yadavs living in metropolitan Delhi. In Mathura city I was aware of six marriages which had taken place in the last ten years involving Yadav men from Mathura and Yadav women from Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. These marriages were arranged through contacts developed by Yadav caste association meetings.

The rise in the number of inter-state marriages has also been accompanied by a rise in the number of inter-*vansh* marriages. When asked about inter-*vansh* marriages amongst Mathura Yadavs, informants often say that these unions only began to be arranged in the early 1980s, and they generally attribute this change in marriage patterns to the activities of the Sabhas. The following is one of fifteen resolutions approved during the AIYM convention held in Mathura in December 1981.

'Lord Krishna had organised the caste-system on the basis of their qualities and profession. This Mahasabha calls upon all those communities who possess Yadav qualities and professions...to unite and encourages marriage alliances between them to become one' (resolution 12; AIYM Convention Mathura, December 1981; see Yadav Sansar, January 1981: 25 – Originally in English).

Previous sections described the social categories of the Nandavanshi, Goallavanshi, Yaduvanshi and Krishnavanshi. I illustrated how their boundaries have been historically ill defined, and how in the last twenty years they have become even fuzzier. There have been evident changes in the way local Yadavs

define themselves. The emergence of the category of Krishnavanshi and the growth of inter-*vansh* marriages and inter-state marriages indicate the successful impact of the work of the Mahasabha. Such ideology has succeeded in eliminating smaller subdivisions such as the Ghosi and Kamaria subgroups and it is in the process of eliminating larger subdivisions such as the Nandavanshi, Goallavanshi and Yaduvanshi. This 'modern' trend has a double manifestation. On the one hand we observe inter-*vansh* marriages which follow the traditional path of hypergamy, and on the other we observe inter-state marriages or political marriages which are ideally free from status concerns.

### **Inter-*vansh* marriages and hypergamy**

Although, inter-*vansh* marriage alliances are still a minority amongst the Mathura Yadav community, they are not a taboo and are theoretically and empirically accepted. As previously described, to each Yadav subdivision corresponds a territorial area in which women are exchanged. Amongst the three subdivisions the Nandavanshi-Yadavs are the ones who in recent years have most rapidly expanded their territorial-marriage limits and consequently their endogamous boundaries. Traditionally they tended to send daughters to, and receive them from, the districts of Etah, Jaleshar, Mainpuri, Farrukhabad and Aligarh. Now they also send their daughters to Kanpur and to eastern U.P. In the past these areas were considered off limits because they were inhabited by inferior status Yadavs. As explored above, economic and political improvements have had a bearing on eastern Uttar Pradesh Yadavs. They are now considered prestigious enough to receive Mathura girls. In addition, Ahir Para Yadavs today accept daughters from Anta Para and Sathgara Yadavs. Until fifteen years ago, Ahir Para Yadavs did not accept marriages within Mathura town. They gave their urban-bred girls to the villages and brought village girls to the town. Rao recorded the same pattern amongst the Ahir/Yadavs of two Delhi *mohallas* (1979: 196-197).

The intra-town Yadav marriages are thus to be considered a new trend. Such exchanges follow a precise pattern and involve exchanges between Ahir Para and Sathgara on the one hand, and Sathgara and Anta Para on the other. I

have not recorded marriage alliances between Ahir Para and Anta Para. Ahir Para Yadavs view their marriage alliances with Sathgara as a symbol of their status superiority. All the inter-*vansh* marriage alliances within Mathura city imply hypergamous relations: Ahir Para Nandavanshi-Yadavs accept girls from the Sathgara Goallavanshi-Yadav families but do not give them their daughters. The whole process can be also understood as one of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' (Pocock 1957: 28). The Goallavanshi girl's family attempts to include itself with the higher ranking Nandavanshi-Yaduvanshi groom's family (*vansh*), and at the same time attempts to exclude itself from its own sub-group, considering its members to be of low status. I recorded similar patterns in a number of villages near Gurgaon, where girls from wealthy Uttar Pradesh Goallavanshi-Yadav families were married into Haryana Yaduvanshi-Yadav families. Yadavs from the Benares region told me that this was also the case in their area. Even if a regional study is needed to assess this pattern more carefully, my data clearly highlight a hypergamous preferential pattern amongst regional inter-*vansh* caste alliances which places the Goallavanshi as the inferiors of the Yaduvanshi and Nandavanshi.

So on the one hand, Mathura Yadavs told me that such marriages are the outcome of the activities of the local Yadav associations; on the other these unions followed a traditional hypergamous model. This made me suspect that Yadav caste ideology was at times used as a pretext to legitimise what it is indeed an old phenomenon. As mentioned before, hypergamy can lead to a shortage of marriageable women for men at the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy and this promotes the absorption of lower-status groups into the higher caste through marriage. In the case of the Yadavs, hypergamy is not just confined to the upper levels of the caste but it is also common amongst lower-ranking Yadavs. On the whole, status hypergamy is said to lead 'inevitably to an imbalance in the numbers of available potential spouses' (Billing 1991: 350). Hypergamous systems can not function in a totally closed subdivision structure because there would be no wives at all for the men at the bottom of the internal subdivision hierarchy; similarly the women at the top would have no husbands (Clark 1989).

Other modern 'factors' contribute to the difficulty of the search for suitable grooms and brides. It appears that nowadays it has become increasingly

difficult to find educated grooms and brides who meet the expectations of both the families (Vatuk 1972). In Ahir Para I recorded another visible trend, namely that individual choices during the process of marriage arrangements were taken much more into consideration than in the past. Such attention to individual preferences is bound to render the search for brides and grooms more difficult. Ahir Para boys tend to prefer to have a wife who is already adjusted to urban living. Similarly, the girls who married in Ahir Para often said that they only agreed to the marriage because they wanted to move into an urban area and not stay in a village. Many Ahir Para boys of marriageable age dread the possibility that their parents could arrange a marriage for them with an uneducated village girl. All these trends may have contributed to the inter-*vansh* marriage alliances within Mathura town that have occurred in the last fifteen years.

More specifically, I recorded fourteen marriage alliances between Ahir Para and Sathgara. The patterns of these alliances were structurally homologous. Ahir Para Yadavs are the wife-takers and Sathgara Yadavs the wife-givers. Moreover, such unions involved, on the one hand, Nandavanshi families who were not wealthy, and were therefore at the bottom of local Yadav hierarchy, and on the other hand extremely well-off and well-connected Goallavanshi families. To illustrate this pattern I use the case study of the marriage between Gopi Yadav (a Goallavanshi-Yadav girl) and Rakesh Yadav (a Nandavanshi-Yadav boy).

Gopi Yadav is from the neighbourhood of Sathgara. Her husband and father-in-law told me that she originally belonged to the Goallavanshi subdivision, although when I asked her to which *vansh* her family belonged she promptly answered that she was a Krishnavanshi. Her father, who is now dead, was in the dairy business. She had three brothers. Two have married with Goallavanshi girls from Agra city and one is unmarried. Her two sisters are married; one in Mathura and one in Delhi. The one in Delhi is married to a Nandavanshi-Yadav. Her brothers and brothers-in-law are all involved in the dairy business. Gopi Yadav said that until twenty years ago Sathgara Yadavs tended to give their daughter to families in the old part of Mathura city. The marriage arrangements were usually carried out by the women and not as in Anta Para and Ahir Para, by men. Things are now changing, and wealthy families tend

to give and take their daughters outside Mathura town. Many other informants in Sathgara were of the same opinion.

Rakesh Yadav belongs to the Phatak clan. He is a lower rank civil servant and works in the Mathura telephone exchange unit. His father, B. Yadav, has a grocery shop in Sadar Bazaar and he is an active local leader of the BJP. In 1989, he contested the municipality elections for the Cantonment Board but he lost against the candidate of the 'Netaji Parivar'. As I mentioned before, the Phatak clan is locally considered to be highly prestigious. Its members are locally involved in the running of the *akhara* and in the organisation of the Krishna Lila and Ram Lilas. Local members of the Phatak clan do not belong to the same lineage as their *parivars* migrated to Mathura at different times and from different localities. B. Yadav moved to Mathura with his family in the 1950s when he was still a child. His father used to be a farmer in the nearby district of Etah. B. Yadav has three other sons. One is in the police service, one is in the dairy business and the third is completing an MSc at K.R. College in Mathura and is not married yet.

B. Yadav told me that Gopi's family approached him and he thought that she would be a suitable match for Rakesh. The fact that she was a Goallavanshi was not of any importance for him: 'all the Yadavs are equal', he said. However, when asked if he would give a daughter to a Goallavanshi family his answer was firmly negative: 'we never give daughters to places from which we take daughters'. I asked him if anyone in Ahir Para had refused to come to the marriage because they did not tolerate inter-subcaste marriages. He mentioned only one person, who is now dead. Other than that, he said, nobody opposed. The important thing, he added, is that the boy comes from a good family.

### **Inter-state marriages, mass marriages and anti-dowry campaigns**

So far I have explored inter-*vansh* caste marriages which occurred locally. Such alliances allow both the parties involved in the marriage to cross-check each others' status, customs and habits. Moreover, members of different *vansh* who live in the same city are usually more likely to follow similar customs and a similar way of life (*rahan-sahan*). These inter-*vansh* marriages, even if they



cross-cut *vansh* endogamous boundaries, do not cross-cut territorial boundaries, thereby ensuring that there is little or no cultural difference between the partners. In her study on kinship in Meerut Vatak points out how arranged marriages which cross-cut both endogamous and regional boundaries seldom occur (1972: 92). As a matter of fact the new challenge of the local caste associations is precisely the promotion of inter-state marriages. This project is supported by complementary social campaigns which indirectly attack hypergamy and with it the reproduction of Yadav internal status differences. More specifically, in recent years Yadav social activists have been promoting a capillary anti-dowry and anti-child-marriage campaign. By the same token, lavish marriage celebrations are strongly discouraged and the concept of mass (group) marriage popularised. The following are a number of resolutions approved at different meetings in the last fifteen years:

‘All resolutions taken in the past to check the dowry system in its ugly forms have failed to arrest it. This is most unfortunate. This Mahasabha is not of the view that unless the youth forces that the revolutionary lead, it cannot be checked. Remedy is the arrangement of congregational marriages on the occasion of Mahasabha sessions. Resolved that a Committee of the following persons to suggest ways and means within four months be formed. It further resolves that the delegates present should take a view not to take dowry on marriage of their children’ (Resolution 6, AIYM Convention, Mathura 1981, Originally in English).

This Mahasabha appeals to the Yadav youth to oppose dowry. Group marriages should be encouraged (Uttar Pradesh Yadav Mahasabha resolutions, Kanpur 1990).

Similarly, at the last general convention of the AIYM in Delhi (1999) Har Mohan Singh Yadav, in his opening speech said:

‘Brothers and sisters, on this auspicious occasion, I appeal to you, I humbly request you: bad traditions like dowry, illiteracy, child marriage, consuming liquor, blind faith in old traditions etc. create disharmony in the conjugal familiar atmosphere and thereby the people in general and Yadavs in particular have become backward day by day...’...‘the lavish expenditure on marriage ceremonies should be curtailed...Dowry system which is a great evil in our society should be discouraged...Marriage between Yadavs of different states should be arranged’ (Har Mohan Singh Yadav, AIYM, Convention, Vaishali-Delhi, 25 December 1999).

Hypergamous marriages are not cheap. The amount of dowry given by the bride's family is associated with the status of the groom, his family and his lineage. During caste association meetings Yadav activists strongly criticise the way money is spent on dowries and marriage celebrations; they cite examples of members of the community who indebted themselves for life in order to marry their daughters into a good family. In particular, the amount of money spent on marriage compared to the amount spent on education is often pointed out.

The following is a poem recited by a Yadav girl in a Yadav caste meeting in Agra in February 1998:

'Dear father you are getting exploited; what kind of marriage is this; Should I call it a marriage function or should I call it burden; You and my brother are getting weaker and weaker day by day; I do not want a father-in-law who is greedy for money; I need a husband who is rich in the heart and has love for others; If the community does not listen to your voice; Then let me be un-married; But my grief will curse the world and all the community will be hurt...' (Sunita Yadav, MYS meeting, Agra, 28 February 1998).

Little girls often recite these kinds of poems at Yadav caste meetings. Moreover, in each local Yadav newsletter there is a section dedicated to the problems of dowry. A way of combating this 'social evil', which mainly hits non-wealthy Yadavs, is the concept of mass (group) marriages. This type of marriage is organised by the local marriage bureau. It is precisely on these issues that local level social leaders mostly work.

The Yadav Mandaliya Sammelan was established in Agra in November 1990. The Marriage Bureau affiliated to the association attempts to link the Yadavs of the Mathura-Agra area with the Yadavs of eastern U.P. and also of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. Similarly, the first meeting of the Rashtriya Yadav Mana Seva Sangh in Vrindavan was held in September 1999. In the meeting discussion focused on the eradication of dowry and the establishment of a marriage bureau. Marriage forms were distributed to the audience with the aim of collecting a database of potential brides and grooms eager to have a non-dowry inter-state marriage. In Mathura, Yadav marriage bureaus are very recent phenomena and it is, therefore, difficult to assess their performance and popularity. However, the activity of caste associations in the sphere of marriage has had a visible impact. I recorded six so-called inter-state marriages which were

all arranged through the caste association network. However, in order to draw larger conclusions there is a need for a study of regional marriage patterns.

## Conclusion

This chapter has had a number of objectives. The first was to provide an empirical description of Yadav subdivisions, and the importance of the logic of descent in the construction of the Yadav community. I have attempted to link present ethnographic data with the ethno-historical data presented in Chapter 2, illustrating changes and continuities in the internal dimensions of the Ahir/Yadav caste/community. I have shown how Mathura Yadavs still draw internal boundaries within their community through the language of locality, ideologies of blood, concepts of purity and pollution and wealth and power. By the same token, I have documented how an increasing number of Yadavs view themselves as members of a large kin-community (Kolenda 1978), which recognises common descent from the god Krishna. This widely shared belief works against the internal status and cultural subdivisions which were already historically ill defined.

The importance of the idiom of kinship in relation to the idiom of purity-pollution in Ahir/Yadav understandings of their community has gained extra-force in recent times. Contemporary ethnography (Kolenda 1978; Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma 1994; Béteille 1996; Mayer 1996) shows that caste in its 'traditional' definition, i.e. as a hierarchical system governed by rules of purity and pollution legitimated by the Brahmanical ideology, is perceived in the political and public domain as an illegitimate institution and is therefore denied. However, whenever the institution of caste is not disapproved of, it is usually perceived in terms of *cultural distinctiveness* rather than in terms of ritual purity. Since in the public and political arena caste can no longer be described as *unequal*, it is described as *different* (Fuller 1996: 12-13). This shift is reflected by the substitution of the term *jati*, which refers to caste, with the term *samaj*, which refers to community (Mayer 1996: 59).

In the light of these ethnographies, the caste system, defined by vertical hierarchical relationships, is said to have changed its nature. As a result, castes are

increasingly becoming 'horizontal', disconnected 'ethnic' groups with their own distinct culture and way of life (Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma 1994: 19-20; see also Srinivas 1966: 114; Dumont 1970: 227). There has been a shift from an organic to a segmentary organisation (Bailey 1963b: 123) and from 'a structure to the juxtaposition of substance' (Dumont 1970: 227).

The ethnography and historiography of Ahir/Yadavs of the Braj-Ahirwal area shows how it is highly reductive to conceptualise 'traditional' and 'substantialised' or 'modern' forms of caste consciousness in opposition and in contradiction to each other (see S. Bayly 1999: 365-382). Equally, it is problematic to use terms such as 'modern' and 'traditional' to differentiate different types of caste systems (i.e. vertical versus horizontal, and organic versus separation/competition). Amongst the Ahir/Yadavs, 'substantialised' manifestations of caste are not a recent phenomenon. The concept of *vansh*, which incorporates allied pastoral and warrior castes which claim descent from Krishna, has its roots in pre-colonial times.

The aggregative strategies, and extreme intra-caste differentiation of the Ahirs, shows how phenomena that are often considered to be linked to 'modern' processes of substantialisation (Fuller 1996: 13), were 'traditionally' familiar to the Ahir caste-cluster. The Ahir/Yadav 'caste cluster' historically had a marked tribal character. Its internal organisation was informed by kinship and symbolic descent rather than by ritual purity. The Ahirs have historically shared a common past, myth of origin, military culture and marriage alliances with other related castes like Rajputs, Gujars and Jats. Hence, historically 'the community' aspect of the caste diluted internal differentiations marked by the ideology of religious hierarchy. In a hierarchical and holistic caste system, castes tend to fission. In contrast, in a non-cooperative caste system the opposite happens: castes tended to fuse (Béteille 1969: 151; Kolenda 1978). The fact that the Ahirs traditionally tended to fuse rather than split suggests that the concept of 'substantial solidarity' was not an entirely alien concept to them.

In contemporary Mathura, the horizontal social organisation of Yadavs, and related practices of hypergamy, still inform and facilitate processes of fusion among local Yadav subdivisions. Evidently, the decline of the purity-pollution principle in defining internal subdivisions has contributed to reinforcing Yadavs'

descent-centred set of kinship values and processes of amalgamation. At an ideal level, today's Mathura Yadavs appear to be a relatively homogeneous status group from the outside. The hierarchical principle of purity and pollution does not substantially permeate the internal organisation of the caste community.

However, this quasi-ethnic understanding of caste coexists with a lively insistence on the maintenance of the pollution barrier between the Yadavs and the 'unclean castes' (e.g. former untouchables). Thus, being a Yadav is not only determined by birth and by an inherited immutable substance (Barnett 1977); but to a certain extent still depends on what the members of the community do or fail to do towards the preservation of personal or collective purity (see S. Bayly 1999: 310-311). The following chapter explores the *religious* aspects of local Yadav processes of fusion.

## Chapter 4

### **From lineage deity to caste/community deity: gods are ancestors and ancestors can become gods**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter explores the *religious* dimensions of the Yadav folk theory of descent. Since the themes discussed in this chapter are part of a cumulative argument, it is worth summarising a number of issues previously discussed. The ethno-historical exploration of Ahir/Yadav kinship organisation in the Braj-Ahirwal area, and its ethnographic analysis in contemporary Mathura town, sheds light on the ways in which the Ahir-Yadav cluster organisation and lineage view of caste facilitated the transformation of different Ahir subdivisions into the ‘modern’ Yadav community. A strong ideological model of descent was at the basis of the internal structure of the Ahir caste. At the core of the formation of the Yadav community lies a tendency to ‘emulate’ and ‘duplicate’, at the regional and national levels, the ideology of descent which legitimises local lineages (Fox 1971: 23). Being ‘Yadav’ is, therefore, locally understood both in terms of close agnatic relations and in terms of ‘symbolic’ regional and national agnatic relations.

The previous chapter illustrated the implications of this process at the empirical level. The emergence of the new encompassing Krishnavanshi kinship category is an evident outcome of the spread and manipulation of such ideology. Being Krishnavanshi-Yadav means to descend from Krishna. No occupation or titles are specifically connected with this new social categorisation. This was not the case for the Yaduvanshi, Nandavanshi and Goallavanshi categories. The new Krishnavanshi social category is not connected with a specific territory either; its territorial inclusiveness comprises the whole of India. These extended territorial boundaries correspond to equally extended endogamous boundaries. Hence, the

entire Yadav caste community is, in principle, a single large endogamous group whose tutelary lineage-community deity is the god Krishna.

This chapter explores how amongst Mathura Yadavs the cult of local lineage deities has been gradually substituted by the cult of the god Krishna, and how such a process is accompanied by the adoption of Sanskritic forms of Hinduism. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the AIYM's ideologues began to push the issue of socio-religious reform (see Chapter 2). The outcome of such reformist campaigns is at the base of contemporary statements like: 'we (Yadavs) are Kshatriyas but we behave like Vaishyas'. Such an assertion is related to the type of Hinduism Mathura Yadavs practise. In the last fifty years, there has been a change in terms of who ordinary local Yadavs worship, how they worship and who they believe to be their direct ancestors/protectors. More specifically, in the last three generations there has been an evident shift from the cult of 'meat-eating' deities to 'vegetarian' deities and from lineage deities to caste/community deities.<sup>94</sup> For instance, the worship of local 'male' lineage deities (*kuldevtas*), such as Mekhasur, has been gradually substituted with the cult of Krishna. By the same token, the local 'female' *kul* deities (*kuldevis*) have been tamed and transmuted into vegetarian *vaishno devis*, whose foundation myths are now solidly linked with the mythology of Krishna and his companion Radha. The purification of local lineage deities is accompanied by a strengthening of the pollution barrier which separates clean castes from unclean (i.e. untouchable) castes.

This chapter explores these entangled phenomena, and in particular focuses on the cult of the *kuldevtas*. I believe that the study of Yadav *kuldevta* cults, which incorporate dimensions found in hero cults, possession cults, and *bhakti* cults, as well as cults of 'great' gods, simultaneously highlights tensions within contemporary Hinduism and changes that have occurred in the internal organisation of the Yadav caste/community. Harlan (1992: 12) correctly points to the potential insights that studies on lineage deities can provide to the understanding of kinship and caste, and to the relation between the caste system

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<sup>94</sup> Here for 'meat-eating' deity I mean deities who demand blood sacrifice (cf. Fuller, 1992).

and Hindu ideology. Unfortunately, this is an area of study still under-investigated. The literature on lineage-god/goddess cults amongst middle-low castes is not extensive. Since *kul* deity cults are viewed as a 'primary emblem of Rajput identity' (Harlan 1992: 10) and royalty, they have been primarily explored in relation to Rajputs. In particular, it is the literature on 'male' *kul* deities that is most scanty. Since Rajputs do not worship 'male' lineage deities, the latter are not included in available literature on Rajput religion. Male lineage deities are found mainly among pastoral castes and, as others have already pointed out, there are very few detailed studies of religion as practised by pastoral, nomadic and semi-nomadic communities (Srivastava 1997: 46).

This chapter is divided into two broad sections. The first section outlines the debate about the internal stratification of Hinduism and its relation to Indian society. It examines how a caste-based hierarchical social structure is connected with indigenous notions of religious stratification and how reformist processes have influenced both social and religious domains. The second section explores the ethnography of a number of lineage deity cults, their recent transformations and relationship to the formation of the modern Yadav community. In the light of this ethnographic material which shows how Yadav horizontal alliances still belong to the realm of ritual/religious space, it is concluded that new substantialised modern castes are still permeated by a religious caste ethos.

## **Reformist religious processes: becoming 'Kshatriyas who behave like Vaishyas'**

### **Superior and inferior forms of Hinduism: the issue of sacrifice**

The adoption by lower castes of goddesses defined as *kuldevis* has often been described as an imitation of Rajput customs, and thus as an ongoing process of Sanskritisation/Rajputisation. For instance, Pocock (1973) illustrates how the Patidars of Gujarat lay claims to have lineage goddesses for the sake of their own prestige. Pocock underlines how *kuldevi* worship is generally conceived as an



institution encountered exclusively among the Rajputs and not among Shudra castes (1973: 67).

However, Mathura Yadavs' claims to possess lineage deities should not be interpreted as an explicit expression of an ongoing process of Rajputisation. Informants never explicitly attached any form of prestige to their claim of having a *kuldevi* or *kuldevta*. As a matter of fact, prestige was instead linked to their claims of worshipping vegetarian goddesses and gods, who were closely associated with the mythology of Krishna: the Yadav tutelary caste deity *par excellence*.<sup>95</sup> In order to understand such claims, this section shows how Mathura Yadavs have been reforming themselves by adopting socio-religious practices associated with high forms of Hinduism.

To begin with I introduce what has been a central debate within studies of Hinduism, namely the issue of its internal stratification and its relation with Indian society. The Hindu world is populated by an uncountable number of deities. A number of them are worshipped throughout the subcontinent and their attributes are celebrated in well-known texts ('great deities'). Others, instead, are regional and parochial figures and their worship is specifically local ('little deities'). The lineage goddesses and gods discussed in this chapter belong to the latter category. As mentioned, they can be male and female and they can have non-divine origin. They are periodically worshipped by all members of a clan or caste, and their function is to protect the members of particular kin groups. They are usually meat-eaters and are said to like and to need blood in order to be effective. Conversely, 'great deities' such as Krishna are viewed as immortal, fully divine and strictly vegetarian. In short, lineage deities are parochial in nature and usually demand animal sacrifice to be effective. In contrast, all-India Sanskrit deities are strictly vegetarian and they do not demand animal sacrifice. This distinction is crucial to understand the phenomena I describe in this chapter.

In the early 1950s Srinivas (1965) elaborated the concept of 'Sanskritic Hinduism', which he opposed to popular, local, parochial and folk Hinduism.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Here for vegetarian deities, I mean deities who do not accept animal sacrifice.

<sup>96</sup> The main characteristics were the worship of great deities such as Vishnu, Shiva and Devi; the importance of pilgrimage centres; of the two classical epics: the Ramayana and

By elaborating the concept of ‘great traditions’ opposed to ‘little traditions’, Singer (1972) emphasised the differences between the classical, philosophical and text-based aspects of religion and the popular ‘folk’ religious practices. Although contemporary anthropological studies on Hinduism have come to the conclusion that at the empirical level it is impossible to make a distinction between ‘inferior’ and ‘superior’ forms of Hinduism (Babb 1975; Fuller 1979, 1988); they have also acknowledged that at the ideological level the concepts of Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic Hinduism, and of ‘great’ and ‘little’ traditions, capture ‘an indigenous frame of reference’ (Fuller 1992: 27).

In plenty of instances local people in Mathura and in Braj distinguished between superior forms of Hinduism and inferior ones. The following ethnographic description illustrates this point. On one of my first visits to an Ahir/Yadav village near Rewari, one hundred kilometres from Mathura town, the village head, when asked about the religious life in the village, answered by saying that the Ahir/Yadavs were not ‘religious’ (English word): ‘we do not have temples (*mandir*) and priests (Brahmans) for our worship; if you wish to study ‘religion’, you should go to Mathura, where there are many Brahman and Banias’ (Bola Yadav, 70 years old, teacher). In reality, during my stay in the village I witnessed many ‘religious’ activities, which as my informant correctly said, did not need the service of the Brahman. These rituals were conducted in vernacular and not Sanskritic language and the offerings to the deities were vegetarian as well as non-vegetarian. It soon became evident that by evaluating Mathura as a ‘superior’ Brahman and Vaishya stronghold, the headman was pointing at the separation between the local ‘inferior’ worship of ‘little deities’ and the worship of the so-called Sanskritic ones.<sup>97</sup>

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the Mahabharata; the holiness of the cow; beliefs in concepts such as *karma* and *dharma* and the prominent role of the Brahman. The concept was paired with the concept of *Sanskritisation*.

<sup>97</sup> Datta (1999), in her work on the Jats of southeast Punjab, which as a caste traditionally share many of the customs and much of the religious culture of the Ahirs/Yadavs and Gujars, describes the pre-colonial and early colonial religious world of the pastoral castes of the area. With the term ‘*Kaccha* tradition’ opposed to ‘*Pucca* tradition’ local people made a distinction between a non-brahmanical religious form and a ‘brahmanical one’. ‘The *Kaccha* tradition... often conflicted with the brahmanical moral codes and precepts...

The headman of the village, therefore, expressed how the concept of 'Sanskritic Hinduism' has an evaluative significance in the lives of ordinary people. As Fuller suggests 'by reference to it higher-status groups tend to regard their own beliefs and practices as superior to those assumed to belong to lower-status groups' (1992: 27), and, by the same token, lower status groups evaluate their beliefs and practices in relation to it. The origin of this widespread discourse is not recent and goes in tandem with the assumption that Brahmanical Hinduism is the 'real' and most 'pure' form of Hinduism. In short, this model is empirically identified with vegetarianism, non-violence and ascetism (ibid.). Vegetarianism is usually considered as the dietary rule of the higher castes. 'Non-violence' and 'vegetarianism' are taken as indices of purity and superior status. Conversely, violence (including sacrifice) and meat-eating tend to be associated with impurity and low status. Sacrifice is evaluated as a low ritual that does not belong to Brahmanical Hinduism. 'Animal sacrifice, in short, is ideologically devalued in relation to vegetarian worship' (ibid.: 88). In a sacred and orthodox town such as Mathura, these trends are present in people's everyday lives. They have in fact been reinforced by centuries of strictly vegetarian Vaishnava devotional movements and in more recent times by Hindu reformist movements such as the Arya Samaj.

The Vaishnava religious tradition vigorously opposes animal sacrifice and the consumption of meat and alcohol. Vaudeville (1996: 65) has pointed out how the autochthonous pastoral castes of Braj have gradually associated their goddess cults, which demanded bloody rites, with Bhakti cults of Krishna and Vaishnava practices. In this process, goddesses gradually gave up meat and became vegetarian. In the region of Mathura, family deities have been 'tamed' over the centuries by Vaishnava reformers who abhorred the animal sacrifice associated with their cults. The term 'Vaishnava' is also locally understood as synonymous with vegetarianism (Babb 1999: 157).

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avoiding the symbols of orthodox Hinduism- *pucca mazhab*- they (the Jats) took pride in describing their own practices as *kaccha mazhab* (ibid.: 25).

Local Ahir-Yadavs are followers of devotional sects like the *Gaudiya Sampraday*, *Pusthi Marg* and *Ramandandi Sampraday*. However, the emphasis on vegetarianism is not only a Vaishnava phenomena. Mathura Yadavs have also been greatly influenced by the vegetarian and non-sacrifice ethos of the Arya Samaj. In Chapter 2 I highlighted how the socio-religious movement of the Arya Samaj intertwined with the reformist character of the Yadav caste associations. Even today, old Yadav informants often pointed out that ‘the *Aryas*’ demanded that they abandon animal sacrifice. In a number of instances when I asked informants if they performed *bali*, I was given the answer, ‘no I am an *Arya*’. By this, informants did not mean that they had been converted to the Arya Samaj, but just that they followed the Arya Samaj rules about animal sacrifice and vegetarianism. Thus, Yadav informants explicitly acknowledged the influence of the Arya Samaj. Notwithstanding this, they also explicitly said that they had never abandoned the cult of their deities as the Arya Samaj asked. Being ‘*Arya*’, therefore, meant locally to be reformed and paradoxically to adhere to a Brahmanical form of Hinduism.

In many respects the forms of Brahmanical Hinduism to which Ahir/Yadavs in Mathura adhere have been recently sponsored by the agenda of the Sangh Parivar. Hinduism is conceptualised by Hindu nationalists as a homogenous and uniform religion encoded in texts. Sacrifice is usually strongly condemned and vegetarianism is highly valued. At the core of the Hindu nationalist pantheon are superior and Sanskritic vegetarian deities. Being a site of Hindu nationalist propaganda, Mathura has been highly influenced by such ideologies.

Thanks to the combination of many concomitant factors (Yadav caste associations’ reforms, devotionalism and Hindu reformist movements) over the last fifty years the Yadavs of Mathura have become vegetarian. In addition, they gave up the cult of ‘meat-eating’ gods and goddesses, or transmuted their deities into vegetarian ones. In doing this, they transformed them into ‘proper’ ancestors: vegetarians like their worshippers (and descendants). Sacrifice has been almost entirely abandoned by the last three generations and it is conceived as a ‘low’ ritual: a ritual that ‘backward castes’ perform. Most of my informants were almost scandalised when I asked if they used to perform animal sacrifice. Their reaction

was one of incredulous shock. They could not imagine how I dared to ask this kind of question: 'the Yadavs are a *bare jati*. If you wish to witness a sacrifice', they told me innumerable times, 'go to the Jatav (untouchable) neighbourhood' (Phoolan Devi, 35 years old, housewife).<sup>98</sup>

The majority of the Yadavs of Ahir Para are strictly vegetarian. I did come across young men who secretly ate meat and drank alcohol. Such occasions are mainly provided by 'chicken-whisky' picnics on the banks of the Yamuna river. These 'parties' were organised by young male Yadavs who were mostly attracted by the transgressive nature of such events. Despite these exceptions, I can safely say that reformist attitudes and behaviour are spread uniformly throughout the Yadav community.

### **The reinforcement of the purity-pollution barrier: a 'religious' and 'political' issue**

In Sadar Bazaar, the pollution barrier between clean caste communities and unclean castes is a lively social reality. For a start, Ahir Para Yadavs do not allow 'Jatavs' (the Sanskritised name for the local Chamars, traditionally leather-workers) and Valmiki (Bhangi, sweepers) to enter into their temples. Informants explicitly say that low-caste people are not allowed to enter their places of worship. As a matter of fact, I never met a low caste person at the Mahadev Ghat temple. In addition, I witnessed a couple of episodes in which young Jatavs were chased away by the temple caretakers because they passed too close to the Mahadev Ghat. The kitchen is another space which cannot be violated by a lower caste. Yadav women consistently told me that the worst violation of their sacred kitchen would be the presence of a SC or a Muslim. They could tolerate other 'presences' (like mine...) but even the more broad-minded could not conceive of

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<sup>98</sup> Old Yadavs described to me the sacrificial ritual they had seen in the past. They told me how usually a he-goat (sometimes a chicken) was decapitated during the festival *naurata* (nine nights). In their descriptions, emphasis was always placed on the sacrificial meal, the *prasada*, which was cooked at the site of the sacrifice and distributed to the people present.

having a low caste person in their own kitchen. Jatavs cannot sit in the presence of Yadav men as a sign of respect. And this even if a significant number of Jatavs in the neighbourhood are in government positions and quite wealthy and politically assertive.

A number of hierarchical transactional relations still exist between local Yadavs and low castes. More specifically, the dead cows and buffaloes of Yadavs are removed by the members of two Jatav households, who provide their service to the members of the Chaudhri and Dudh Parivars. Bola Kumar has been serving the Chaudhri Parivar for the past fifteen years, and before him his father, grandfather and uncles all worked for Yadav families. For his services, Bola Kumar receives cash and dairy products. In addition, due to his special patron-client relation with the Chaudhri Parivar, when he is in need he is allowed loans at a 'special' interest rate. B.S. Yadav, the leader of the Chaudhri Parivar, often said that his family does not trust the municipality sweepers and carcass removers. He said that they (the municipality sweepers) sell the dead animals to the Kasai/Qureshi (butchers) who then either eat the meat or sell the skin. By contrast, Bola Kumar buries the dead cows on the banks of the Yamuna river. Moreover, when he does it he is careful not to be seen by other people, who may want to exhume the corpse and sell it. B.S. Yadav often said how much he trusted the Kumars, and how it was a source of worry that Bola Kumar's sons might not carry on the traditional family service. Arun Kumar, Bola Kumar's first son, wants a government job, and considers the work of his father demeaning. Commenting on that, B.S. Yadav often said that the Scheduled Castes have too many privileges, and that since their political party, the BSP, won some parliamentary seats they do not want to carry on their traditional jobs, and think they can govern U.P.

The Bahujan Samaj Party, which draws its support mainly from SC members, is quite strong in Mathura district. In the general election of 1998 it was second only to the BJP.<sup>99</sup> Amongst the clean castes of Sadar Bazaar there is a strong anti-BSP and anti-SC sentiment. This separation was effectively expressed

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<sup>99</sup> In the 12<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha Election Results for Mathura constituency, 48 per cent of the votes went to Tej Veer Singh (BJP), 18 per cent to Pooran Prakash (BSP), 16 per cent to Manvendra Singh (SP).

on the day of the 1999 parliamentary elections. Outside the electoral-polling stations the different political parties set up their kiosks from which party workers welcomed their supporters and helped them to cast their vote. While the Congress, Samajwadi Party and BJP kiosks were located close to each other, the kiosk of the Bahujan Samaj Party was positioned two hundred metres away and behind a corner. This separation was also emphasised by the fact that there was no interaction between the people who went to cast their vote for the Congress, BJP and SP and those who went to cast their vote for the BSP. While supporters of the Congress, BJP and Samajwadi Party, stopped to chat with people from other 'kiosks', after having cast their vote, there was no interaction between them and the BSP supporters who were almost entirely member of Scheduled Castes.

Although Yadav caste associations organise Other Backward Classes meetings and explicitly express their commitment against Untouchability, I never met a SC member attending or delivering a speech at such events. A recent controversy showed how in practice Yadav caste associations are not willing to encompass in their social category members of SC communities who claim to descend from Krishna. At the AIYM meeting held in Gurgaon in 1998, a member of the committee raised the issue that Jatavs in Agra and Rajasthan had begun to adopt the Yadav title. A member of the audience pointed out that he had already written to the Mahasabha secretary to inform him that in Bharatpur (Rajasthan) the local Jatavs were calling themselves Yadavs. Another pointed out that in Udaipur Jatavs who worked as builders and did casual labour were also calling themselves Yadavs and had adopted the *Kadamb* Yadav clan. The Mahasabha secretary said that the AIYM committee would prepare a press-release to be sent to the local regional newspapers which would clearly explain that these people were 'cheaters' and not Yadavs but Jatavs (Harijans). The representatives of the Agra and Bharatpur AIYM branches were given the task of sending the article to the local newspapers.

In Ahir Para informants often pointed this issue out to me, but they also said that in Sadar Bazaar Jatavs did not have the courage to claim the Yadav title, and even if they did nobody would believe them. On the other hand, local Jatavs were not at all interested to claim to be Yadav, and stressed how 'by making such

a big fuss Yadav leaders show that they are scared of the Jatavs and the SC in general' (Arun Kumar, 25 years old, student).

**'We are Kshatriyas but we behave like Vaishyas': vegetarians  
'with fighting spirit'**

The Yadavs of Ahir Para regard themselves almost unanimously as Kshatriyas: mythological traditions, kinship organisation and ritual practices support this claim and provide a culturally plausible account of their historical association with the Rajputs. The *kuldevi/kuldevta* cults discussed in this chapter provide a number of examples which illustrate the close relation between the Ahir/Yadavs and the local Jadon Rajputs. This religious and cultural link contrasts sharply with the Vaishya-like religious behaviour found among a large section of Mathura Yadavs.

Rajputs are generally 'meat-eaters'. Furthermore, as Babb points out, 'the very symbolism of sacrifice itself is central to the notion of who Rajputs are' (Babb 1996: 159). Rajputs are represented as '... those who offer themselves on the battlefield as the goddess's sacrificial victims' (ibid.). Conversely, as examined in the previous sections, animal sacrifice is locally assimilated by Yadav/Kshatriyas to 'low forms of Hinduism' and to 'low caste' customs. Modern Yadavs, being a 'higher caste' and, on top of that, Vaishnava, look at animal sacrifice with abhorrence. In a number of instances Yadavs described themselves as '*Kshatriyas who behave like Vaishyas*'.

In order to understand this claim I wish to draw attention to a number of associations which link the economic history of the Mathura Yadavs with the spread and adoption of particular religious practices. In modern times, Yadavs have been trying to become 'businessmen' and 'entrepreneurs'. Moneylending is another activity previously monopolised by the local Banias (the local Vaishya community) that is now in the hands of the local Yadavs. The Yadavs' local economic and political upsurge in the late 1980s shaped the ritual complex of Sadar Bazaar. In the last fifty years the Yadavs of Ahir Para have gradually monopolised and begun to patronise two temples that were previously controlled



by the local Bania community. By the same token, rich Yadavs tend to embrace Vaishnava sects, such as the *Pusthi Marg* and/or the *Gaudiya Sampraday*, in the same fashion as business communities did traditionally. They patronise the construction of new Radha/Krishna temples, as well as the reinvention of new rituals, such as the Kamsa Festival (see Chapter 5).

The fusion between Vaishya-Kshatriya and pastoral themes can appear complex and contradictory, but this is not the case in the eyes of Ahir Para Yadavs. They have a mythological justification as well as local empirical evidence to tease out such apparent ambiguity.

As a mythological foundation they generally provide the following story:

‘When Yadavs used to live in Gokul, Vrindavan and Braj, they used to sell milk, curd, and butter. This was their ‘business’. They were called ‘Gopalan’. Nanda and his colleagues were called ‘Gopas’ or ‘Vaishyas’. Even Krishna said in the Bhagavad Gita (chapter 18, paragraph 44), that: ‘farming, *gopalan* and business are the jobs of the Vaishyas. When the Gopas settled in Mathura and began to govern the city they began to be called ‘Kshatriyas’ (Devi Yadav, 55 years old, housewife).

Alternatively, as already mentioned in Chapter 2, they justify their Vaishya behaviour by drawing on a mythological tale which describes how Yadu, the forefather of Krishna, had two wives: one Kshatriya and the other Vaishya. From the Kshatriya branch descended Vasudev the father of Krishna, and from the Vaishya one Nanda, the forefather of Krishna. The unambiguous coexistence of Kshatriya-Vaishya themes is also locally teased out by empirical evidence, i.e. the Vaishya-royal character of the local historically dominant family of Mathura: the Seths. The ‘royal family’ of Mathura is a family of bankers. Most of the members were and are followers of *Pusthi Marg*. This Kshatriya-Vaishya local model of royalty was often presented to me as evidence of the existence and legitimacy of such a fusion.

The Seth model has certainly had an impact on the way local Yadavs conceptualise their being ‘*Kshatriyas but behaving like Vaishyas*’ without seeing any apparent contradictions. Ahir Para is located very close to the former mansion of the Seth family. In addition, the main ritual complex of local Yadavs, Mahadev Ghat, borders the Seth mansion. The Ahir/Yadavs served the family historically,

and a number of house managers belong to the Ahir/Yadav community. Today, the Seth family have left Mathura and the beautiful mansion on the river of the Yamuna is abandoned. The present Yadavs act informally as the guardians of the house and protectors of the Seth family dwellings. When in Mathura, the descendant of the family, Mr Arjun Seth, never fails to pay a visit to Mahadev Ghat and to give rich offerings to the temple. These acts are interpreted as a sign of gratitude from the family for the guardian role played by the Yadavs and for their role as clients in the past. On the basis of past services, today's Yadavs have permission to enter the Seth property and use the water pumps for their daily bath.

In Mathura the assumption that Krishna was born from the Kshatriya and Vaishya *varna* is widespread not only amongst Yadavs but also amongst their Bania neighbours. Similarly, other ethnographies point out how for the Banias Lord Krishna evolved from the Vaishya and Kshatriya *varna* (D. Gupta 2000: 126) and how Vaishya-like communities, such as the Agrawal, claimed Krishna to be a member of their caste (G. Pandey 1990: 112). Others point out how the cultural identity of a number of trader communities is also related to Rajput ancestry (Babb 1999). Writing about the relation between Rajputs and Banias, Babb tells us that Khandeval Jains claim Rajput ancestry but have rejected the Kshatriya life style. Similarly, Pocock (1973) describes how the Patidars have been shifting from a Kshatriya model to a Vaishya model of identity (Pocock 1973).

Mathura's Yadav example is both similar and different to those described in the available literature. Mathura Yadavs not only claim Rajput origins in the past, but also claim to be Kshatriya in the present at the same time as rejecting several aspects of the Kshatriya life style by 'behaving like Vaishyas'. It should be emphasised that the Bania model offered in Mathura by the Seth family presents Banias and the King as having equal status, and this assumption nullifies contrasting and competing claims of status among Yadavs. Inconsistencies in the local hierarchical representations of *varna* do not trouble the Yadavs.

Yadavs emulate a syncretism of Kshatriya and Vaishya models which is at the ideological level legitimised by the ill-defined nature of Krishna, and at the empirical level by the dual Vaishya-Kshatriya character of the traditional rules of Mathura. On the other hand, the adoption of vegetarianism and abhorrence of

animal sacrifice do not go in hand with non-violence. Babb points out how central to the cultural identity of the Banias, more than vegetarianism, is non-violence; and this is what differentiates the Banias from the Rajputs (1999: 17). Although the Yadavs of Mathura adopted a vegetarian diet and transformed their 'meat-eating' deities into vegetarian ones, central to their identity is their warlike and violent outlook (see Chapters 5 and 6). Bania informants endlessly drew to my attention the violent behaviour of the local Yadavs, whereas conversely Yadavs said that the Banias were cowards and incapable of fighting. Yadav boys who put on weight, who do not enjoy wrestling, or have peaceful and quiet personalities are teased by their companions with Bania nicknames. This draws my attention to the fact that informants never said 'we behave like Banias' and this is because they consider them 'effeminate' and not able to fight. Thus, they refer to the *varna* concept rather than to the caste model provided locally. The Vaishya-*varna* concept which scripturally encompasses herdsmen and cowherders, allows informants on the one hand to adopt a number of dimensions of the Vaishya repertoire and on the other to exclude others.

## **Ahir/Yadav 'lineages' and their sacred protectors**

In Chapter 2 I showed how Yadavs are conscious of their genealogy and how certain subdivisions within the community are today more important than others. In short, the largest kinship categories within the local Yadav community are the *vanshs*: the Yaduvanshi, the Nandavanshi and the Goallavanshi. Progressing down towards smaller kinship units, the next unit after the *vansh* is the *got* (clan). After the *got* comes the *parivar*.

Today, of all the segments mentioned the one that plays the largest role in defining the Yadav community is the *got*. The boundaries of the *vansh* categories are ill defined. The emergence of the encompassing Krishnavanshi social category is an explicit sign of the decadence of 'traditional' Ahir endogamous kinship units. In contrast, the unit of exogamy, the *got*, is still relevant. Apart from its role in the practical matters of exogamy, the *got* is important because, theoretically at least, it was the unit protected by the *kuldevi* and the *kuldevta*. I say theoretically

because local people can use the term '*kul*' to refer respectively to their *vansh*, their *got* or their *parivar*. The concept is indeed flexible and can comprise small or largely extended kinship groups. Thus, the lineage deity may or may not be empirically associated with kinship groups designated with the term *got* and *parivar*. As we shall see, a number of Yadav *kuldevis* and *kuldevtas* are associated with smaller segmentary units; others protect many different groups belonging to various *parivars*, *gots* and *vanshs* (see Harlan 1992: 11-12).

Studies of clan organisation in India have tended to support the view that lineage deities separate groups into those whom one may marry and those whom one may not marry (see Harlan 1992; Bennett 1983). The case of the Ahir/Yadavs is at present not clear-cut. A number of clans have their specific lineage deities, while others share the same *kul* deities. A number of informants told me that this is a legacy of their migratory past and that people forgot their original deity and adopted local ones. Others instead proudly maintained their original deity and said that when their ancestors moved, their gods moved with them. Lineage deities vary, therefore, in their degree of territorial and social inclusiveness. In the next section, which is dedicated to the cult of Mekhasur, I illustrate how lineage deity cults can provide information about the migratory past of the Ahir/Yadav *gots*, and about the present consanguineal relations between different localised portions of clans. Going back to the issue of the *got/kul* deity relation and the role of the *kul* deities in demarcating exogamous boundaries, I can safely say that contemporary Mathura members of different *vanshs* legitimised their inter-*vansh* marriage alliances by saying that they were all Krishnavanshi and that they had the same *kuldevta*, namely Krishna. Therefore, the argument that lineage deities define the exogamous unit is locally dismissed.

The most popular *kuldevis* deities are Nari-Semri, Kaila Devi, Anandi-Bandi and Anjina Devi; while the most popular *kuladevtas* are Krishna, Goverdhan Baba, Mekhasur and Pir Baba (Gogaji). In the next sections, I examine a number of these cults and their relations with local Yadav kinship units. Most of my informants identify their present lineage deities with the place where their family members are supposed to have their shaving ceremonies (called *mundan* and done for boys), performed as well as with the place where a bride and groom should worship the groom's lineage god after the marriage. On

the whole it is the relation between *kuldevis* and specific clans that is more vague than the relation between *kuldevtas* and clans. It is for this reason that the next sections will be devoted mainly to the exploration of lineage 'male' deities.

### **Ahir/Yadav *kuldevtas* and Kshatriya-pastoral themes**

This section focuses on the local Yadav 'male' lineage deities. It explores the relationships between these deities, hero-god cults, and their pastoralist-bard ritual specialists. I investigate the assimilation of such cults to the cult or mythology of the god Krishna. This choice of emphasis is not casual. Both the conversations and the behaviour of ordinary Yadavs indicate their 'preference' for their male lineage deities over their female ones. In innumerable instances, when directly questioned about the name of their *kuldevis* (lineage goddesses), informants replied with the name of their 'male' *kuldevta*. Soon I realised that for most of them the structural and symbolic relation between the *kul* and the protective male deity was clearer than the identical relation between the female lineage deity and the *kul*. The latter generally tended to be conceived and worshipped more as a family deity and as protector of the household than of the lineage. In contrast, *kuldevtas* have strong relations with the clan. In many instances the caretakers of their main shrines were, and are, the genealogists (*jagas*) of the *gots* protected by them. Being related to patrilineal descent, *kuldevta* cults are mainly a male domain.

Ahir/Yadavs' preference for the 'male' *kul* deities might also be understood as a legacy of their pastoral past. A number of ethnographies on pastoral religious practices have noted how traditionally 'pastoral groups often see the goddesses as a demon dangerous to cattle. This, in various instances, led to the assimilation of goddess into god cults' (Sontheimer 1993: 34-68). In addition, pastoral groups understand *kul* deities and their functions in a different way to Rajputs. Among both Rajputs and Yadavs the *kuldevis* and *kuldevtas* are supposed to be 'special' deities since they are considered responsible for the birth of the *kul*. According to Harlan, 'a goddess begins her career as *kuldevi* when she becomes incarnate at a critical point in time in order to rescue an endangered

group of Rajputs whom she judges worthy of her protection' (1992: 52). In doing this, she usually helps the leader of a community to establish a kingdom. In moments of political crisis or war she might reappear using her '*shakti*' to help and protect the descendants of the leader. *Kuldevis* are, therefore, protectors of kingdoms and of their families. Above all these goddesses are protectors on the battlefield.

The pastoral 'male' *kuldevtas* are equally linked with kingship: '...defending and rescuing cattle was a successful way to begin a dynasty. Such a feat would make the defender a hero and secure him prosperity or, if he was killed in battle, bring renown to him and his descendants' (Sontheimer 1993: 101). Yadavs' *kuldevtas* are in fact often glorified cowherders, who defended the herd of the community. In a number of instances these heroes are conceptualised as later *avatars* of Krishna. Yadavs thus connect their male *kul* deities to their mythical royal/pastoral heritage and to Krishna: the king of the gods. There can be little doubt that such Kshatriya affinities played an important part in the association of the Ahir/Yadavs with the cult of these sets of deities. The foundation myths of the various deities all converge on Yadav royal dynasties and on descent lines of 'cowherder kings', thereby representing a fusion between 'pastoral' and 'Kshatriya' themes.

Parallel to that, Yadavs' 'female' *kuldevis* have been historically connected with the local Jadon (Yadav) Rajput branches and with the royal lineage of Karouli in eastern Rajasthan. The Jadon Rajputs of Mathura and nearby districts claim descent from Yadu, son of Yayati, the fifth king of the lunar dynasty. The lineage of the Raja of Karouli is traced back to Krishna. This lineage was represented in Braj by the Raja of Awa in the *teshil* of Jaleshar of the present Etah district. The local shrine of the main Yadav *kul* deities, such as Nari-Semri, Anandi-Bandi, Anjina Devi and Chamunda, are all located in Jadon Rajput villages, and for centuries their main traditional patrons have been local Jadon Rajputs.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> This trend could represent an interesting example of how the local religious structure has been shaped by the political one. Alternatively, it can also be viewed as 'evidence' of a plausible Rajput/Ahir connectedness and a legacy of ancient Ahir/Yadav warrior-pastoral royalty. A number of Yadav traditions are in fact so intimately compatible with

In addition, these deities have been historically associated with the mythology of Krishna and included in the pilgrimage circuit of Braj.<sup>101</sup> For example, in Nari-Semri the twin deities Nari and Semri are visited every year by thousands of pilgrims (Vaudeville 1996: 62). The deity at Semri is known as the ‘the dark-skinned one’ and ‘the mistress of cattle’. Nari is more commonly known as Kinnari. It is said that in order to persuade Radha to give up her pride (*mana*), Krishna assumed the female form of Kinnari. In Anandi-Bandi, the twin deities Anandi and Bandi are also linked to the mythology of Krishna. According to local Yadavs, the religious complex in the village was originally dedicated to the lineage deity of Nanda, and Krishna’s hair-shaving ceremony (*mundan*) is said to have been performed there. Similarly, the cult of Anjina Devi is associated with Krishna. Anjina Devi is the lineage deity of the royal Jadon-Rajput family of Karauli. According to myth, immediately after his birth Krishna was smuggled out of Mathura to escape from the murderous designs of his uncle Kamsa, and was taken to Gokul. The goddess Anjina Devi, known also as Hanuman’s mother, is said to have acted as the protector of Krishna during the trip from Mathura to Gokul. Anjina Devi has often been mentioned to me as the *kuldevi* of the *Brajbasi* Yadavs. However, only a few families in Ahir Para worship her, and none of them were able to say why they considered her to be their *kuldevi*. Only one old man was able to tell me the above story.

On the whole the exploration of Yadav lineage deities sheds light on the complex relation between Rajputs and Ahir/Yadavs and more generally between pastoral groups, Krishna mythology and Rajput culture. Exploring the structural nature of the fusion between the cowherder myths and the Kshatriya myths, and the historical social relations between the local Jadon Rajputs and the Ahir/Yadavs is a hard task. Drawing on religious studies undertaken in the area

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major Kshatriya themes that it is impossible to resist the temptation to see them as ‘authentic original’ cults of the pastoral communities of Braj.

<sup>101</sup> Many of the ‘female’ *kuldevis* popular in the Braj area are now associated with the cult of Radha. The synthesis between Radha and local goddesses in the area of Braj is common. There are similar Saiva/Vaishnava syntheses across the region. However, this is a particular case and it has not been looked at in any detail previously. Hence, further research is needed to assess how the balance between the two cults works. For an exploration of the cult of Radha see Hawley and Wulff (1984).

and on my own ethnography I attempt to explore these ‘special’ connections and to explain how they might have originated, as well as their transformation in the light of the current political and economic changes.

## **Gods are ancestors and ancestors can become gods**

This section builds up a picture of the Ahir/Yadav pantheon and its structural similarities with other pastoral communities in India. In addition it describes the importance of the role of hero-god cults amongst Yadavs. The Yadavs are no longer a nomadic or semi-nomadic community like their ancestors used to be. In the last two centuries they have become a sedentary and agricultural community. However, this does not mean that the religious world of the Yadavs is no longer linked to their pastoral nomadic past. Many of the Yadavs’ places of worship are located in other districts, sometimes in far-off areas in the middle of the ‘jungle’. A number of local Ahir/Yadav caste-specific cults are to be found hundreds of miles distant from Mathura and located in other states. The ethnography of Yadav religious life required a lot of travel. The mapping of their ‘traditional’ cults mirrors in many ways the history of the Ahir migrations that occurred through the centuries.

In reviewing the few available studies of nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists in India, my first observation is that there are striking similarities in the ideologies and religious practices of the different pastoral groups in India.<sup>102</sup> Ancestral grazing activities and migratory habits have presumably ecologically shaped the ways members of pastoral communities relate to the gods.<sup>103</sup> Like other pastoral castes Yadavs traditionally hold that the worship of their deities does not need the services of Brahmans.<sup>104</sup> The complex of shrine, religious specialist and rituals was considered necessary but not indispensable. Most of the

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<sup>102</sup> Srivastava (1997) on Rabaries and Sontheimer (1993) on Dhangars (now called Yadavs).

<sup>103</sup> According to Sontheimer the landscape also made its mark on the religion of the pastoral groups (1993: 104).

<sup>104</sup> For comparative ethnographic data on the religious life of the Raikas see Srivastava (1997: 50).



Yadav lineage deities do not traditionally demand the use of religious specialists and intermediaries for their worship. In fact, the ritual complex was not always available for migratory people like the Ahirs.

To begin with, Ahir/Yadavs' Hindu pantheon is composed of gods and goddesses who are also ancestors: 'All Yadavs are Krishna's children'; 'All members of the Deshwar clan (*got*) are Mekhasur's children'. These are common statements which blur the relation between human beings and gods. Today, Yadavs trace a direct line of descent from the god Krishna, and there is no conceptual problem in defining him as 'an ancestor'. In the past, and to some extent even today, other gods such as Ahir or Rajput heroes were/are perceived as ancestors. Therefore, gods can be perceived as ancestors, and by the same token ancestors can become gods (Srivastava 1997: 53). The analysis of the hero-god cults, so popular amongst the Ahir/Yadavs and amongst pastoral castes sheds light on the relationship between gods and human ancestors. The hero-god cults are often accompanied by epic mythological accounts (*allahs, lok kathas*) and typical Ahir songs (*virahas*) that are acted out by local castes specialised in their performance in the form of songs and dances. My informants considered these epics and songs as histories of their caste/clan/family (see Chapter 5).

Worship of 'deified dead' is common among rural castes of northern India (cf. Blackburn 1985). Members of lower and middle ranking rural castes constitute the majority of their followers. Coccari (1989), in her study on deified gods in the city of Benares, recorded a number of specific castes. Amongst these, she mentioned the Ahirs, the Gaderiya, the Kunbi, the Kumbar, the Mali, the Pasi and the Chamar (ibid.: 228). In theory any person can become a 'deified hero'. However, in northern India the members of particular communities, such as the Ahir/Yadavs, are considered to be more prone to become hero-gods than members of other castes. The Yadavs are said to have 'heroic substance' (ibid.: 260). 'They cherished the view of themselves as brave fighters and leaders among a collection of allied castes with whom they are found in village and urban settings' (ibid.: 260). The Hindi oral epics of Lorik, and of Adhal and Udal, understood by many Yadavs as their oral history, highlight the heroism of their ancestors and provide 'historical proof of Ahir martial glory' (see Chapter 5).

Amongst the Ahirs there is the tendency, therefore, to establish memorials to their untimely dead and to worship them as caste/clan heroes. Many of these shrines remain family, clan or caste deities, or guardians of cattle fertility, safety and health. Others acquired the status of regional pilgrimage sites known for exorcism and wish fulfilment. These 'hero-gods' are locally known as '*Bir Baba*' or '*Vir Babas*'. The most common representation of the *Bir Babas* found in Mathura and nearby districts is a clay/marble/cow-dung mound (*pind, stup, gumbad*) set upon a raised platform. A recurrent pattern in the process of worshipping a hero-god appears to exist. Tradition holds that the hero-gods were human in the past and that they died in extraordinary circumstances. They usually died during a battle or a fight with members of other castes (especially landed castes), or with members of the Muslim community, or with tigers. The object of such disputes is usually the protection of 'cows' and the protection of 'Brahmans' and/or 'Hindus'. The deification of the hero is accompanied by the composition of a song (*viraha*) which tells the story of the hero. Hero-gods are also linked with spirit possession.

My ethnographic data on the hero-gods/*kuldevta* of Mathura are confined to the Yadav caste, and more specifically to the figures of Mekhasur and Pir Baba (known also as Gogaji).<sup>105</sup> In Mathura the *Birs* are usually worshipped on Monday, the day of the week usually devoted to the worship of the family deities. On the same day, *puja* is performed for the family goddess (*kuldevi*). In addition, special *pujas* are offered on Goverdhan Puja and on Holi. These forms of cults among the Yadavs of Mathura are slowly disappearing. The young generation is losing the knowledge of the songs and epics connected to their worship. Even many amongst the eldest devotees did not know the life's stories of the gods and the *viraha* related to their worship.

In the next section I provide the illustrative example of the worship of Mekhasur, a *Bir Baba/kuldevtas* whose main shrine is located in Gangiri, Atrauli

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<sup>105</sup> For reasons of space I only present ethnographic data on the cult of Mekhasur. Lapoint (1978) illustrated the cult of Gogaji in northern India. In Mathura Gogaji is known by the name of Pir Baba or Jahavir. Near Sathgara, a temple that used to be dedicated to Pir Baba is run by local Yadavs. In the 1950s, the temple was transformed into a Dhouji temple (the local name for Krishna's brother). Then, ten years ago, it was converted into a Radha-Krishna temple.

*teshil*, Aligarh district, which is 150 kilometres from Mathura town. In Ahir Para, the Yadav neighbourhood from which the bulk of the ethnographic data presented in this chapter comes, there are two permanent shrines of Mekhasur. Both the *parivars* which worship Mekhasur are originally from Kannauj in Central Doab (Uttar Pradesh) and are related by blood with the Ahir/Yadavs of Gangiri in Aligarh where the main shrine of Mekhasur lies.

## **The cult of Mekhasur: from hero-cowherder god to the epic Krishna**

The cult of Mekhasur and the changes and continuities it has experienced over the last one hundred years provide an exemplary story of the processes of transformation that the Ahir/Yadavs of the area have been facing. Furthermore, such an analysis reveals interesting trends of evolution within the broader Hindu tradition. As Bennett has stated, 'it is only by looking at religious movements in their wide historical and cultural sweep that patterns can be discerned which are of continuing relevance in the present, awareness of which enables the anthropologist to analyse his field data within a wider temporal perspective' (1983: 13). It is to this method that I have resorted in the analysis of the Mekhasur cult. By adding the analysis of oral and written texts to the fieldwork, I attempt to reconstruct parts of forgotten history.<sup>106</sup>

I have divided the history of the Mekhasur shrine and cult into three broad phases. By the end of the nineteenth century, Mekhasur is portrayed in written colonial documents as the 'totemic god' of the Aheriya: a nomadic 'criminal' tribe spread through all the North Western Provinces and Oudh (today Uttar Pradesh). Oral histories collected in Mathura and Gangiri, the village where the main shrine is located, state that by the early 1920s Mekhasur was worshipped as the *kuldevta* of the local Ahir/Yadavs of the *Deshwar got*. Contemporary

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<sup>106</sup> See Khan: 'Whenever events cannot be reconstructed on the basis of inscriptions, learned treaties, travelogues and census reports, ethnographical data collected through the direct observation of shrines and rituals, as well as the recording of legends and songs, followed by their critical examination from an anthropological point of view may have an important contribution to make' (1997: 18).

ethnographic data collected during my fieldwork, illustrate how the cult of Mekhasur is no longer confined to the Deshwar and Javeria Ahirs. In contrast, today it is popular amongst all the Yadavs of the area. Five years ago, on Mekhasur's tomb, a statue of Krishna was installed. The *kuldevta* shrine has gradually been transformed into a Krishna temple served by a Brahman priest.

### **Mekhasur: 'the totemic god of the Aheriya tribe'**

The history of the shrine and of Mekhasur mirrors in many ways the history of the transformation that occurred to the Ahir/Yadavs of the area in the last one hundred years. It shows how the Aheriya, a nomad pastoral caste and also 'criminal tribe', have been gradually absorbed within the Ahir category, and subsequently into the Yadav one. How did the connection between the Aheriya and Ahir/Yadavs come about? Unfortunately there are very few data on this process of absorption. The Aheriyas are described as 'a tribe of hunters, fowlers and thieves found in Central Doab'. 'Devi (goddess) is their special object of worship, but Mekhasur is their tribal godling' (Crooke 1890: 45). According to Crooke, his name means 'ram demon': 'The Aheriya, a vagrant tribe of the North Western Provinces, worship Mekhasur or Meshasura in the form of a ram' (ibid.: 45).<sup>107</sup>

The ethnographic description provided by Crooke presents Mekhasur as a godling worshipped with sweets and occasionally with goats. He states that an Ahir (or Aheriya) takes the offering (1890: 45). Mekhasur was also worshipped at home: 'some make a house shrine dedicated to Mekhasur in a room set apart for the purpose. Only married women are permitted to join in this worship, but unmarried girls and *kardo* (second) wives are excluded. The sacrifices to these

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<sup>107</sup> See also Crooke (1896: 226): 'We perhaps get a glimpse of totems in connection with the goat in some of the early Hindu legends. When Parusha the primeval man, was divided into his male and female parts, he produced all the animals, and the goat was first formed out of his mouth. There is again a mystical connection between Agni, the fire god, Brahmans, and goats as between Indra, the Kshatriya, and sheep, Vaishya and kine, Sudra and the horse. These may possibly have been tribal totems of the races by whom these animals are venerated. The sheep, as we have already seen is a totem of the Keriya...'.

tribal godlings are done by some members of the family and not by a regular priest' (ibid.: 46).

Mekhasur was considered the protector of the Aheriyas, and plausibly linked with robbers and thieves as well as with heroes and warriors. The Aheriyas were hunters with bows and arrows and were associated with the jungle. The Ahirs were also considered a 'criminal' tribe even if not denotified as the Aheriyas.<sup>108</sup> The census of 1871-72 classified the Aheriyas as a subdivision ('subcaste') of the Ahirs. In the census of 1891, the number of people who declared to be Aheriya consistently diminished, while the number of Ahirs increased instead. A large number of Aheriyas declared to be Ahirs. Being considered Ahir meant, for the Aheriyas, not to be subjugated to the Criminal Tribe Act and to the policy of control related to it. Thus, for a member of the Aheriya caste, it was definitively more convenient to be classified by the government authorities as Ahirs.<sup>109</sup>

By the beginning of the twentieth century, a large number of Ahirs, coming from Central Uttar Pradesh (Kannauj), migrated to Braj and nearby areas. I base this on the data collected through genealogies amongst the Yadavs of Mathura and of Gangiri. Moreover, influences of *kannuji* dialect are still noticeable in the *teshil* of Atrauli and can plausibly be interpreted as a legacy of such old migrations from the east of the state. More specifically, the ancestors of the major lineages, which today are still present in Ahir Para, migrated from Kannauj, Mainpuri and Etah. Presumably, the Ahirs, who were already the caretakers of the shrine, gradually monopolised the worship of Mekhasur. By the 1930s it became the local 'caste' temple of the Ahirs and lost any connection with the Aheriya tribe (C.S. Yadav: personal communication).

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<sup>108</sup> The Criminal Tribe Act (1871) attempted to control the so-called 'criminal tribes'. From the middle of the nineteenth century some persistent turbulent social groups in North India were collectively labelled 'criminal'. The police tried to register and limit their movements, a policy which eventually gained legal sanction by 1871. The 1911 Criminal Act allowed local governments to declare an entire community 'criminal', to deprive it of its right under the law and force its members to work on approved sites.

<sup>109</sup> NAI Home Judicial, Proceeding, August 1875, File 60-64. *Proclamation as criminal tribes of the Aherias in the villages of Etah district*. See also Census of India 1871-72; Census of India 1881 and Census of India 1891.

As shown in Chapter 2, historically the Ahirs tended to absorb through marriage alliances the lower autochthonous pastoral castes that they encountered through their movements. The Ahirs had a marked preferential hypergamous marriage pattern. Wife-givers were and are generally considered inferior to wife-takers. It is plausible, therefore, that the Ahir caste members who found themselves at the bottom of their local caste hierarchy were forced to take their brides from the higher strata of the Aheriya. Unfortunately, this is purely speculative and there is no historical evidence to prove it.

### **Mekhasur's cult in Ahir Para. The *kuldevta* of the 'Dudh Parivar' and 'Chaudhri Parivar'**

This section describes the cult of Mekhasur in Ahir Para. Local people indicate two families, the Chaudhry and Dudh Parivars as founders of Ahir Para. They are both originally from Kannauj and have agnatic relations with the Yadavs of Atrauli district where the shrine of Mekhasur lies. It is plausible that members of the same exogamous clusters moved from Kannauj together and while a part settled down in Mathura the rest settled down in the Atrauli district of Aligarh.

Mekhasur as a deity appears to have a marked territorial character as well as a clan character. The mythological tales related to his worship are very similar to the stories and legends related to the worship of hero-gods in Kannauj, the Bhojpur area (eastern Uttar Pradesh) and West Bihar (districts of Bhagalpur and Dharbanga). In the 1930s, colonial ethnographers such as Archer, Risley and Hamilton-Buchanan collected in detail a number of such legends. With the following note Archer commented on the relevance of the worship of hero-gods among the Ahirs of western Bihar: 'it is remarkable that none of the sects (Ahir subcaste) speaks of worshipping 'Krishna' who is really the lord of the Gowala (local name for Ahirs)'.<sup>110</sup> These deities are mainly described as cow protectors.

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<sup>110</sup> I.O.L., Archer Private Papers, MSS Eur F236/21. 'There is always an *asthan* (place of worship) where the incarnation (*avatar*) died. It is called a *pindy* representing a mound of earth on a raised earthen platform generally under the tree. But such *asthans* are copied and made at other villages too where the Gowalas worship the particular incarnation for:

Their cult is confined to matters of animal welfare. They are worshipped at occasional events connected with cows and buffaloes: when the latter are indisposed or the females do not conceive, when the she-cow is about to deliver a calf and before migrating with the animal herds. Archer described the legends and deeds of more than fifteen local hero-gods. Their type of worship is consistent with contemporary ethnographic data on Mekhasur's cult.<sup>111</sup> Given the striking similarities between the cults of hero gods in Kannauj, eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar, it seems justified to speculate that the cult of Mekhasur might have been 'exported' to the Braj area by the nomadic Ahir tribes, coming from the East of the country.

Deities in Ahir Para can be divided into caste-free deities and caste-specific deities.<sup>112</sup> The latter deities are those in which members of a particular caste have particular faith. Mekhasur is a strictly Yadav cult both in Ahir Para and in Gangiri. In Ahir Para there are two little shrines dedicated to Mekhasur, one in the main Deshwar family (belonging to the 'Dudh Parivar') and one in one of the Jaweria clan households (belonging to the 'Chaudhri Parivar'). On various occasions in conversations with old men and women of the Chaudhri Parivar and Dudh Parivar, I was told that Mekhasur was supposed to help them because he was their ancestor and therefore he cared for the welfare of his descendants.<sup>113</sup>

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i. increasing the number of cattle; ii. caring the disease (if any) of other cattle; iii. for finding out any lost cattle, iv. on fulfilment of any desire'.

<sup>111</sup> This is the general form of worship described by Archer in his manuscripts:

'Before starting the worship of the incarnation, Goddess, namely Bhagvati, is as a rule first worshipped. Worship is done by a particular Gowala (Ahir) who is more religiously inclined and is called Bhagat. He keeps himself on fast on the day of worship which is generally a Sunday and would wash the *asthan* with cow-dung to purify it and then offer worship to the incarnation with unboiled *arua rice* (i.e. *achnat*), *ganja*, *bhang*, sweetmeats, unboiled milk, incense flowers... In case of fulfilment of desire, he or she goats are offered to the incarnation (gosai) and goddess respectively. The *bhagat* would then start singing the song of the particular incarnation concerned. The songs are very lengthy and take days and days together and sometimes one whole week or more to finish. Songs are generally sung in the evening and continue the whole night and are generally divided into parts describing different stages of life of the incarnation...' (ibid.).

<sup>112</sup> For the elaboration of the distinction between caste-free deities and caste-specific deities see Srivastava (1997: 54).

<sup>113</sup> Ex-human deities are often thought to be particularly understanding about the needs of ordinary people, especially members of their former family/community (Fuller 1992: 50).

The stories about Mekhasur collected in Ahir Para were quite diverse. I collected several different versions of the Mekhasur legend.

Pratap Singh is an old man and a cowherder. He belongs to the Deshwar *got*. In the courtyard of his house lies a *gumbad*, an orange-coloured hill, which is said to represent Mekhasur. Mr Pratap Singh was not able or not willing to provide any information about what he calls: 'his ancestor'. He only said that he was a brave Ahir and that his main shrine is to be found near Gangiri, in Aligarh district. He adds that he went twice to visit the shrine. Finally, he said that if Mekhasur considered it opportune, he would have appeared in my dreams and personally told me his story. Alternatively, he suggested I go to Gangiri and talk with the *jagas* (local term for genealogists) of the temple. The caretaker of Mekhasur's shrine acts as genealogist to a number of Yadav lineages. Until twenty years ago, these *jagas* used to visit Ahir Para regularly and spent a couple of days registering the new-born. Furthermore, they used to sing songs related to the life of Mekhasur and collected offerings for his shrine.<sup>114</sup>

In the family of Pratap Singh, as in that of Hari Singh, *puja* to Mekhasur is performed on Monday, by men or by married women. On the day after Diwali, the festival of the cattle, and on Holi, a special *puja* is performed by the headman of the family. Until twenty years ago devotees used to sacrifice a he-goat. Nowadays Mekhasur has turned into a vegetarian deity and he is said not to like blood any more. I tried to find out if worshippers of Mekhasur think the deity still insists on blood *bali*, and the answers were always negative. Coconut and *khir* (rice cooked in milk) and *capatti* are offered instead. Members of the Deshwar *got* are supposed to have their shaving ceremonies (called *mundan* and done for boys) performed at the Mekhasur shrine.<sup>115</sup> Other worshippers of Mekhasur in Ahir Para were willing to tell me the 'stories' of Mekhasur, which contained different versions of the hero-god legend. Mekhasur is said to be an Ahir and a cattle-rescuer who died at the hands of his enemies. According to various

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<sup>114</sup> The connection between Mekhasur care-takers and their role as genealogists and epic singers is similar to that found among the Charans in Gujarat and Rajasthan. The latter are the bards of the Rajputs and their origin is pastoralist, see Tambs-Lyche (1997).

<sup>115</sup> Amongst the Rajputs, the *mundan* ceremony is usually done at the *kuldevi* shrine.



versions, 'the enemies' were either represented by Thakurs (a local landed caste) or by Muslims.

Arjun Singh Yadav, the head of one of the Javeria households of Ahir Para, has a representation of Mekhasur in his courtyard. Arjun Singh is a policeman. His grandfather is said to have taken the cult of Mekhasur from Kannauj, their district of origin, and to have installed its shrine in the garden.

'Mekhasur was a young boy. He had a quarrel with his mother and left his family for a period of *tapasya* (ascetic life) in the jungle. After this period, he came back and began to look after the cows of his family. One day there was a big fight between the Ahir residents of his village and the residents of the nearby Thakur village. Since god gifted him with holy powers (*juta thona*), while he was in the forest he was able to kill many enemies during the battle that occurred between the two villages. He finally got killed. In a dream his mother was informed about the holy powers of her son and she spread the news throughout the region. Accordingly, a *samadhi* (memorial grave) was built and the Mekhasur cult began'.

According to Hari Singh, a former milkman and a devoted *bhakta*, the story of the hero-god goes as follows:

'There were two villages: one inhabited by Yadavs and one by Thakurs. While grazing his cows Mekhasur entered the Thakur territory. This act cost him his head (he was decapitated). In the evening the cows went back to their village followed by the rolling head of Mekhasur. The head rolled to the master of the village telling him what happened and ensuring that he kept feeding his cows'.

Thakurs are represented as bad characters in the folk tales current in the Yadav region of Mathura and Aligarh. The genesis of their mutual recrimination is reported in various legends. The following is one of the various versions available:

'There was a Raja (king) who had two sons from two queens. Influenced by the charming face of one queen, he nominated her issue as the heir-apparent, while the other son, although elder, was deprived of the throne and ancillary privileges. The disinherited son was born of a Yadav and the heir-apparent of a Chauhan mother. Then follows the lengthy story as to how the Yadava prince was later on harassed by his Chauhan brother, who became king, and finally how the Yadava prince took his revenge'.

The theme of the contrast between landed castes and pastoral ones is a common one. Comparative ethnographic material exists about pastoral castes in South

India where their disputes with landed castes are usually described as related to the protection of the cows and of the territory of pasture (Hiltebeitel 1989). Most other versions of Mekhasur's tale recorded in Ahir Para identify the enemies of the Ahir cowherder Mekhasur with the Muslim community. According to Ram Singh (90 years, famous wrestler and leader of the local Yadav community), 'the Muslims' killed Mekhasur.

'Mekhasur was a cowherder. He was a single child and had hundreds of cows to take care of. One day, he went to the jungle and 'Muslims' attacked him. His head was decapitated. At home, the cows of Mekhasur were left starving. The head of Mekhasur is said to have rolled towards the headman of the village, and informed him to look after the abandoned cows'.

A different version, but still centred on a dispute with members of the Muslim community, was provided by Baba Gorakan Das Ji. He is a Yadav ascetic, who belongs to the Ramanandi *sampraday* and he is originally from Etawah town. At present, he is one of the caretakers of Mahadev Ghat complex.

'Mekhasur was an Ahir orphan boy who lived in the village of Gangiri in Atrauli district near Aligarh. His village happened to be attacked by the Muslims while he was grazing his cattle. In his village lived a Brahman widow and her daughter. During the attack, the Muslims kidnapped the latter. When he came back from the fields Mekhasur saw what happened to his village, completely sacked by the Muslims intruders. He promptly decided to go to rescue the daughter of the Brahman woman. He (alone) went to the nearby Muslim village, killed almost everybody and rescued the young Brahman girl. After a while a number of the Muslims that survived came back to the village and killed Mekhasur. The Brahman widow buried him and divulged the story of his bravery throughout Braj. In Gangiri there is still a *samadhi* (memorial grave). He is considered the *kuldevta* by the members of the Dudh Parivar'.

Many versions of Mekhasur's legend focus on 'Muslims' as the enemies of Mekhasur and of his cows. This portrayal predictably raises questions about the nature of the relation between Yadavs and Muslims. In Chapter 1 I described how the cow is a strong symbol which locally demarcates the Ahir/Yadavs from the Kasai/Qureshi. The narratives of Mekhasur which portray Ahir/Yadav hero-gods defending their kin and their herds against the Muslims, are fused with the anti-Muslim rhetoric popularly diffused by the Sangh Parivar (see Chapter 6).

## Mekhasur's shrine in Gangiri

When I went to Gangiri, I was provided with another version of the story.

'Mekhasur was from the village of Achalpur. He was adopted by a Brahman woman, now known and worshipped as Gangi Mata. One of the daughters of the Brahman woman happened to be kidnapped by a Muslim of the Bhatti caste. Mekhasur went back to the Muslim village and rescued the girl. He was injured and left alone in the forest. To get rid of him the Muslims used a magic spell (*jadu thona*). While he was lying injured a voice reached the ears of the Brahman woman, telling her what happened to Mekhasur. She immediately went to rescue him, but she found him dead. She buried him at the spot where today the temple lies. Actually it seems that the shrine lies where some drops of the blood of Mekhasur dropped'.

Mekhasur's shrine in Gangiri has only one functionary, the caretaker of the temple, Mr Gelon Singh Yadav, who also acts as the genealogist for a number of Yadav *gots*. Traditionally Mekhasur's shrine preserved the genealogies of the members of the Jaweria and Deshwar *gots*. In recent years, however, the shrine has become popular amongst the Yadav community of Uttar Pradesh. People from far off places are said to come to pay homage to Mekhasur, who today is viewed as a Krishna *avatar*. During their visits their genealogies are collected irrespective of their *gots* and *vanshs* of origin.<sup>116</sup> The role of Mekhasur as the protector of a specific *got* has been replaced by the role of Mekhasur/Krishna as protectors of all the Yadavs.

Mr Gelon Singh Yadav's priestly role is far from being specialised. Any Yadav man can perform Mekhasur *puja*. The main priestly role is to clean the shrine every day and to offer *puja* every morning and evening. Furthermore, there are *bhagats*, namely the mediums. Anybody can become a *bhagat*. The only condition is to have faith in the god and to demonstrate devotion. The spirit enters the *bhagat's* body and speaks through his mouth. I was quite surprised when I witnessed a possession session at Gangiri's shrine. In Mathura, worshippers of Mekhasur rarely mention the 'possession issue' and if they mentioned it they

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<sup>116</sup> Unfortunately (for various unlucky reasons), I was never able to examine these genealogies in detail. This is one of the research areas that I wish to pursue in the next fieldwork.

referred to it as a superstitious custom which belonged to an uncivilised past. Spirit possession is quite a sensitive issue. Yadav informants usually dismiss it as a low caste practice.<sup>117</sup> Needless to say, 'sacrifice' is another sensitive area. Today, offers to Mekhasur are only of a vegetarian kind. People from Gangiri told me that their great-grandfathers stopped sacrificing goats. Mekhasur, I have been told, does not like blood and does not need it. On *puṛnima* (full moon), devotees 'symbolically' offer a goat or a little calf and then release them into the jungle. By the same token, today the Yadavs deny any link with the Aheriya tribe. They consider its members as belonging to a '*chote jati*', namely untouchables. 'The Aheriyas hunt and do sacrifice (*bali*); we do not smoke, drink or eat with them. Members of the Aheriya caste are not allowed to enter into the shrine' (B. Yadav, 50 years old, landlord).

As mentioned before, five years ago a statue of Krishna was installed in the Mekhasur shrine. A wealthy Yadav politician and active member of the local Yadav Mahasabha branch donated the *murti*. The temple is covered with inscriptions which hail Krishna and Radha (*Jai Sri Krishna, Jai Radha*). A Brahman priest regularly comes to perform *puja* to Krishna. At the time of Krishna's birthday, *Janmastami*, and on other major Hindu festivals, such as *Goverdhan Puja*, the festival of the cows, a *mela* is held.

Nowadays Mekhasur is described as a glorified cowherder who is supposed to be a later incarnation (*avatar*) of Krishna. Mekhasur as an Ahir hero, whose life moved between his herd and the fights with Thakurs/Muslims, is merging with the cult and the mythology of Krishna. Several informants told me that the possession sessions are becoming rarer. Their explanations were that 'Krishna' does not possess his devotees. Moreover, Krishna is conceived to have universal powers, contrary to Mekhasur whose powers are narrow and localised. The physical juxtaposition of the two shrines - of Mekhasur and Krishna - is emblematic of the tension between greater deities and local deities, as well as of

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<sup>117</sup> On this point, my data are in line with the findings of Harlan (1992). Also in the case of the Rajput women among whom she did her fieldwork, possession was not considered dignified.

the reform efforts of the Yadav community and their creation of a suitable 'past' through their ancestor 'Krishna'.

## Goverdhan Baba versus the epic Krishna

In Braj, Krishna is traditionally viewed as a protector of Gopas and Gopis of whom he is in some way the recognised guardian (Vaudeville 1996: 20). In conversation elder informants stress how Krishna was born to destroy the demons of Gokul, a village near Mathura.

Goverdhan Baba (Krishna-the-cowherder) is said to have lifted the mountain 'Goverdhan' to protect the Yadavs (Gopas and Gopis) and their cattle from the god of rain Indra and the snake (*naga*) Kaliya.<sup>118</sup>

In this version Krishna is often represented as *Goverdhan Raja*: the King of Goverdhan.

Nanda, the headman of Gokul, was persuaded by 'Goverdhan Baba' not to sacrifice any animal to Indra. His main argument was that the pastoral people living in the *jungle* and being neither farmers nor merchants, were not obliged to pay any tribute to the god of the Rain. Instead he invited the pastoral people to sacrifice an animal to the Goverdhan mountain and to do *parikrama* around the cattle decorated with garlands of flowers. Nanda followed the advice of Goverdhan Baba. On the other hand, Indra was furious and provoked a wild storm over Braj. It is then that 'Krishna' uprooted mount Goverdhan and used it as an umbrella to protect the Yadavs and their cattle. When Indra left, the Yadavs carried on worshipping Mount Goverdhan and Krishna together (Radha Yadav, 40 years old, housewife).<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Hari Singh Yadav, an old and retired milk-seller, often invited me to go to the Mathura Museum where two iconographic representations of Krishna-Gopala, which both depict the Goverdhan episode, are kept.

<sup>119</sup> Every year, the day after *Diwali*, pastoral castes celebrate *Annakut*, or as it is often called *Goverdhan Puja*. On this day the role of the Brahman *pujari* is downplayed. Cowherders are invited into the temples of Braj to preside over the rituals. These ceremonies are clearly intended to ensure the fertility and wellbeing of the cattle, see Toomey (1994).

In Ahir Para, old people who worship Krishna-Gopala as their *kuldevta* refer to him as Goverdhan Baba. In Braj, Goverdhan is worshipped as Krishna's *svarup* 'his own true form in nature' (Toomey 1994: 21). In contrast, Ahir/Yadavs who traditionally used to worship other *kuldevtas*, such as Pir Baba or Mekhasur, and now consider Krishna as their *kuldevtas*, refer to the latter as 'Krishna Vasudeva': Krishna of the epic, the Yadava prince of Dwarka and ally of the Pandavas. References to the Goverdhan episode and to Krishna-Gopal are, therefore, surprisingly seldom mentioned by younger people. In their descriptions the figure of Krishna relates more to the 'epic Krishna' and to episodes of the Mahabharata. On one of the very first days of my fieldwork, while I was still introducing myself to the community, I was struck by the statement of Hari Singh Yadav who told me that since the Mahabharata TV serial had been broadcast nobody could ever deny Yadavs' princely Krishna ancestry. Different persons at different stages of my fieldwork repeated this statement (see Chapter 5).

Here, the tutelary function of the epic 'Krishna' as a *kuldevta* is justified and proved by mythological episodes from the Mahabharata. The entry of Krishna in the Mahabharata, who as a god helps the Yadav prince Arjuna to perform his martial duty was the most common example referred to. The next chapter illustrates how the passage from Krishna-the-cowherder to Krishna the 'prince' and 'politician' has been promoted by the ideology of the AIYM and by Yadav politicians. It shows how Yadav religious reformist attitudes are coupled with the construction of a dignified 'Yadav heritage'.

## Conclusion

In the previous chapter, I showed how the idea of a unique Krishnavanshi kinship category which fuses traditional subdivisions (Yaduvanshi, Nandavanshi and Goallavanshi) into a single endogamous unit is spreading rapidly. Inter-marriage between different 'endogamous' units is, day-by-day, more popular. This chapter showed how the process of amalgamation has been gradually accompanied by a parallel homogenisation of the Ahir/Yadav Hindu pantheon: Krishna has gradually become the main god as well as the main ancestor. Local clan deities

are disappearing and losing their functions and powers.<sup>120</sup> By taking a set of deities as representative of a certain ideology and by following their transmutations or substitution with other deities (and ideologies), I attempted to shed further light on the empirical construction of the Yadav community and its complex dimensions.<sup>121</sup> The 'traditional' cult of *kul* deities worshipped by different Ahir subdivisions in a way mirrors the 'discrete' nature and peculiarities of the different *got/vanshs* which make up the total Yadav community.

As others have widely acknowledged there is a connection between the structure of the Hindu pantheon and the structures of Indian society (Bougle 1991; Dumont 1970; Fuller 1992). Accordingly, Hinduism is said to correspond to a particular social structure, which is caste. The ethnographic exploration of kinship and religion in Ahir Para showed how modern transformations are still partly in line with such explanatory schemas. The Yadav community is still inseparable from Hinduism as the Ahir *jatis* were in the past. The demise of the purity-pollution idiom does not equal the demise of the religious aspects of caste. If on the one hand ritual hierarchy has been undermined as a principle of social stratification, on the other 'ritual descent' has dynamically facilitated Yadav adaptation to the modern political world. The substantive nature of the Ahir/Yadav community which is linked to Krishna as 'substantial' deity, has helped Ahir/Yadavs from different parts of the country to interact with one another horizontally. Thus, such interactions do not belong to the realm of 'non-ritual space' (Seth 1999: 96) but in contrast they are permeated by a religious ethos.

Yadav 'communalised' caste consciousness is hence still encompassed by Hinduism and this is not only expressed by the constant emphasis on their 'divine' heritage but also by their emphasis on religious reform. The ideology and organisation of the 'traditional' caste system might have been partly eroded but this does not mean that the socio-religious content has disappeared from the 'new' substantialised Yadav community. Ahir/Yadav subdivisions might no longer

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<sup>120</sup> The 'substantial' Sanskrit deity 'Krishna' legitimises, in principle, the equality between the different subdivisions within the Yadav community. For the elaboration of the concept of 'substantial' divinity amongst the Great Deities see Fuller (1992: 96).

<sup>121</sup> For similar analysis see Ghurye (1962) and Tambs-Lyche (1997: 86).

relate to each other as units of a social hierarchy but they still relate in terms of a socio-religious idiom. I suggest therefore that to say that that 'the caste system, long conceived as a ritual system, has imploded' (Seth 1999: 106) is an oversimplification. As the ethnography of Yadav 'heritage' and religious practices show, ritual hierarchy is not the only religious aspect of caste and modern communities still search for religious reference and legitimation in Hinduism.

Ahir/Yadav ethnography is therefore only partly inconsistent with Dumont's substantialisation thesis. According to Dumont (1970), the substantialisation of caste was still limited to the political-economic domain of caste and still encompassed by the religious ideology of hierarchy. Dumont thereby argues that the caste system is not yet fundamentally changed.<sup>122</sup> At the ideological level, the Yadav caste/community has accepted equality both in the religious-kinship domain and in the economic-political sphere. This process is made possible by a form of Hinduism which encompasses the functioning of a 'competitive' caste system. The Yadav process of community formation is encompassed by the religious ideology of descent. It is a *substantialised* form of Hinduism which today informs the quasi-ethnic Yadav community. Thus, religious ideology still encompasses the Yadav community (conceived as a large scale descent group) through sacred kinship. However, if contemporary Yadavs view themselves as a homogenous category shaped by primordial sacred origins, their relation with low castes is still regulated by the language of purity-pollution, both in the private and public domains. The pollution barrier which divides castes which claim clean origin from untouchable castes is stronger than ever. This picture displays two contradictory and at the same time complementary processes. On the one hand we are seeing a 'transition from structure to substance' (Dumont 1970: 226) in the sphere of caste. On the other hand the religious ideology of hierarchy still informs relations between clean and unclean castes.

The next chapter shows how the homogenisation of Ahir Para Yadavs' Hindu pantheon mirrors what is happening to the multi-layered structure of the

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<sup>122</sup> For a summary of similar critiques of Dumont's syncretic structural model see Fuller (1996: 1-31).



clans' mythological accounts. The unifying myth of Krishna not only tells about the origins of the entire Yadav community, but it also nullifies the hierarchy and 'cultural' differences existing within the community. The clan narratives that were used as metaphors to express status, and to differentiate each Ahir unit from the others, are changing their meanings and functions. The encompassing Krishna tale legitimates the equality of all members and expresses it through the religious language of descent. Claiming 'clean' descent reinforces the boundaries between Yadavs and castes that cannot claim a 'clean' (i.e. non-untouchable) past.

## Chapter 5

# 'Past' and rhetoric: the political recruitment of Krishna

### Introduction

The previous chapter illustrated how in recent times Ahir Para Yadavs have begun to conceive Krishna-the-warrior as their lineage deity. The tutelary function of the god is legitimised by the Mahabharata's mythological episodes. The image of Krishna as a god who helps the Yadava prince Arjuna to perform his martial duty is the most common episode cited by informants. Conceiving the epic Krishna as a *kuldevta* is a new trend. Ahir Para Yadavs used to think of their lineage protectors as minor pastoral hero-deities, like Mekhasur and Krishna-the-cowherder in Goverdhan Baba's representation. I explored how this shift is linked to a gradual but marked adoption of Sanskritised religious practices. This chapter looks at this complex phenomenon from a different angle and leads the discussion into the realm of 'existing politics'.

More precisely it looks at how Ahir Para Yadavs have come to think of themselves as *sons of Krishna-the-warrior* and of the Mahabharata as an *historical* text which literally describes the 'History' of their community.<sup>123</sup> This process is not disjointed from changes that have occurred in the lineage deities' cults. On the one hand there has been a gradual passage from the cult of various lineage gods to the cult of a single community-god, and on the other multiple tales of origin have merged into a composite story of the Yadavs which is framed by a reinterpretation of the Sanskritic Mahabharata.

In Chapter 2 I described how during colonial times Yadav 'historians' began to compose Yadav historiographies which cumulatively amassed colonial ethnographies, orientalist literature and Hindu mythical texts like the

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<sup>123</sup> Throughout the chapter I use the term History capitalised when I talk about 'western' forms of doing and understanding history. For a critical study of the category 'History' see Nandy (1995); Prakash (1995) and Chakrabarty (1992).

Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita. Central to these narratives were descriptions of the life and achievements of Krishna. Krishna's 'biography' was generally divided into three phases: his childhood, youth and adulthood. The following is an example:

'The life of Sri Krishna has been unparalleled in history, full of love, mystic interest, friendliness with all residents in Gokul, Mathura, Hastinapur and Dwarka, pastoral plays in childhood, psychic powers and miracles in boyhood, military tactics and philosophical knowledge in youth...In general, his life may be found to have three characteristics:

-In *infancy* he showed miraculous psychic powers.

-In *boyhood* he played with pure love amidst Gopas and Gopis, and having killed all the demons and beasts by physical power protected Yajnas of Rishis from all their dangers and freed the cattle from all dangers.

-In *adult* life he used all his yoga skill and military wits to carry the Bharat war to the success of the Pandavas and preached the Bhagavad Gita to bring peace over India especially by the culture of philosophical and yogi temperament of all people which would even benefit now the whole world' (Khedkar 1959: 42).

During colonial and early post-independence times, the reconstruction of a Yadav noble genealogical pedigree was articulated mainly by reshaping Krishna's adult life phase, as narrated in the Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita. The mischievous Krishna of Braj described in the Puranas was dismissed or reinterpreted. Yadav caste associations used Krishna-the-warrior both to claim superior ritual status in the caste system as well as to develop a powerful ethnic discourse (see Chapter 2). In the last ten years, Krishna-the-warrior has been employed to prove the cultural 'speciality' of the Yadav community, the unique genius and martial valour of the Yadav *vansh* and the 'innate' predisposition of its members to govern in a democratic setting. The Mahabharata-Krishna figure together with themes and characters of Ahir regional martial oral epics and Rajput culture have been reworked into a successful 'Yadav heritage' which underpins both the Yadavs' sense of community and their political interests.

There is a large literature which discusses the powerful role of myth and history in shaping social identities and political interests. However, remarkably little attention has been paid to the study of the politics of 'the past' in the context of the process of ethnicisation of caste. Although, Susan Bayly convincingly

shows how caste has much in common ‘with other complex “invented traditions”, most notably those of nationhood and ethno-religious community’ (1999: 366), there are few anthropological explorations which follow such lines of analysis (see for example Lynch 1969).

Like most ethnic groups, Yadavs justify claims of shared identity by evoking real or constructed historical evidence, and by so doing they claim a sense of continuity with the past (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2000). Yadav historians have created a story which recounts a sense of distinctiveness. The creation of fictive blood relations with the ancestor-god Krishna and with the valorous and democratic Yadavas links contemporary Yadavs to the past and binds them to the present. It is in this way that ‘the past’ is said to assume an importance in ethnic identity formation (Eriksen 1993).

The powerful ideological force of ‘the past’ (History, myths, epics...) has been widely explored (Kapferer 1988; Spencer 1990) particularly in the context of Hindu nationalism (G. Pandey 1990; van der Veer 1994). The past, its conserved artefacts, remembered personalities and symbols have been increasingly turned into ‘heritages’ which are used to underpin social, cultural and political groups (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). Despite the diffusion of this phenomenon, the ways communities’ or nations’ historical narratives are reworked differ according to the political culture in which they are developed and the audience to which they are directed.<sup>124</sup> Different societies view themselves in history in different ways and accordingly they use history differently to reproduce the social identities that underpin their political interests. Equally, the *debatability* and *plausibility* of the past’s claims are restricted by socio-cultural codes (Appadurai 1981).

This chapter explores the content of ‘Yadav heritage’ and its force in creating a Yadav sense of commonality and in politically mobilising the Yadav electorate. More specifically, it describes how and why the representation of Krishna as ‘the first democratic leader’, and the portrayal of contemporary

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<sup>124</sup> For anthropological exploration of ‘the past’ in different cultural settings see Errington (1979); Peel (1984); Morphy and Morthy (1984); Carsten (1995); and Gay y Blasco (2001), and for India see Skaria (1999).

Yadavs as ‘naturally apt to govern in a democratic system’ constitutes a powerful and effective political rhetoric. Hence it explores how these claims are plausible in the eyes of my informants.

I suggest that in order to understand the powerful role of ‘the past’ in shaping Ahir Para Yadavs’ sense of community and political interests, it is essential to take into account how *folk theories of sources of knowledge* inform the ways local Yadavs link the present to the past (Bloch 1996: 217). In Chapter 4 I showed how the ‘epic’ and ‘historic’ Krishna is more than a divine hero for the Yadavs of Mathura. He is their ancestor. Yadav rhetoric presents relatedness as rooted in descent, i.e. in some kind of ‘stuff’ that people inherit from previous generations and which makes this generation the same as the previous one and the same as the next. Each individual is a replacement of his forbears or the vessels in which the eternal element is given temporary incarnation (cf. Fortes 1953).

This kinship descent model has an elective affinity with a particular way of conceiving the past and of being in history (see Bloch 1996). According to the Yadav descent paradigm, people are as they are because they are born so. The rhetoric of the Yadav community stresses over and over again how changes in external circumstances can affect, but not completely alter, ‘the Yadav essence’. Thus, regardless of the fact that they have had different historical experiences and therefore different ritual, social and economic statuses, different Yadav subdivisions are said to have maintained their Yadav quintessence through the centuries. Headings like ‘Yadavas through the ages’ often introduce Yadavs’ historiographies. In these ‘histories’ blood and transmitted substance figure prominently if not exclusively in the determination of individual group membership. Yadav intellectuals emphasise descent to an extreme degree. As descendants of Krishna, they portray the members of their community as privileged vessels of a moral and ‘democratic’ knowledge by the very fact of their ancestry.

In Ahir Para, the idea that being Yadav depends on birth and that physical traits together with skills are passed in the blood is ‘in the air’. Informants explain their predisposition to succeed in the political game as ‘innate’. They say that

‘they learn it in the womb’ (*pet se sikhte hai*) and that they were born to be politicians.<sup>125</sup> They also invoked the ‘womb’ metaphor when they answered my queries about apprenticeship, especially with regard to issues relating to the cow-herding profession (e.g. ethno-veterinary practices and a particular sign-language used by brokers at cattle fairs). How do people learn these practices? No learning process or apprenticeship training would be mentioned. People looked at me as if I was a fool and said that they were born already knowing how to deal with their herd: ‘we learn it in the womb’.

Ahir Para Yadavs explained their ‘martial’ qualities and their successful employment in the army and the police in the same fashion. They often proudly reminded me that even the British recognised them as a ‘martial race’. Fighting abilities are considered to be hereditary ‘skills’. Even today, local Yadavs are still actively campaigning for the creation of an Ahir/Yadav regiment. One of the main arguments in its support relies on Yadavs’ claim to be Kshatriyas, i.e. to belong to the *varna* of warriors and kings with a military tradition since time immemorial, and hence, to be ‘naturally’ predisposed to fight.<sup>126</sup> The Yadav-Kshatriyas are not only considered to have a predisposition to fight but also to govern. Hence, informants described to me their ‘political’ ability as a caste-bound activity and/or related to primordial caste features. Accordingly, the skill of ‘doing politics’ was passed on ‘in the blood’ from the glorious Yadava ancestors and the god Krishna to the present Yadavs. Such an understanding of knowledge transmission needs to be conceptualised within the ideological framework of the caste system, in which the members of each caste are usually believed to have special aptitude for their caste occupation and this propensity is thought to be transmitted ‘in the blood’ (Parry 1979: 85). Thus, skills or at least a predisposition to acquire certain skills is believed to be passed on ‘in the blood’ to the next generation.

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<sup>125</sup> The word *pet* here is understood as womb. In northern Indian languages there are numerous expressions that represent the womb/belly as the container of knowledge and secrets. Other ethnographies have illustrated how the human embryo is said to be ‘cooked’ – in the woman’s stomach by her ‘digestive fire’ (*jatharagni*)’ (Parry 1989: 497).

<sup>126</sup> This type of rhetoric is widely represented in the contemporary Yadav caste literature. See for example AIYM Mahasabha Souvenir 1924-1999, (1999: 39-59).

In the following section I show how a political rhetoric developed by the AIYM mobilises this implicit folk theory of knowledge transmission by also portraying 'democracy' as a 'primordial' political process, which was given to the mythical Yadavas by their ancestor Krishna. The political system of the ancient Yadavs is portrayed as 'democratic' and 'republican'. In this sense contemporary Yadavs are also seen as the heirs of such 'democratic' traditions and political skills.

Accordingly, the composition of a successful 'Yadav heritage' is based on the active reconfiguration of Ahir indigenous folk modes of categorisation based on patrilineal descent, common stock and a common ethno-historical imagination centred in Mathura and the Braj-Ahirwal cultural area. The logic of descent (in terms of locality, sacred kinship and knowledge transmission) is undoubtedly the most prominent element in the construction of the Yadavs' complex and composite heritage.

'Yadav historians' are not interested in 'proving' the historicity of the kin relation between the Yadavs and Krishna. According to them this relation is self-evidently supported by the major Hindu religious texts, such as the Puranas, Mahabharata and other regional oral epics. The Yadav community is said to be beyond time and history and Yadavs do not need 'historical facts' to believe this. Thus, Yadav intellectuals devote their efforts to construct through their narratives a superior Yadav 'essence' rather than a Yadav chronological history. This goal is achieved by selecting and reworking specific qualities and skills of Krishna. Particular value is given to masculinity, bravery, political skills, morality, abilities in statecraft, all of which are qualities that contemporary Yadavs are said to have inherited from their ancestor Krishna-the-warrior. It is at this stage that 'historical facts' and 'History' enter Yadav self-histories. 'History' is used to prove the truth and authenticity of particular *qualities* of Krishna, and hence of contemporary Yadavs. It is used to dismiss the portrayal of Krishna-the-cowherder and lover and to consolidate the image of Krishna-the-warrior and with it that of the contemporary Yadavs.

The 'Yadav heritage' is thus centred on the reconfiguration of Krishna's achievements and qualities, which are believed to be passed in the blood from one generation to another. It is in this way that Yadavs are linked to their glorious

past.<sup>127</sup> Yadav historians selectively appropriate elements from the language of History and archaeology. The result is a past which, though it clings to traditional themes and maintains its mythical and religious character, is legitimised and I would say modernised by the language of history and science. On the whole, ‘the Yadav heritage’ can be described as a hybrid mix between ‘History’ and ‘mythography’. The idea that history should be scientific and objective has permeated local understandings of ‘the past’, but this does not mean that local folk theories of ‘being in the past’ have lost their legitimation. In contrast, they have been reinforced and modernised by a ‘history’ which is in principle antithetical to them.

The argument presented in this chapter is discussed in three parts. To begin with I analyse how the tensions and contradictions between Krishna-the-cowherder and Krishna-the-warrior, and between Ahir pastoral ‘past(s)’ and the Yadav Kshatriya ‘past’, are partly resolved in regional martial oral epics. Martial epics which rethink the Sanskritic Mahabharata (Hiltebeitel 1998, 1999) offer an invaluable set of socio-cultural resources for the development, diffusion and local assimilation of Yadav ‘histories’ and political rhetoric. Equally, I describe how the Yadav heroic ‘essence’ is narrated through the elaboration and making of contemporary Yadav heroes. In the second part I explore how Yadav historians recuperate Krishna’s masculinity by using ‘historical facts’ and by assimilating Mathura’s nationalist Hindu narratives in Yadav self-histories. Similarly, I explore how Yadavs in Ahir Para use ‘archaeological’ evidence to enrich the multilayered story of their ancestor and hence their past. The last part explores how the political rhetoric of the AIYM is disseminated in Ahir Para and how this intertwines with local political and religious culture.

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<sup>127</sup> ‘The book as its title indicates (*The Divine Heritage of the Yadavs*) was intended to expound the greatness of the Yadav race and particularly the philosophy, deeds and achievements of Lord Sri Krishna which constitute the most valuable part of their heritage - a heritage which the rest of the nation is proud to share with them’ (Khedkar 1959: VI).



## The making of a Yadav past

### Regional martial epics, the tradition of martial folk cults and the Mahabharata: from Ahir to Yadav

Throughout my fieldwork whenever I met a member of the Yadav community, whether he/she was a social activist, politician, housewife or milk-seller, in the first two minutes of our conversation he/she would invariably come up with one of the following statements: '*Krishna was a Yadav*'; '*Our caste is the caste of Krishna*'; '*We descend from Krishna-Vasudev*'. In a similar fashion, Yadav social and political activists often use the term 'Krishna' as synonymous with 'Yadav'. Most of the community halls (*Bhavans*) and hostels built with the Yadavs' financial contributions are named *Krishna Bhavan*, *Krishna Daramshala*, *Krishna Hostel* (and not *Yadav Bhavan*, *Yadav Daramshala* or *Yadav Hostel*). Charitable Trusts and caste publications similarly employ the name of the Yadav ancestor, for instance: *Krishna Trust*, *Krishnayana*, *Krishna Sakha* and *Sri Krishna Bureau*. The importance of the 'Krishna-Yadav' link is reflected not only in the conversations of my Yadav informants and in the activities organised by their intelligentsia, but also in the conversations and thoughts of people belonging to other communities. One of the jokes which circulated in Mathura during the 1999 Lok Sabha election campaign illustrated this point well:

'A man is trying to persuade Krishnaji to contest the elections by telling him that he is the most fit person to contest ...after all you are a Yadav. Krishnaji answered: 'I am a god and I do not belong to any particular jati'. The man replied: 'Sir, even god would not be able to succeed in the present political situation. At least try to maintain your caste!'

The relation between Yadavs and Krishna-the warrior-politician is, therefore, well established. But what kind of tales has the Krishna story substituted; and why did it do so successfully? I suggest that the answer to these questions should be sought in the link between local martial oral epics and the Mahabharata. Long afternoons spent at the Mahadev Ghat taught me that for the oldest generations, and therefore presumably for the previous ones as well, Krishna's tale was secondary in importance to the tales which focused on the lives of local Ahir-

Rajput hero-gods and kings. However, they also taught me that the Ahir/Yadavs' local heroic tales were implicitly linked to Krishna-the-warrior and to the story of the Mahabharata and hence to 'the past' diffused by Yadav caste associations and politicians. I suggest that regional martial oral epics constituted a pathway between local Ahir/Yadav subcaste/lineage 'pasts' and the composite 'Yadav heritage'. In Mathura, Yadav hybrid mythical-historical tales hang on available ideals and themes. These available cultural resources make the takes of Yadav 'historians' plausible in the eyes of Ahir Para Yadavs as well as non-Yadavs.<sup>128</sup> Thus, Yadav 'historians' re-shape the history of their community rather than inventing it. What they do is to render more explicit existing links between Yadavs, Rajput culture and Krishna-the-warrior.

In the previous chapter I described the cult of the hero-god Mekhasur and I outlined how the traditional Ahir/Yadav pantheon and cosmology were traditionally linked, and to some extent still are, to the Ahir royal/pastoral heritage. The foundation myths of the various Ahir lineage deities are often associated with Ahir royal dynasties of 'cowherder kings' and indirectly to Krishna. Thus, these local stories fuse 'pastoral' and Kshatriya themes and overlap the image and personalities of Krishna-the-cowherder and Krishna-the-warrior.

Regional epics which are not strictly associated with the spread of a religious cult (as in the case of Mekhasur) also depict the deeds and gestures of Ahir pastoral martial heroes who were also incarnations of the Krishna of the Mahabharata. A number of Ahir Para Yadavs perceive these epics as their regional 'histories'. According to Mathura Yadavs, Ahir/Yadavs are the protagonists of two famous regional martial oral epics: the epic of Alha and Udal and of Lorik. Older Ahir Para Yadav informants often suggested I read these epics in order to understand their past. These epics tell the story of heroic Ahirs and of the manly and brave character of their community.

The Lorik tradition is well diffused in northern India and it is not associated with the spread of a religious cult. In the Awadhi - and Bhojpuri -

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<sup>128</sup> On the relation between epics and community self-identity see Blackburn, Claus, Flueckinger and Wadley (1989: 5-7) and Richman (1991: 12-14).

speaking areas of Uttar Pradesh, the Ahir/Yadavs are both the primary performers and audience of the epic. The Lorik epic has been widely studied by scholars of folklore who all seem to agree that there is a strict relation between the epic and the cowherding Ahir caste cluster. For centuries it has been at the heart of the popular cultural milieu of the Ahir/Yadav caste in the Gangetic plains

This epic is popular in eastern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. Although western Uttar Pradesh is peripheral to the epic's area of diffusion, I found that amongst a relevant number of my eldest informants it was well-known. They explained their knowledge by pointing out that the origins of Ahir Para Yadavs were in Kannauj, in central Uttar Pradesh. Although only a few people told me that they had actually witnessed a performance of the epic during their childhood, most of them knew the story of Lorik through narratives that their parents and grandparents had told them. Finally, even if some were not able to narrate the epic themselves, most knew in a general sense that it was about the history and the martial qualities of their caste. Elder Ahir/Yadavs perceive the Lorik epic as one of the oldest accounts of their caste group. Its performance is strictly a male affair and is evidently a portrayal of the valour and martial heroism of the Ahirs. Its hero is a protector of caste honour (*izzat*), and he is protected by Durga and by divine intervention. In a Bihari version, Lorik is also an incarnation of Krishna (Archer 1947). The model of Krishna is therefore present in the Lorik epic, first as a lover and then as a warrior.

Flueckinger (1989) analyses how the epic is told by two Ahir/Yadav communities, one located in Uttar Pradesh and the other in Chhattisgarh. She highlights how the Ahir/Yadavs of Uttar Pradesh emphasise its martial themes, while Ahir/Yadavs from Chhattisgarh emphasise its romantic themes. In eastern U.P. '... the Ahirs have seen themselves as the local warrior caste and continue to promote this image of themselves' and accordingly she suggests that their '... "kshatriya-isation" movement may have originated and gained momentum in U.P. partly because the Ahirs already had an image of themselves as a martial caste' (1989: 41). This seemed not to be case for the Ahirs from Chhattisgarh whose version of the Lorik epic emphasises romantic themes rather than martial ones. Thus martial oral epics are extremely important in the construction of a Yadav martial and masculine caste/community image. Yadav 'historians'

recognise the importance of this idiom and in their literature they include articles on the legends of Lorik and on *virahs* (songs of separation). Here the legend of Lorik is viewed as part of the cultural heritage of the Yadavs and as such needs to be preserved: 'The songs of Lorik are getting lost in the dark' (R.L. Yadav 1999: 71-72). In these stories, Lorik is portrayed as an incarnation of the epic Krishna.

Yadav caste publications point out how Yadavs are also famous on account of the exploits of their heroes Alha and Udal who belong to this community, and who fought Pritviraj, the king of Delhi. The exploits of Alha and Udal form the themes of poems still well known and popular in Uttar Pradesh...' (for example see *Yadav Sansar*, February 1981: 25). Older informants in Mathura know the story or at least a number of its episodes. What they know is that Alha and Udal were two brave Yadavs and powerful wrestlers. Alha is often described as an incarnation of Balram, the brother of Krishna, and Udal as an incarnation of Krishna. The wrestling ground of the Mahadev Ghat is said to be used in the night by Adal and Udal. Wrestling holds a special place in the Yadavs' ethos. Wrestling for them is not only a sport but a way of life and *shakti* and *bal* are values and ideals associated with it.

Ahir Para Yadavs' traditions are, therefore, dominated by heroes who were incarnations of Krishna and who were related to the Sanskrit Mahabharata. In this regard my findings are in line with the recent work of Hildebeitel (1999) on the relation between regional martial oral epics, Rajput culture and the Mahabharata Sanskrit epic. Following Kolff (1990), Hildebeitel (1999, 2001) insists that prior to the 'new Rajput Great Tradition' of sixteenth-century Rajasthan, there was 'an older, lower status medieval Rajput culture' (1999: 3) that has been passed down through generations by regional martial epics. According to Hildebeitel, 'regional martial oral epics are a distinctive genre within the larger class of India's oral epics. They are all formed in the same unsettled medieval period (twelfth to fifteenth centuries). They all make similar linkages between regionality, the peripherality of 'little kingdoms', land, land dominant castes and the goddess of the land' (1999: 6). All these features are usually present in popular versions of the Mahabharata and more importantly, 'in each, central characters are reincarnated heroes and heroines' (1999: 7) of the Sanskrit

Mahabharata. These epics, in particular Alha, rethink the classical pan-Indian Mahabharata (Hiltebeitel 1999: 2).

The understanding of the relations between vernacular oral epics and Sanskritic epics as a continuum rather than as an opposition (Roghair 1982 and Smith 1991) sheds light on how local Ahir lineages' tales have been so easily absorbed into the Sanskritic Mahabharata story sponsored by Yadav 'historians', and why Krishna-the-cowherder has been gradually substituted with the epic Krishna. Local oral epics provide, therefore, a mediating tale between 'traditional' Ahir pastoral identity linked to Krishna-the-cowherder-lover and the 'modern' Yadav Kshatriya identity associated with Krishna-the-warrior. This implicit link allows Yadav 'historians' to portray the Mahabharata as the 'History' of all-India Yadavs, and to make this claim plausible in the eyes of the ordinary Yadavs.

The building up of an all-India Yadav 'history' implies the amalgamation of the 'pasts' of local and regional pastoral castes (e.g. Ahir, Goalla, Gopa, Konar, Kuruba...) into a single composite tale. Local hero-gods like Mekhasur and heroic Ahirs like Alha and Udal and Lorik (linked respectively with hero and lineage cults in a particular geographical area (Braj) and with the Ahirs' sense of past in a particular region (Gangetic plains)) are absorbed into the story of Krishna of the pan-Indian Mahabharata. In a similar way Konar/Yadavs from the South are linked to martial oral epics which rethink the Mahabharata (see Sontheimer 1993 and Roghair 1982). Hiltebeitel (1999) draws attention to the links between northern and southern martial oral epics. I suggest that the continuity of the pastoral-Kshatriya themes from North to South, expressed by regional oral epics which rethink the classical Mahabharata, offers an extraordinary path for an elaboration of an all-India Yadav heritage and hence an all-India Yadav community. This homogenous set of cultural resources provides 'Yadav historians' with the framework for the construction of a past which unites regional Yadav clusters with different but complementary pasts. Importantly, this composite heritage maintains the deep social and religious meanings entrenched in the martial oral epics.

## Contemporary martial heroes' tales

So far I have shown how hero-god cults and regional martial oral epics are central to Yadav religious culture and to Yadavs' 'way of being' in history and contribute to their warrior-like popular image. Yadav intellectuals also used these cultural resources to portray contemporary Yadavs as a caste traditionally committed to fighting for 'freedom' and to protecting the 'weaker' people against injustices.

In recent times historical figures like Rao Tula Ram, Rao Gopal Deo and Veeran Alagamuthu Kone (Yadav) have been portrayed by the Yadav caste literature and in the political speeches of Yadav politicians as modern Yadav heroes who combated 'British imperialism' in the same way that 'Krishna' fought against 'the imperialist Kamsa', and Adal and Udal fought against their enemies from the kingdom of Mahoba. The deeds of these modern epic Yadav heroes cover the North and South of India and provide evidence for the existence of a culturally united all-India Yadav community.

Rao Tula Ram (1825-1863) and Rao Gopal Deo are both members of the former Royal family of Rewari and are said to have valorously fought against the British during the 1857 Mutiny. The following are extracts from popular Yadav caste literature which show how the two men are rhetorically described as the Heroes of 1857.

'Rao Tula Ram (1825-1863), a scion of the historic ruling house of Rewari (Haryana), is one of the greatest freedom fighters of India. He not only obliterated all vestiges of British rule from Ahirwal but also helped the revolutionaries do this work elsewhere too, in Delhi, Rajasthan, in Madhya Pradesh and so forth. The story of this great son of Ahirwal is that of heroism, valour, patriotism and self-sacrifice of the great order. With four to five thousand Ahirs, Jats, Rajputs and Ranghars he struggled hard against the superior British forces in 1857...He was the first Indian to plan to overthrow British imperialism...' (AIYM, Platinum Jubilee Year Souvenir, 1999: 20, Originally in English).

K.C. Yadav (1966) was the first 'Yadav historian' to write about Rao Tula Ram. He was patronised by Rao Tula Ram's great grandson, Rao Birendra Singh. 'Rao Sahib' as he is commonly called, was chief minister of Haryana in the late 1960s and then Union Cabinet Minister for Agriculture. Many believed he constructed

his political career on the basis of the legend of his famous ancestor's legend. Each year on 28 September, his birthday, commemorative ceremonies are held in Rewari and Delhi. A statue of the hero has recently been installed in Rewari town and another in a suburban Delhi area. In 1998 a revised edition of K.C. Yadav's book on Rao Tula Ram was published. The book was presented to the public by Mulayam Singh Yadav during a commemorative ceremony dedicated to the 'hero of 1857'.

Rao Tula Ram's story is contested at the local level by Rao Bijender Singh who is the great-great-grandson of Rao Gopal Dev. Rao Gopal Dev was the cousin and contemporary of the late Rao Tula Ram. A book about the history of the hero is in preparation; while articles about his valorous deeds have already appeared in local Yadav caste publications in the last five years. Rao Bijender Singh is the promoter of Rao Gopal Dev's heroic myth. He claims that the story of Rao Tula Ram as represented by K.C. Yadav and his patron Rao Birendra Singh is false and misleading. In his version Rao Gopal Dev is the 'real' hero of 1857 and not Rao Tula Ram. Moreover, he contests the legitimacy of Rao Birendra Singh's claim to be the heir of the former royal family. He alleges that Rao Birendra Singh was adopted, and hence was not the 'genuine' heir of the little Ahirwal kingdom. However tense and controversial these contested histories are at the local level, they do not affect the unity of the AIYM rhetoric at the national level. The Mahasabha uses the example of both of the Rewari heroes to portray the bravery and courage of contemporary Yadavs, and hence to contribute to the creation of a 'Yadav' martial and political 'essence'.

'Rao Gopal Dev was a scion of the ruling house of Rewari. He was cousin of Rao Tula Ram, and general officer commanding of the forces that finished all vestiges of the Feringhee rule from Ahirwal in 1857 and kept the fire of revolt burning everywhere around Delhi for a pretty long time. Rao Gopal Dev was a brave soldier, far-sighted military commander and a gifted leader of men in adversity. He was a great patriot who sacrificed all that he had his raj, property and comfort, so that others could live free, secure and safe' (AIYM Platinum Jubilee Year Souvenir, 1999: 21, Originally in English).

More recently, the Mahasabha is promoting the publication of a book on 'the martyr' Veeran Alagamuthu Kone (Yadav). He is described as the first Tamilian 'to raise the banner of the revolt against the British in 1759'. J.N. Singh Yadav

the 'historian' who is now working on the book, told me that he collected much historical evidence to reconstruct the deeds of this south Indian Yadav hero.

'... 'Vamsamani Teepigai' a time honoured historic document and the palm-leaf manuscripts found in Kattalangulam near Kalugumalai, the second capital of the then Ilasi kingdom, speak volumes for the historic war of Indian Independence waged by Veeran Alagumuthu against the British Imperialism in Pethanayakanur. Veeran Alagumuthu was a brave warrior, a prophetic captain and an ardent patriot. His blood boiled when the British imperialists tried to bring the Indian kingdoms under their yoke. He made his supreme sacrifice in defence of his motherland...he was the embodiment of courage and the very incarnation of patriotic fervour. This industrious son was born in Madurai...he was the first leader to start the Yadava movement' (J.N. Singh Yadav: 1996, Originally in English).

The Tamil Nadu government holds an annual function on the hero's birthday; a bronze statue which will be installed in Madras, is currently in preparation.<sup>129</sup>

The heroic and martial qualities of Yadavs are further proved by the portrayal of other famous Yadavs who died in defence of their community or their country. For instance, Trikoli Das (Yadav) the hero of the 1925 Lakho Chack incident is often remembered and commemorated in Yadav journals as well as at Yadav caste meetings. The so-called Lakho Chack episode saw a violent clash between Bhumihars and Yadavs in the district of Monghyr in Bihar. The hero of 'the battle' has been renamed Sher-e-Dil (lion hearted).

A large number of Ahir Para Yadavs knew about this episode and its heroic protagonist. They use his story to emphasise the bravery and strength of their community and their commitment to combating 'social evils'. Archival records extensively report the tension between Ahir-Goallas claiming Yadav-Kshatriya identity and the landed elite who felt challenged by the new emerging caste/community. The Lakho Chack incident is documented by various police reports.<sup>130</sup> In addition, Pinch (1996: 121) extensively analysed the event. It is described as an example of the assertiveness of the Yadav caste community identity. This event, which is part of the 'Historical' formation of the community,

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<sup>129</sup> Personal communication/ N.S. Yadav/ 10 December 2001.

<sup>130</sup> NAI, Home Dept. Police, 1925, 8/IV/25 and see *The Englishman*, Serious riots in Bihar, Police overpowered by big mob, 6 June 1925.



has therefore been successfully appropriated by Yadav caste 'historians' who use it to prove first the success of the community and secondly the heroic nature and bravery of the caste members. Although their accounts are in line with the 'official' story, they are narrated in fabulous and epic fashion. The clash between the Ahir/Yadavs and the Bhumihars is described as an epic battle. The Bhumihars are said to have arrived in the village led by the *zamindar* of Rampur, Prasad Narain Singh. This aristocratic figure, riding an elephant, led seven thousand men against a few hundred Yadavs. In the official accounts the Bhumihars are said to number three thousand. In addition there is no mention of the participation of the *zamindar*, nor of the elephant, or of the fact that the *zamindar* had to pay sixteen thousand rupees to the collector of the district as a penalty for attacking the village.

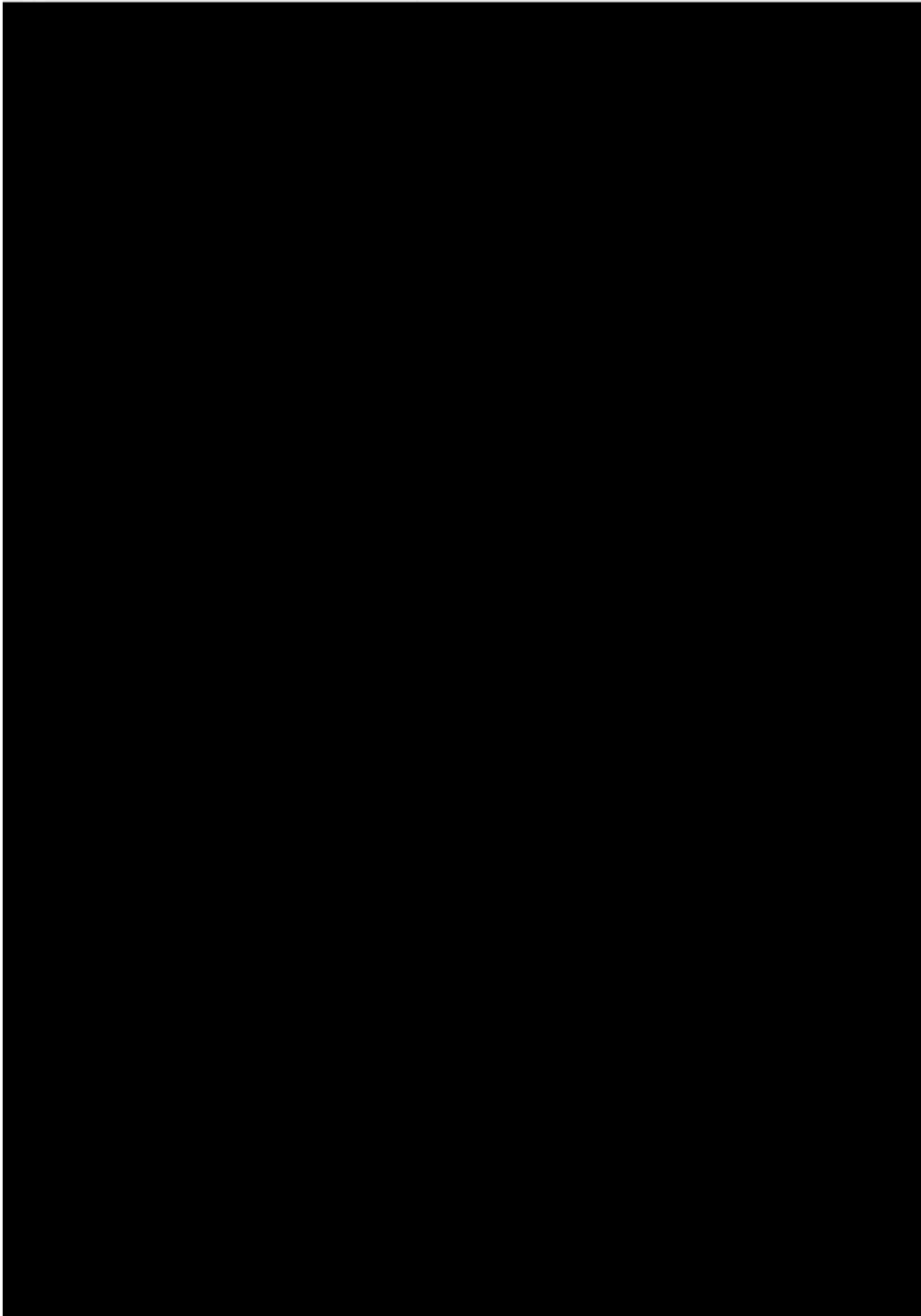
Central to the myth-making of Sher-e-Dil (lion hearted) is that he is the only Yadav who died in the incident. He is described as a brave and strong Yadav with a big (heavy) heart.<sup>131</sup> Locally, the heart/liver (*dil/kaleja*) is conceptualised as the organ in which power and strength are kept. Sher-e-Dil was a wrestler. He is said to have killed many tigers and defended his community, under attack from the Bhumihars, like a lion. Ten years ago a school was established in his honour. A *viraha* song about the hero is said to have been composed, as well and a small shrine established.<sup>132</sup> Sher-e-Dil's story illustrates a process whereby a living individual becomes a glorified and deified Yadav.

In a similar way, Yadav war martyrs are celebrated and deified. Articles and ceremonies which commemorate the bravery of Yadav soldiers who lost their lives in the India-Pakistan and India-China post-independence conflicts, and more recently in the Kargil conflict, are central to Yadav caste rhetoric (see Plate 8). One of the episodes of the Indo-China war in 1962 is commonly described as the 'epic battle of Rezang-La'.

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<sup>131</sup> The heart/liver is understood to be the organ in the body where power and strength are kept. Emphasising the size of the hero's heart means to praise the hero's superhuman powers. For an analysis of the process of formation of new Bir Babas in Benares, see Coccari (1989: 261).

<sup>132</sup> Personal communication/B.L. Singh Yadav/26 December 1999.



'By any test, every man of C Company who fought and died at Rezang La was a hero...the battle that the company fought was indeed great. It was a battle that will be remembered by future generations of Chinese as well as Indians. The Chinese will remember it for the incredible heroism they saw; the Indians will have every reason to be proud of the brave Indian *jawans* who preferred to die fighting than surrender even an inch of the sacred soil of their motherland. Already, in the countryside of Haryana, men and women sing heart-warming songs in praise of the heroes of Rezang La' (anonymous writer, Originally in English).

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Ahir/Yadavs depict themselves as 'soldiers by birth'. The stories published in the Yadav caste literature, as well as the episodes repeated again and again at caste meetings, emphasise how the Yadavs 'are soldiers by birth and as a consequence were present in the army of the ancient Kings, of the Mahabharata; with the British and against the British and finally in the army of their country.' Contemporary Yadavs also view a number of their charismatic political leaders as perpetuators of a long tradition of Ahir/Yadav heroism. They view Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav as heroic Robin Hoods and 'incarnations' of Krishna who steal from the rich to give to the poor and to 'ordinary' people. In the eyes of informants they have heroic status because they fight against the enemies of their community and for the community's social well-being. Thus, Yadav heroes can be Rajas, freedom fighters, soldiers and 'democratic' politicians. They all share Krishna's predisposition to fight and 'do politics'. Heroes and politicians can therefore have divine attributes (see Price 1989).

### **'History' and 'Mathura Hindu histories': recuperating Krishna's moral integrity and masculinity**

Yadav informants told me a substantial number of times that their ancestor Krishna was not 'like Bill Clinton'. With this statement they referred to the sexual scandal of the former American president, which was heavily reported in the media for a long period of my fieldwork. This metaphor was used to undermine

the portrayal of Krishna as the lover of thousands of cowherders. Similarly, the Puranas which illustrate Krishna's mischievous pastoral youth were considered as *false* and as *legends*. Conversely, the Mahabharata and Bhagavad-Gita which describe Krishna-the-warrior were portrayed as *true* 'Histories'. In particular, it was the Bhagavad Gita which was widely conceived as the 'book of the Yadavs' spoken directly from the mouth of Krishna. In the following sections I describe the making of Krishna the Yadav icon and how this symbolic figure intertwines with Hindu nationalist ideologies and with the use of 'History'.

### **Yadav 'historians' and their 'historical archives'**

If the number of Yadav caste publications is astonishingly large, so is the number of 'Yadav historians'. This broad category is formed by retired academics, teachers and civil servants who write for the Yadav cause and view their work as a mission to propagate the message of Krishna and the achievements and great qualities of his Yadav sons. Their mission is to recuperate Krishna's moral integrity and political skills through 'History'. This section explores how the idioms of 'History' and archaeology are used by Yadav intellectuals in Delhi and in Mathura. In addition it illustrates how ordinary Yadavs in Ahir Para use these idioms to assert their glorious past and to imbibe their narrative with an aura of 'modernity'. I begin this investigation by exploring Yadav historians' personal archives. Their libraries and filing-cabinets say a lot about the ways they construct 'the past' of their community and how they view themselves in the present.

D. Nagendhiran (Yadav) is the current president of the AIYM. He was appointed in December 1999. He is 58 years old. He is the first 'South Yadav' to occupy such a prestigious position. He worked in the government administration of his home state, Tamil Nadu, for forty years. Now he has decided to dedicate his life to the 'Yadav cause' and 'the social justice crusade'. He says that now he is 'a full-time servant' of the Yadav community and this also means reconstructing the 'Yadav heritage' and diffusing it amongst Yadavs from the North to the South of the country.

During an interview, Nagendhiran proudly showed me the content of his personal 'archive' which mainly contained newspaper clippings and academic books which describe the martial qualities of the Yadavas and of their famous ancestor Krishna, as well as the historical reliability of the Mahabharata. 'Warrior roots: scholars claim Shivaji was not Rajput but a Hoysala Yadava';<sup>133</sup> 'Science and legend merge in Dwarka';<sup>134</sup> 'Dwarka's past powerfully influencing the present';<sup>135</sup> and then 'Somanatha temple, its history and sanctity'. These are the headings of a number of articles collected in Nagendhiran Singh's archive. They have been filed because they attempt to prove that the Mahabharata is a 'true' story. They describe how since the 1980s archaeologists and scientists have been trying to determine where the ancient town of Dwarka was located.

In recent years archaeological excavations have been performed at sites described in the Mahabharata and Ramayana (van der Veer 1994: 144-145). 'Yadav historians' closely follow these research projects and update their files with new 'evidence' which proves the historicity of Krishna and the Mahabharata 'to foreigners and non-believers' (N.S. Yadav, 65 years old, Yadav activist). These data are added to the historical evidence which Yadav 'historians' have been collecting since the beginning of the century. For instance:

'An inscription engraved 3730 years after the Bharata war i.e. about 600 A.D. in Siva temple at Ibhalli in Dharwad clearly refers to the battle of Kurukshetra (see Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal Vol. IV pp. 376/7; Vol. V p. 725; VI. p. 88. Journal of Royal Asiatic S. New series 185 b. Vol. I Part 2. p. 273)' (quoted in Khedkar 1959: 52).

Nagendhiran's personal archive does not differ from the many 'private collections' I had the opportunity to explore during fieldwork. Dr J.N. Singh Yadav graduated with an M.A. in Political Science from Punjab University, Chandigarh and obtained his Ph.D. from Kurukshetra University. He is 60 years old and comes from a village in the district of Mahendragarh (Haryana). In 1992 he published two volumes entitled *Yadavas Through the Ages*. The books were presented at the Madras Yadav caste meeting 1994 by Mulayam Singh Yadav. In

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<sup>133</sup> The Week, 21 October 2001.

<sup>134</sup> Hindu, 31 October 1998.

<sup>135</sup> Hindu, 2 November 1995.

an interview, Dr J.N. Singh Yadav said that throughout his childhood he was eager to know more about the origin and history of the Yadavs, but when he wished to know more about 'the Yadav race' he could not find reliable works.

'...I was disappointed not to find much material about the Yadavas in the books...the Yadavas were not lucky enough to find some good scribes to record testimony of their valour and historic achievements. While the Rajputs had Col. Tod, the Marathas Grant-Duff, the Sikhs Cunningham and even the Jats had K.R. Kanungo, the Yadavas had none. The All India Yadava Mahasabha approached Rajbali Pandey to write the history of the Yadavas, who miserably failed them...Majority of the historians held false notions about this caste. Some scholars relying upon some *puranic* descriptions held the view that 'all the Yadavas perished in the fratricidal war at Dwarka', and hence there survived no Yadavas. It is a great fallacy and the historians have always misguided and misrepresented this wrong notion...The present study is a humble effort to sweep these misnomers and false notions' (1992: IX-X).

J.N. Singh Yadav's position is widely shared by his colleagues who view their work as a mission to establish a 'true' Yadav story. Yadav 'historians' archives are very similar both in the way they are organised and in terms of their content. Their book collections usually contain the most established Yadav books published in the last one hundred years: *Abhir Kul Dipika*, n.d., (The Enlightenment of the Abhir Clan); *Ahir Itihas Ki Jhalak*, 1915 (A Glimpse into the History of the Ahirs); *Jatiya Sandesh*, 1921 (Jati Message), *The Divine Heritage of the Yadavs*, 1959; *A List of Rules of Yadav Jati*, 1928; *Yaduvansh Ka Itihas*, 1969 (History of the Yaduvansh); *Yadavs through the Ages*, 1992 and *Yadav Itihas*, 1997 (History of the Yadavs). Often, located close to the caste literature are colonial district gazetteers and files containing photocopies of sections of the census in which Yadavs are mentioned. The book of the Indian sociologist M.S.A. Rao (1979) and the historian O.P. Verma (1979) are also often found in Yadav historians' libraries. Then there is the Bhagavad Gita, the Mahabharata and local vernacular copies of the martial epic of Alha and Udal and of Lorik. And then there are recent biographies of modern Yadav leaders like Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav. Newspaper and magazine clippings about 'Yadavs' are also collected (Ashrafi 1994; R.S. Yadav 1998; K.C. Yadav 2001).

In order to collect material for their articles and books, a number of Yadav 'historians' regularly visit the Nehru Memorial library in Delhi. Whenever I casually met them there, they seemed extremely pleased to see that finally I was doing 'real' research, i.e. 'historical research' rather than 'participant observation'. Informants never really grasped why I was collecting ethnographic data given the fact that there was already so much literature and documentation on the Yadavs and Krishna that needed to be explored. 'Written material' in their eyes was authentic, 'true' and 'historical'.<sup>136</sup>

The importance of adopting a historical approach to the composition of Yadav narratives is explicitly emphasised by the AIYM agenda. The AIYM demands Yadav 'historians' to be accurate in their methodology, i.e. to prove their stories with 'historical facts'. In 1998, the following guidelines were sent by the central AIYM committee to the Mahasabha's state branches. The occasion was the plan of a book about Yadav history and culture.

'Please take note of the following points while doing the write-up:

- The write-up has got to be brief and to the point; authentic and objective.
- As far as possible, the mythological stories and traditions should be made use of only when some historical evidence supports them directly or indirectly' (Internal circular, 1998, Originally in English).

The use of terms such as 'authentic', 'objective' and 'historical evidence' express the need for 'Yadav historians' to provide 'histories' of their communities which are not contestable and that fit with the methodological demands of 'professional history'. The need to *historically* prove a mythological event is not only confined to Yadav intellectuals in Delhi. 'Yadav historians' in Mathura have the same concern.

S.P.S. Yadav is the editor of *Yaduvani*, a newsletter published in Mathura-Vrindavan since 1968. He is in his seventies and he used to be an English teacher at Mathura K.C. College. *Yaduvani* is printed at a Yadav printing press in Sadar Bazaar. Between 2,000 and 2,500 copies per month are printed and then sent by

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<sup>136</sup> For a discussion of the effects of printing technology and literacy material in India see Parry (1985); van der Veer (1994: 79); Burghart (1996: 96).

mail to their subscribers. When in December 1999 I subscribed to the journal (at the cost of Rs. 100 per year) I was the eight hundredth new subscriber of that year. S.P.S. Yadav said that he was pleased with the performance of his journal. Most of its subscribers are from Mathura and the Braj area. S.P.S. Yadav said that he does not find it difficult to find articles for each monthly publication. He said that he regularly receives at least twenty pieces of work a month. Apparently, he has a hard time choosing what to publish. When I asked which criteria he used to select the papers, he said that he privileges objective writings. What he attempts to do is to publish 'histories' and not 'legends'. At the same time he privileges histories which diffuse the message of Krishna and of the Bhagavad-Gita.

The preoccupation with 'History' is not only confined to Yadav 'historians'. To a certain extent it also concerns ordinary people, i.e. the readers of Yadav self-historiographies. Ahir Para Yadavs endlessly referred me to 'books' and 'historical sites' which in their eyes proved their tales of origin and the achievements and quality of their ancestor. What they considered to be the 'History' of the Yadavs *par excellence* was the Mahabharata and in particular the Bhagavad Gita. Many emphasised how these were 'true' histories and how in recent times archaeological findings had proved their 'historical' validity. In Ahir Para, archaeological debates are a common and popular topic of conversation. This is partly because the *Krishnajanmabhumi* issue, and the debates that surround it, have entered the public arena. In this regard, the role of the media is particularly influential.

Table 5.1 shows that on average Sadar Bazaar residents are highly exposed to different types of media. The majority of all caste/communities said that they either read a newspaper or watched television.

**Table 5.1: Media exposure by caste-community, Sadar Bazaar**

	Newspaper	Radio	TV	Cable TV	Number
Brahman	96%	39%	93%	71%	28
Bania	96%	25%	96%	81%	28
Other upper caste	74%	47%	89%	68%	19
Yadav	89%	33%	89%	67%	65
Other OBC	80%	50%	90%	70%	10
SC	50%	36%	86%	48%	22
Muslim	54%	44%	80%	44%	41
Other	56%	11%	78%	75%	9
Total	77%	36%	88%	64%	222



Source: Mathura Survey

Notes: Table entries based on all respondents (no information was recorded for 3 cases). Table entries refer to the percentage of respondents who said they either read, watched or listened to the relevant media.

Countless times informants said ‘I read it in the newspaper’ or ‘I saw it on TV’ to support their claim. They used the media as a source to ‘prove’ that eating meat leads to blindness; that the offspring of inbred unions were physically unfit; that cow milk has almost miraculous nutritive properties; and that Krishna was born in Mathura and was a great political leader.

Thus, the ‘historical’ claims put forward by the Sangh Parivar in an attempt to prove that the Shahi mosque is constructed on the site of Krishna’s birthplace offers local Yadav informants a repertoire of ‘historical’ facts to enrich their narratives of the past. In the same way that Yadav ‘historians’ collect clippings from magazines and books about the historicity of the Mahabharata and Krishna, Ahir Para Yadavs cite ‘historical evidence’ that they have either read in local newspapers or come to know about from ‘town rumours’. From my arrival in Mathura, informants advised me to go to the Mathura museum. They said that it was the place to go for a scholar and in particular for someone who was interested in the Yadavs’ history and culture. I was told that archaeological evidence ‘about Krishna’ was kept and ‘researched’ there. A number of informants told me that scholars ‘from Delhi’ had found ‘scientific’ evidence which proved that the Shahi mosque was built over Krishna’s birthplace. Such ‘historical’ evidence was used in conversation by informants not to support the validity of the *Sangh Parivar*’s claims, but as a further ‘scientific evidence’ of their unique past.

As a matter of fact people in Sadar Bazaar strongly criticised the *Krishnajanmabhumi*’s liberation movement. Overall, 84 per cent of Sadar Bazaar residents said that it was not justified to pull down the Shahi mosque (Mathura Survey, 1999). There were some Yadavs who were strongly against the pulling down of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, but were at the same time sympathetic towards the liberation of Krishna’s birthplace. This was mainly because they attach stronger ‘feelings’ towards Krishna, their ancestor, than to Ram. This approach was not, however, very widespread.

Instead, what is common is the incorporation of Hindu nationalist themes in the local Yadav narratives. This is done explicitly by the MYS, whose newsletters and caste literature are partly based on the portrayal of Krishna and Mathura found in the pilgrimage literature and Hindu nationalist pamphlets. The Hindu nationalist rhetoric which informs these texts portrays Krishna as a historical person and his native place, Mathura, as a historical birthplace. For the Hindu nationalists, Krishna is an ancestor physically present in a historical past. He was born at a certain time and in a specific place, which is now 'illegally' occupied by a Muslim mosque. Hindu rhetoric privileges Krishna the charioteer, the warrior and the saviour over Krishna the ambiguous lover.

'Once the property comes in the ownership of Hindus, we will build a very huge monument of Sri Krishna at the place, which will be the centre of the whole world from where the preaching of the Geeta will be spread for the betterment of the world' (Maharaj Saini, 30 years old, VHP activist).

When Hindu activists invoke the figure of Krishna, it is usually the Krishna of the Bhagavad Gita. 'Krishna as the god of erotically mystical love, has virtually disappeared from the public sphere of reformed Hinduism...' (Lutt 1995: 152). In modern Hinduism there has been a shift of emphasis from Krishna to Ram. Ram who was the king of Ayodhya is the hero of the Ramayana. For most Hindus Ram is the model of a just and righteous king (Fuller 1992: 33). He is the hero that never departed from the required code of conduct. He is an ideal son, perfect brother, righteous husband and ideal king. Consequently, 'Rama is the Hindu God most amenable to utopian projects, for in the epic Ramayana he created the state regime (*rajya*) that most completely instantiated *dharma* on the earth, Rama Rajya' (Davis 1996: 34-35). In contrast, 'Krishna is sensuous, soft and gentle but his love cannot be counted upon, he is incalculable, polygamous and adulterous. His worshippers languish for him, they lose control of themselves...' (Lutt 1995: 143).

In recent years the Ayodhya *janmabhumi* issue has remodelled Ram as a symbol for demarcating geographic, territorial and spiritual boundaries. He has been transformed into a 'militant' god (Kapur 1993). The new images depict him in an aggressive posture, striding forward with a bow ready for combat. He is heavily armed, *ugra* (angry), ready for a war, with a muscular body. In short he

represents a virile Hinduism. The same process is visible in recent narrative and iconographic portrayals of Krishna. Krishna the ‘lovable- but-untrustworthy’ god (Davis 1996) has been transformed into a ‘quasi ideal king’; what we witness is a martial reinvigoration of the Krishna mythology (Haberman 1994: 43-50; Pinch 1996: 196). It is this masculinised version of Krishna that is employed in Yadav political rhetoric. The next sections will further unpack Krishna the Yadav icon. However, before exploring the impact of this narrative and political rhetoric in Ahir Para, it is worth mentioning another dimension of the intersections between ‘Mathura’s Hindu narratives’ and Yadav local histories.

At the local level, Hindu narratives are presented by Yadav ‘historians’ and ordinary Yadavs as ‘hard historical data’ of the perennial existence of the Yadav community in Mathura town. The history of Mathura’s shrine becomes the history of the local Yadavs, who claim to be the ‘autochthonous’ inhabitants of Mathura and the descendants of Krishna. ‘Mathura Hindu narratives’ provide the local Yadavs with evidence to support their arguments with non-Yadavs who contest their claims. At the local level Yadav and Chaube narratives of the past contest each other (Lynch 1996). Both communities claim to descend from the god Krishna and to be the ancient citizens of Mathura. In the next section, I describe how this contention is yearly enacted in the ritual performance of the ‘*Kamsa vadh ka mela*’ (the festival of the killing of Kamsa).

The ‘historical’ debate around Krishna’s shrine is not the only resource which gives strength to the Yadavs’ claims about the past. The broadcasting of Krishna’s story, the epic Mahabharata, as a television serial starting in 1989, and thus parallel to the rise of Hindu nationalism in Mathura, reinforced Yadavs’ sense of the past. Yadav informants often pointed out to me how the Chaubes can no longer contest their history because millions of people now know who the ‘real’ descendants of Krishna are. The Mahabharata TV serial is often recalled as an extra piece of ‘true’ evidence of the Yadavs’ ‘glorious’ past.<sup>137</sup> In sum, Hindu nationalist ideology and the Mahabharata TV serial has helped local Yadavs to

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<sup>137</sup> For an analysis of the social and political implications of the TV broadcasting of the Mahabharata and Ramayana see Lutgendorf (1991); Richman (1991); and Mitra (1992).

think about the god Krishna as an ‘historical’ ancestor and importantly as a ‘warrior-politician’.

‘...the Yadavs have the honour of claiming Sri Krishna as one of them. Great as religious teacher and prominent in politics and war...He is a national hero from the historical point of view’  
(P. Yadav, 45 years old, Samajwadi Party activist)

It is important to underline that generally local people perceive ‘the historical findings collected in the museum’, or documented in a TV serial or newspaper, as extra evidence of their being descendants of an extraordinary person with extraordinary qualities. Informants do not need historical evidence to believe that they descend from Krishna. In their eyes, the religious texts or shrines are not *false* if they are not historically backed up. However, if they are, then they are somehow seen to acquire an extra legitimacy, especially in the eyes of ‘others’.

In sum, local people both devalue and value ‘history’ at the same time. I suggest that by using the language of ‘science’ Mathura Yadavs also dress up their past with ‘modernity’. This is more of a cosmetic change rather than a qualitative one. Informants provide accounts of their past which are at once historical, ahistorical and imbued with a mythological aura to which are attached religious meanings. For them it is irrelevant to distinguish between mythology, archaeologically proven facts, and the god they worship. ‘Historical facts’ are conceived as an extra layer to be added to their past; a layer that informs their narratives with a modern tone.

### **‘Krishna the Yadav icon’ and the Bhagavad Gita**

Yadav ‘historians’ and politicians emphasise the image of ‘Krishna the charioteer’: the rigorous, moral, military and masculine advisor of Arjuna. They often point to the work of the Bengali nationalist Bakimchandra Chatterjee as ‘the best source of information’ available on the life of Krishna. If, on the one hand, Ahir Para Yadavs advise me to read the Bhagavad Gita in order to understand who is the ‘real’ Krishna, on the other Yadav politicians and ‘historians’ tell me to read the work of Bakimchandra Chatterjee. According to the Bengali

nationalist writer, ‘Krishna was not only an avatar but an ideal man, a Positivist hero’ (Mukherjee and Maddern 1986: 19). Bakimchandra Chatterjee attempts to prove the historicity of Krishna and to ‘rescue’ the ‘real Krishna’ from the mystical cowherder who played games with milkmaids. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s Krishna was a warrior, politician and philosopher. ‘A man who had cultivated all human faculties well and had achieved harmony. He was a man of action not an effeminate cowherder nor an ascetic’ (ibid.: 19). It is to ‘the Krishna’ of Chatterjee that Yadav ideologues mostly refer.<sup>138</sup> Here, Krishna is depicted as a venerable now-dead Yadav political leader. Similarly, J.N.S. Yadav notes how without any doubt the Mahabharata represents Krishna as a ‘human politician *par excellence*... (J.N.S. Yadav 1992: 94).

The prominence of the epic Krishna and the Mahabharata over Krishna-the-cowherder and the Puranas is explicit not only in the caste literature but also in the speeches delivered at caste association meetings. The following are a number of extracts from speeches recorded at various public venues in Delhi and Mathura.

‘Krishna is considered a multifaceted personality. ... Various people have various myths about him but sometimes when it comes to his 16,000 queens it reflects a kind of illiteracy’ (Mulayam Singh Yadav, AIYM Convention Vaishali-New Delhi, 26 December 1999).

‘Lord Krishna is being defamed on the pretext that he was a womaniser... whereas Lord Krishna respected and recognised the woman’s power. Women are respected in a number of ways – she is a woman, she is a goddess, she is Durga (goddess of courage) she is Lakshmi (goddess of money), she is Parvati (wife of Lord of Shiva) and so on’ (Laloo Prasad Yadav, AIYM Convention Vaishali-New Delhi, 26 December 1999).

‘Krishna’ is said to have ‘respected women’; he was not a womaniser. The Puranas are said to have ‘manufactured many cock and bull stories’ to defame Krishna (K.C. Yadav, 65 years old, historian). When the *puranic* sources are not totally dismissed they are re-read and reinterpreted:

‘The authors of the Puranas depict the life of Krishna colourfully and some hints should be given to our readers of these Puranas. The

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<sup>138</sup> I found Chatterjee’s work in every Yadav historians’ private archive. At present, an influential Yadav historian, K.C. Yadav, is writing a ‘bibliography’ of Krishna and is drawing extensively on Chatterjee’s *Krishnacharitra* work.

Vishnu Purana being very ancient gives the life of Sri Krishna as pure and holy...Nevertheless, it does not say that Krishna was vicious and debauched' (Khedkar 1959: 50).

'...The Vishnu Purana may be taken to be authentic for the early life of Sri Krishna, while the Mahabharata for his late life' (ibid.: 52).

'It is felt that the lascivious, lustful, immoral Krishna of Gokula cannot be the same person as the friend of the Pandavas and great teacher of the Bhagavad Gita. For one thing it has not been definitively proved whether Krishna had questionable relations with the Gopis. On account of the absence of any reference in the Mahabharata to the relations of Krishna with the Gopis which is found in the Harivansha and the Puranas some scholars hold that there was no basis in fact for the Gopis stories...At the most all that we can say regarding Krishna's life and doings in Gokula is that his youthful loves did not go beyond violent flirtations and a taste for group dancing and singing; and they were rather a precocious manifestation of his rich, artistic and vital nature' (J.N.S. Yadav 1992: 94).

If on the one hand great effort is given to portraying a 'puritan' Krishna, on the other the Bhagavad Gita is portrayed as 'the book of the Yadavs'. The above quoted speeches of Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav were recorded on the occasion of the inauguration of the Krishna Bhavan, a socio-cultural centre developed on the outskirts of Delhi. The Bhavan's facilities include a library, a multipurpose hall with a capacity of 250 persons, an open-air auditorium for 500 persons, and guest accommodation. The building is said to have been constructed 'to propagate the teaching and tenets of Shrimad Bhagwat Gita and ancient Indian culture' (Pamphlet, 1999). Such aims are consistent with one of the main objectives stated in the constitution of the AIYM, namely,

'To devise ways and means to help Yadavs to achieve ancestral fame and to foster and propagate the teaching of the Holy Gita.' (AIYM, Constitution, Resolution, 2., Original English).

Similarly, Pralad Yadav, the secretary of the MYS, pointed out how it is his duty to propagate amongst the Yadav community the regular reading of the Gita, the chanting of the *gayatri mantra* and the protection of cows. In a conversation he added how the Bhagavad Gita has international fame. 'The Bhagavad Gita is the essence of all scriptures. It is the sign of Indian tradition, civilisation and culture. The Gita scripture is full of Indian concepts. But it is nothing but the Universal scripture. The Bhagavad Gita is part of the Mahabharata...The Gita knowledge

originates from the mouth of Krishna, and hence from the mouth of a Yadav' (P. Yadav, 45 years old, SP activist).

In order to understand this representation it is worth recalling the secular and religious importance of the Bhagavad Gita, and the way in which this text has been repeatedly interpreted to provide solutions to contemporary problems. The Bhagavad Gita is one of the main texts of modern Hindus, and it is nearly as well known in the West. Its setting is the battle between the Kurus and the Pandavas, which forms the heart of the great epic, the Mahabharata, and in structure it consists of a long dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna (Brockington, 1997: 28). It should be noted that commentators from Gandhi onwards have found social and spiritual programmes in the Bhagavad Gita (Malinar, 1995: 444). Since the end of the nineteenth century this religious, philosophical and ethical text has been used as a kind of nationalist programme, a symbol of universal spirituality, a manual for political action and to develop a new corporate work ethic (cf. King 1987). Most of these active interpretations of the Bhagavad Gita concentrate on Krishna teaching Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. The vitality of the text in providing 'social charters' is only reconfirmed by the Yadav reinterpretation.

The use of the Bhagavad Gita by Yadavs is, however, peculiar, and this is because the Bhagavad Gita is said to have been spoken directly from Krishna's mouth. The Yadavs, as direct 'descendants' of Krishna, think of themselves as privileged vessels of his knowledge. Yadav rhetoric at its extreme represents Yadavs as a special kind of human being because of their relation with Krishna, and as predisposed to the amazing characteristics of the god Krishna displayed in the Bhagavad Gita and Mahabharata.

During caste meetings explicit parallels are drawn between the history and present-day success of the Yadavs and the history of Krishna in the Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita.

'I recall the circumstances which we faced while constructing the Krishna Bhavan. Today we are facing difficult times; similar difficulties Lord Krishna had to face when he arrived in this world. It is a world informed by atrocities, social injustice and depression. But remember when Krishna fought against injustice, against atrocities, he faced his relatives, his uncle King Kamsa, who was extremely powerful; he had money power and muscle power. The citizens were doubtful and not sure that Krishna could beat Kamsa and fight against injustice. You must have read the Mahabharata. Everybody knew that

as a child, Krishna had to face the powerful Kamsa. But when Krishna defeated Kamsa, then everyone in Hindustan recognised the power of Krishna. But before seeing the truth nobody expected such an amazing outcome. The same circumstances are prevailing today...nobody thought that Yadavs would be so politically successful again' (Mulayam Singh Yadav, AIYM Convention, Vaishali-New Delhi, 26 December 1999).

'I once again revert to the Mahabharata. On the battlefield, Lord Krishna realised that Arjuna was hesitant to fight with his teacher, his brothers, his relatives and he was afraid of death. Krishna guided Arjuna. He made him understand the truth of life. He gave him a lecture in the battlefield so that his misconceptions about life and human relations could be eliminated. He prompted Arjuna to fight bravely so that he could be appreciated in the history for long... He made him understand that the soul never dies, man is immortal, the soul can not be lit by fire, no air can blow it away, no water can submerge it; rather as we change clothes, the same way the soul changes body. And this is the life cycle. So he asked Arjuna not to get entrapped in the network of misconceptions and fight the social evils' (Laloo Prasad Yadav, AIYM Convention, Vaishali-New Delhi, 26 December 1999).

'Lord Krishna has shown us the way to achieve our position, our goals through struggle. If we deviated ourselves from the way of struggle our built up image will be faded and will be a thing lost. If we silently see the atrocities going on, then we do not have any right to be called the heirs of Lord Krishna. Hence...the Mahabharata and the Gita are our sources of inspiration; they are the final message to us, nothing beyond that. If you think attentively, you will find that whenever we are depressed or disgusted then it is a relief to read and follow the commandments of the Gita. Wherever I look, I find that our community is very innocent comparatively. This is not a negative point with the Yadav culture' (Laloo Prasad Yadav, *ibid.*)

So the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita are used as sources of inspiration for the present. Yadav emphasis on the Krishna of the Gita and on Krishna the politician is reflected in the iconographic images that adorn Yadav caste literature and the banners and symbols portrayed in Yadav caste meetings. These images depict Krishna as the divine charioteer and the teacher of Arjuna (see Plate 9); or as the universal Krishna. Other images depict Krishna holding the Bhagavad Gita text or heavily armed and with a muscular body (see Plate 10 and 11). These are mainly representations of episodes of the Bhagavad Gita which have found a permanent visual expression in modern Hinduism. In particular, the figure which depicts Arjuna encouraging Krishna to engage in active battle is extremely



popular. King (1987) points out how 'today we meet a situation where what began as an illustration of a text has developed into a religious image in its own right. The image of Krishna, the charioteer, has become a true icon, that is to say a focus of religious worship and devotion' (ibid.: 177).

The chariot representation is not only present in print and images, but it is also re-enacted during caste association meetings. The AIYM claims it is a social and secular organisation which is not concerned with religious issues. Nevertheless, in its meetings the presence of political leaders and the deployment of religious themes is striking. The result is that these meetings often resemble religious ceremonies. Usually they present a repetitive pattern: they start in the morning with *yagya-havan* (vedic sacrifice), the chanting of the *gayatri mantra* (sacred formula) and the reciting of episodes from the Gita. This is followed by the hoisting of the Mahasabha flag. Colourful processions are also organised. Often the president and other eminent members of the Mahasabha, especially politicians, sit in a decorated chariot (see Plate 12). Other leaders follow the chariot on motorbikes and horses. *Jankis* (visual displays) depicting the various facets of Lord Krishna's life are also often part of the procession.

The processions led by the chariot are enactments of Krishna's chariot scene. During Yadav processions, participants touch the 'chariot', throw flowers on its path and give offerings to those on board as if they were worshipping a sacred image. To understand such behaviour, it is necessary to point out the peculiarities of the Hindu visual system. Central to religious observance in the Hindu tradition is *darsan*, the auspicious seeing of a divine being (Eck 1981). Sacred images which visually or symbolically represent particular deities, are believed to be infused with the presence or the life or power of these deities. Hindu priests are able to bring images to life through a complex ritual 'establishment' that invokes the god into its material support. The iconographic indeterminacy of Yadav chariot performances seems to offer strategic and rhetorical advantages to those who organise the meetings. Yadav political leaders bring sacred images to life and the response to that seems to be grounded in the cultural notion of divinity representation (Davis 1997). Krishna images articulate religious meanings and emotions and at the same time they are a politically effective form of communication.



Plate 9: Krishna-the-charioteer (Yadav Directory, Front Cover 1992)



Plate 10: Krishna holding the Bhagavad Gita  
(*Yadav Sansar*, Front Cover 2000)

Plate 11: Krishna-the-warrior (Yadava's Living History, Front Cover 2000)

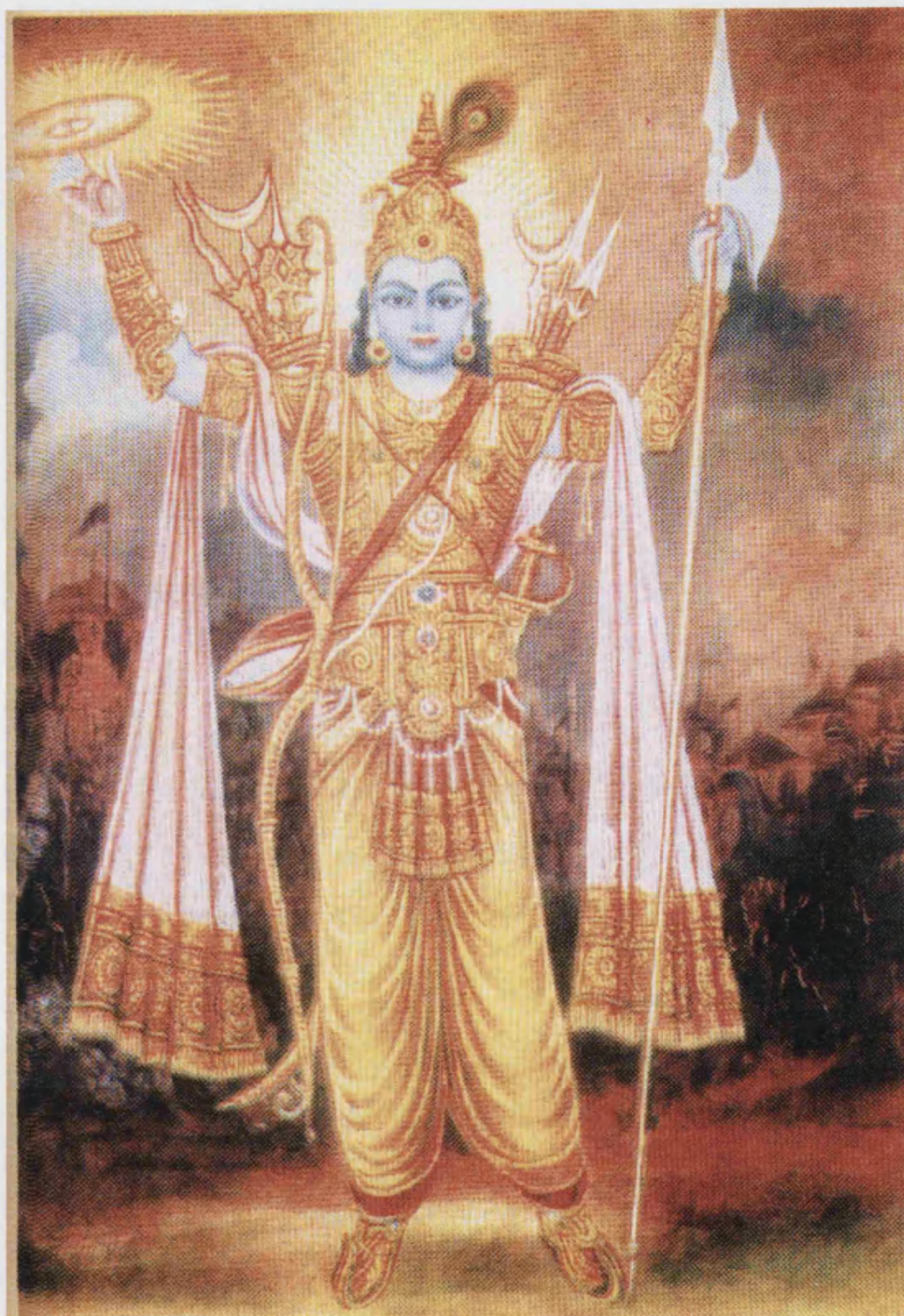




Plate12: Yadav political leaders, Chariot Procession, AIYM Convention Surat, 1995 (Yadav Kul Dipika, January 1996)



Plate 13: All India Yadav Mahasabha Flag (AIYM Rules 1984)

Many have pointed out how technologies and media have also affected the new iconography of Krishna and his worship (see Babb and Wadley 1997: 9). For example, in a recent children's comic series based on Hindu mythological tales, Krishna is presented in his cosmos-embodying form. This representation is an illustration of Chapter 11 of the Bhagavad Gita and it is gradually gaining popularity in modern Hinduism. Again this image is accompanied by an emphasis on the morality of Krishna and on how Krishna is 'the most endearing and ennobling character in Indian mythology' (Pritchett 1997: 97). The emblem of the AIYM is Krishna bearing *sudarsan chakr* (the discus-like circular weapon of Vishnu-Krishna) in his right hand and a conch in his left hand. It is precisely the 'cosmic Vishnu-Krishna' who has been taken as the symbol of the Yadavs, and is represented on the AIYM flag as well as on the covers of caste publications (see Plate 13). Krishna-the-cowherder is present in Yadav caste iconography as the protector of cows and with his 'wife' Radha. In the following chapter I explore how the symbolism of the cow and milk are mobilised in the political arena and how they are entrenched in the production of charismatic Yadav politicians.

## **Krishna 'the democratic leader' in Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar**

In this section I focus on selected aspects of Yadav political rhetoric i.e. the representation of democratic values as an innate quality of the ancient Yadavs, and the representation of the ancestor god Krishna as the first 'democratic political leader'. To begin with I survey what the Yadavs of Ahir Para tell me they read about their 'democratic' history and culture. Then, I illustrate what their political and social leaders have to say about Yadavs' predispositions to succeed in the democratic electoral process. Finally, I explore ordinary Yadavs' general political attitudes, and how they assimilate political rhetoric.

### **Caste publications**

Throughout my fieldwork in Mathura, I was constantly directed to written sources that 'my' informants considered relevant for reconstructing the Yadavs' history. This literature consisted of pamphlets, periodicals, magazines and books in English and Hindi published by local and regional caste associations. Here, I provide extracts from a number of publications collected in Ahir Para. In the Introduction to one of the key texts of Yadav history, the ancient 'democratic' Yadavs are described as follows:

'The fortunes of the Yadavs were greatly affected by two peculiarities of their social and political system – their sustained faith in republicanism,...and their comparative freedom from orthodoxy, qualities on which a high value is set at the present day...' (Khedkar 1959: XI)

'Even in the Vedic age the Yadavs were upholders of the Republican ideals of government... The Mahabharata furnishes interesting details regarding the functioning of the republic form of government among the Yadavs... It is now an agreed fact that Sri Krishna, the central figure of the epic narratives tried to defend the republican ideas against the imperialistic movement led by Jarasandha of Magadaha and Kamsa of Mathura' (ibid.: 199-200).

This type of historical reconstruction is commonly found in other books whose aim is to portray the glorious and noble Yadav past (K.C. Yadav 1966; R. Pandey 1968). Moreover, it is commonly found in the yearly and monthly publications of local caste associations. The following are further examples:

'Yadu (the forefather of Krishna) developed a novel system of governance in his Raj. It was democracy where he ruled with the consent of his people in a much more effective manner than what we are doing today. And thus claimed the honour to be the first experimenter of democracy in the world...' (AIYM Jubilee Souvenir 1924-1999, 1999: 10-15).

'Lord Krishna was a great man and the Yadav community should be proud of the path that he left to them. Lord Krishna gave them three principles: democracy, social justice and commitment to equality. These are the bases of our future. He was a democratic leader. He used to respect the views of his citizens. He used to believe that the person who is elected by the citizens has the right to rule. He was the first person to begin a 'democratic way of governance': but others say that France gave birth to democracy' (R.M.S. Yadav, Yadav Kul Dipika, 1999: 69-70).

'Even after the battle of the Mahabharata, we can still find all the characteristics of the Yadav vansh (race) in the contemporary Yadavs. Even today they think in a democratic way and they are ready to fight for justice and political correctness...The Yadav *vansh* has played a very vital role in Indian political history. The Rigveda describes the



heirs of Yadu, Turvasu, Anu, Puru. They were organised in a democratic fashion. They elected their King' (ibid.: 20).

These kinds of statement might make the reader smile. However, a large number of informants were deeply convinced that the Yadavs were natural vessels of 'democratic' values. The kind of literature described above is usually distributed free or at a very low price to the participants of caste association meetings. The number of regular publications is astonishingly large. The content of this literature does not present much variation.

### **Caste association meetings and political speeches**

The content and rhetoric of the speeches delivered by Yadav social leaders and politicians do not differ greatly from the content of the publications just examined. Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav are at times described by their caste supporters as *avatars* (incarnations) of Krishna sent to earth to protect 'the oppressed' and to promote social justice. It is the natural duty of the Yadavs as descendants of Krishna, and the Kshatriyas, to protect the weaker sections of the society. The following is an extract from a speech delivered by Laloo Prasad Yadav at a Yadav national conference in December 1999.

'I believe that whenever the name of Krishna appears, it does not make any sense to avoid politics. Lord Krishna challenged the evils. The history of communalism and various epics are revealed by a number of historians. But whatever the Vedas said, they began with the word Yadav...this is our history...I tell you the Mahabharata is a true epic. There is a description of a 56 crore Yaduvanshi Army, we can therefore safely say that this Krishna Bhavan is dedicated to 180 million Yadavs' (Laloo Prasad Yadav, AIYM Convention, Vaishali-New Delhi, 26 December, 1999).

'Have you, in the whole life, seen such a Krishna-like personality who has never wished to be in power or to be king. Krishna always fought for the upliftment of the poor, he played with them, he resided with them, he made his society with that class. You know, he was the son of a King, he was a prince. He could have easily become a King. But he never did so. He always associated himself with his poor friends, the farmers, the shelterless etc. He passed his life with these people, he struggled for them and he left this world while struggling for those people. He really struggled very hard...Lord Krishna's descendants, from all over the country, the AIYM has achieved the object of bringing all the Yadavs spread all over the country under one title, i.e.

Yadav and the Yadav Mahasabha also inculcated the spirit of unity thereby bringing strength in the collective attempt in the development of India. In the Indian History particularly with reference to the Vedic Period the Yadavs had a great past, a glorious past and Yadavas were known for their bravery and diplomatic wisdom. The Mahabharata period which was the period of Yadavas is known for republican and democratic government' (Harmohan Singh Yadav, Presidential Address, AIYM Convention, Vaishali-New Delhi, 25 December 1999).

The speeches delivered in the caste association meetings often contain passages which exhort the audience to 'indulge into politics' as the most effective vehicle for socio-economic mobility. For example: 'we shall all try to become as Mulayamji and Lalooji', the vice-president of the Uttar Pradesh Yadav Sabha said during a meeting in Agra (1999) and then added 'in every Yadav there is a Mulayam'.

The previous examples were drawn from meetings held at the national and regional levels (see Plate 14 and Plate 15). I now focus on the content of the political rhetoric used by local social leaders and politicians within Mathura town and more specifically in the neighbourhood of Ahir Para. Whenever I attended regional and national Yadav caste association meetings I did so by following the Yadav social and political leaders from Mathura. Then, on our return to town, I was able to observe how they reinterpreted and disseminated what they had heard and understood; how local agents delivered a particular message to the inhabitants of Ahir Para. For the last ten years, local meetings have been regularly organised in the different Yadav neighbourhoods. The organisation of Krishna's birthday celebration and other religious festivals are amongst the main objectives of the organisation. Meetings are also regularly held to discuss the resolutions approved in the regional and national meetings of the AIYM and/or of the Uttar Pradesh Yadav Mahasabha.



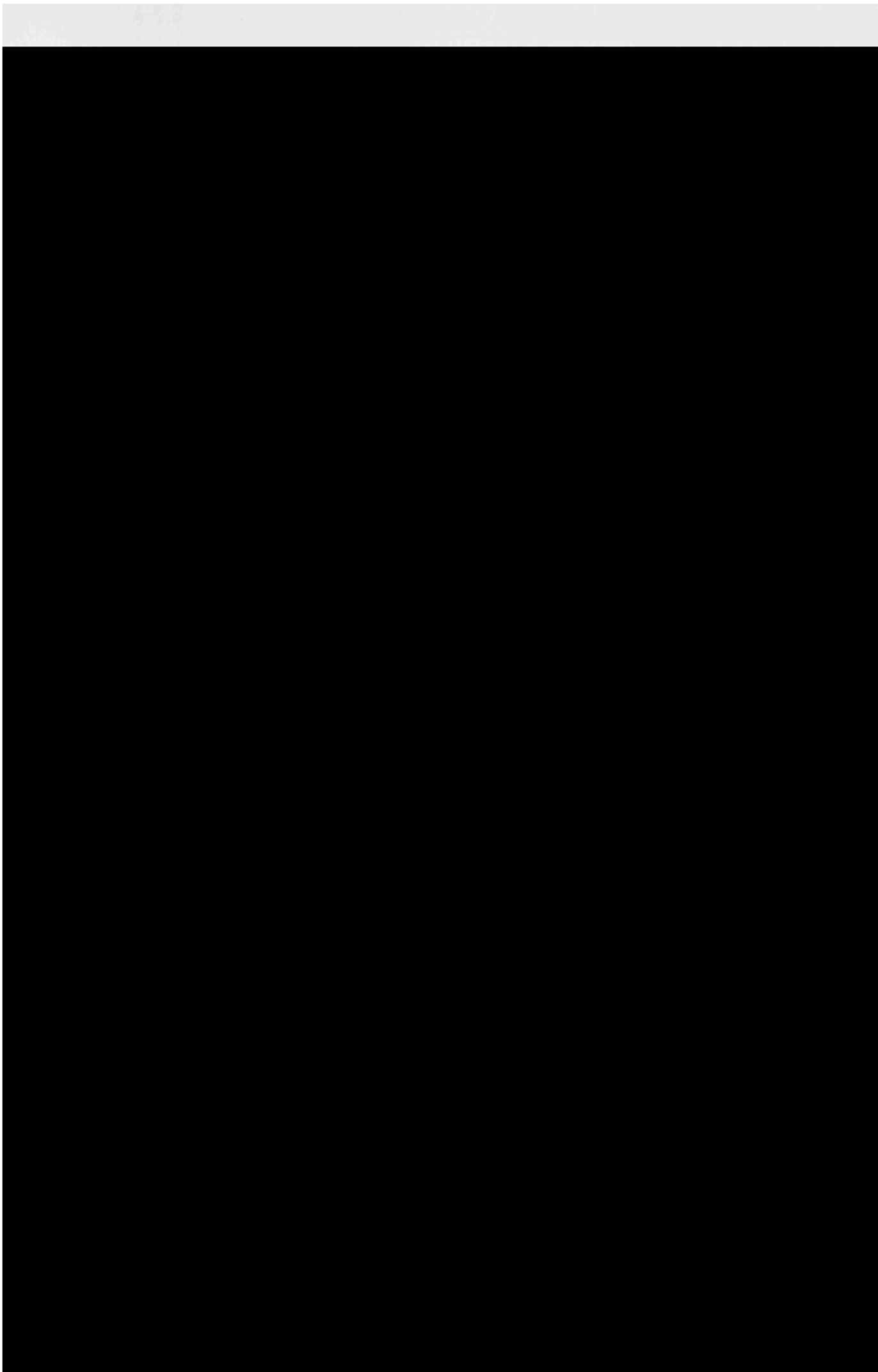




Plate 15: Yadav political leaders at a AIYM Convention (Vaishali-  
New Delhi, 1999)

Each caste meeting in Ahir Para begins with the local leaders exhorting the Yadavs of Mathura town to unity, and to follow the teachings of their ancestor. Local social leaders in Mathura often use episodes from the life of Krishna as metaphors which symbolise the god's heroism and his life commitment to defeat despotism and promote social justice. The following is an extract from a speech delivered on the occasion of the milk strike organised in the summer of 1999. By portraying Krishna as a trade-union leader, an Ahir Para Yadav leader mobilised Mathura milk-sellers to join the strike by saying:

'Sri Krishna prevented the maids from selling butter and milk in the market of Mathura or giving them as tax to the king... And this is because it was the right of the cowherders to use milk and butter for their personal use. Krishna also successfully organised milk strikes which prevented the supply of milk to Mathura. We shall follow his steps'.

These extracts from local speeches should be read as examples of how a particular rhetoric is used locally to address practical issues. This form of rhetoric does not only find expression in verbal discussion, but also in ritual performances.

### **The Killing of Kamsa: a political performance**

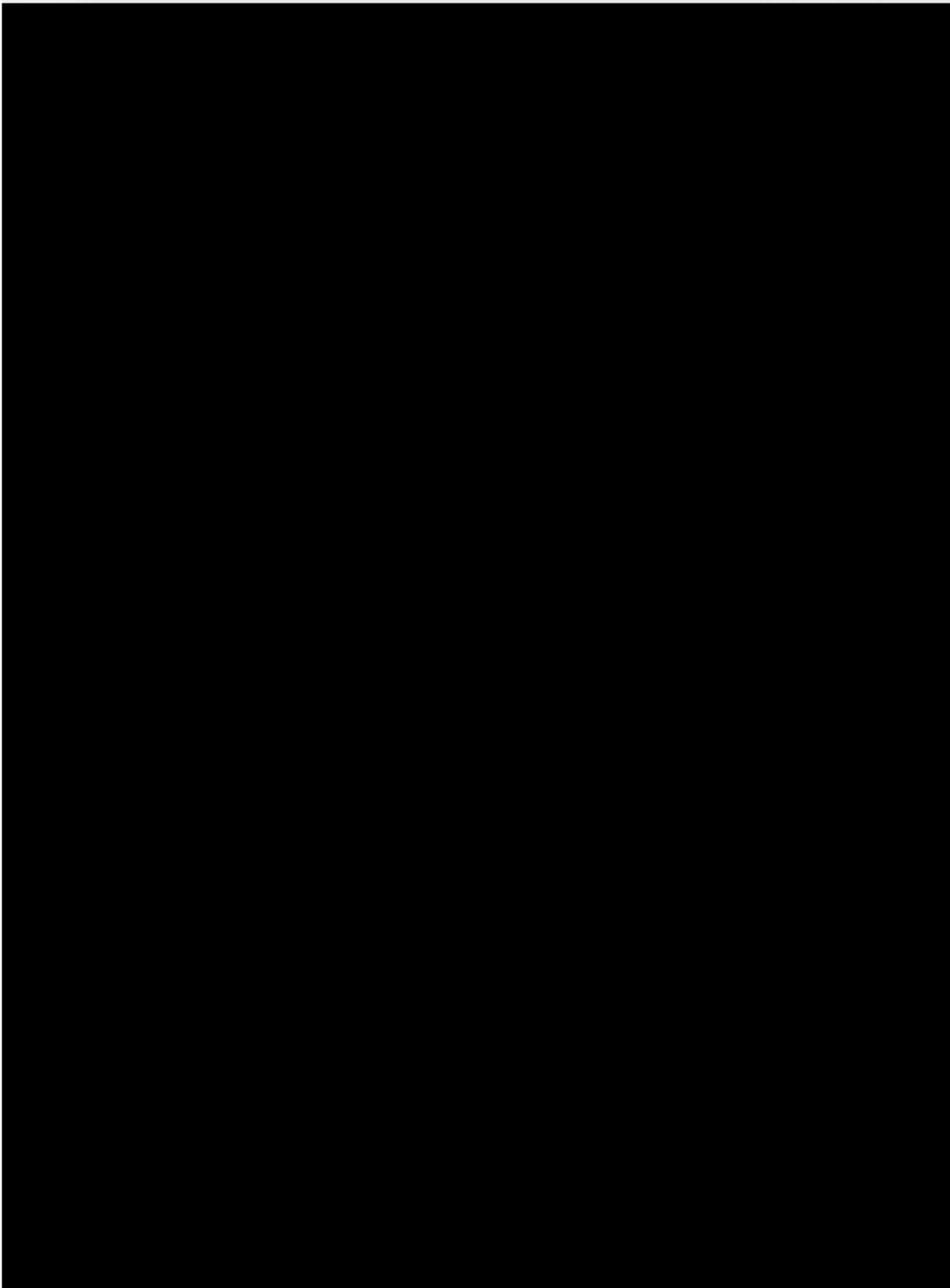
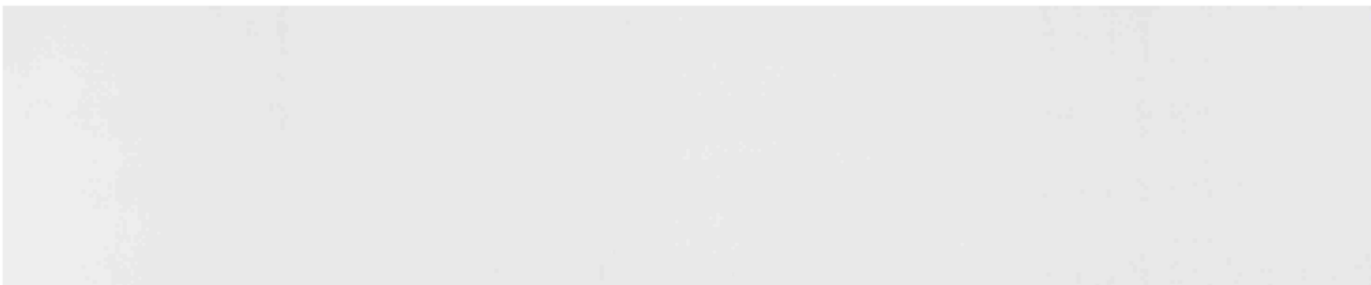
In the last fifteen years, the MYS has organised a number of religious celebrations. Here, for reasons of space, I shall focus only on the Kamsa festival and on the Krishna Lila performance. The Krishna myth narrates how thousands of years ago the throne of Mathura was usurped by Krishna's uncle, the tyrannical Kamsa, and how the grown-up Krishna killed Kamsa to liberate his people from an illegitimate rule. The *Kamsa Vadh ka Mela* (Festival of Kamsa's Destruction) began to be organised by the MYS fifteen years ago. It is portrayed as the celebration of the victory of the democratic Yadavs over an oppressive and despotic monarchy.



Plate 16: Kamsa Festival Procession, Sadar Bazaar (1999).



Plate 17: Krishna and Balram, Kamsa Festival





This festival has been traditionally performed by Chaubes, a community of Brahman priests who act as ritual specialists and guides for pilgrims visiting the holy town of Mathura and Braj (Lynch 1996). It is celebrated annually in early November and the Chaubes are the masters of the festival. In 1980, the local Yadav committee decided that it was time for the Yadav community to begin to celebrate what was indeed 'their' festival. Krishna was the one who killed Kamsa, and since Krishna was a Yadav, the Kamsa Festival belonged to the Yadavs. Thus for centuries the Chaubes had performed the ritual illegitimately because local Yadavs were too poor and oppressed to object. In 1984, the MYS wrote a petition to the Superintendent of Police, who was a Yadav at the time, and obtained permission to celebrate the Kamsa Festival in Sadar Bazaar. In the same year, the Yadavs of Sadar Bazaar began to organise the Krishna Lilas, traditional religious theatrical dramas which enact the life of Krishna.

Ram Yadav, one of the promoters of the Kamsa Festival and of the local Krishna Lilas pointed out to me that with the Kamsa Festival, Ahir Para Yadavs wished to assert that Krishna and Balram (Krishna's brother) were Yadavs. What the MYS contests about Chaube performance is its illegitimacy. During the Kamsa Festival two children are dressed up as Krishna and Balram, and are carried around in a procession through the streets of the town. When they act in the drama they are not merely 'actors' but become the two divine persons and are worshipped as such throughout the procession (see Plate 16, Plate 17 and Plate 18). Informants told me that only the Yadavs who are the descendants of Krishna could legitimately represent Krishna and Balram. In contrast, the Chaubes, who are not Yadavs, have nothing to do with the two divine brothers.

The same pattern is followed in the celebrations of the Krishna Lilas that accompany and follow the Kamsa Festival. The person who acts as Krishna in the performance should be a Yadav. In November 1999, during the Krishna Lila performance in Sadar Bazaar, multiple associations were made between the actors, the story they were acting and the genealogical pedigree of the audience, which was largely Yadav. The Krishna Lilas were seen not only as the history of Krishna but also as the history of Mathura Yadavs, and more specifically of Ahir

Para Yadavs.<sup>139</sup> In the performance references to places close to Ahir Para were regularly made. These made the performance highly realistic and almost historical. Conversations with spectators about these performances support this impression. I overheard the actor who personified Kamsa telling a group of young Yadavs that at Mahadev Ghat, the most important site of worship for the local Yadavs, the Ahirs had raped the mother of Kamsa. Immediately one of the youths came to tell me about what he had just come to know. He was proud to descend from the people who ‘destroyed the imperialist Kamsa’ (English word). Krishna and the Ahirs killed him and gave people freedom to govern themselves. ‘Social Justice’ is the message of Krishna, and it is also the message of the SP’ added his friend Arun, a young SP militant. ‘Lord Krishna had always helped the poor and needy Kshatriyas. There is a similarity between the ideas of Mulayam Singh and Lord Krishna’, another young Yadav commented.

### **Talking about ‘politics’, ‘corruption’ and ‘gods’**

The portrayal of Yadav politicians as ‘hero gods’ contrasts sharply with ethnographies which illustrate Indians’ dismal view of their politicians (see for example Ruud 2000 and Parry 2000). In these accounts, politicians are described as ‘dirty’, corrupt and self-serving. Similarly, in the language of indology *artha*, the pursuit of worldly interests, is said to be inferior to *dharma*, the higher religious principle (cf. Dumont 1970). Accordingly, in the normative Hindu system, politics is morally dubious because it is about power, clout, influence and contacts (Ruud 2000: 134).

In many Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar households, there is at least one person involved directly or indirectly with politics (see Chapter 6). A significant number of these people are aware of the bad reputation that politicians (and hence they themselves) have, and openly acknowledge, and embrace, the dirtiness of the ‘political game’. In addition, a number of informants also sought to distance

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<sup>139</sup> For comparative ethnographic data on caste/community festivals see Osella and Osella (2000a: 162-167).

themselves from the murky world of politics and corruption. Pavan Yadav (30 years old) is the son of one of the leading members of the 'Chaudhri Parivar'. His father is a locally powerful politician and an active member of the Samajwadi Party. Pavan told me that he does not like politics. With this statement he meant that he does not like the roughness and corruption that 'doing politics' involves. He knows that he was able to attend the best public school in Mathura because his father and uncle threatened and bribed the school's Principal. He is aware that he obtained his job because of political contacts and bribes. He also knows that most of the wealth of his family comes from usury, which is sustained by continuous acts of violence and usurpation. He knows that his uncle's main job is to speed up legal proceedings and that his 'customers' come from all over Western U.P.

Pavan views these practices as illegitimate. In line with Parry's ethnography of corruption (2000), Pavan does not think that *bhrashtachar* (corruption) and *ghus* (bribes) are 'morally neutral' activities. He also thinks that the caste title Yadav is not 'morally neutral', and that a 'bad' reputation is intrinsic to it. Similarly, as part of a campaign against corruption, Rajiv Yadav (26 years old, student) dropped the suffix Yadav from his name. Furthermore, he wrote a couple of articles in the local Yadav newsletter in which he proposed that the challenge to Yadav youths in the twenty-first century should be to make the Yadav caste title respectable. Yadavs, he said, need to regain a clean and respectable image which overcomes the unfortunate but popular *goonda* stereotype.

At the local level, however, Pavan and Rajiv's dissenting voices remain very weak, and are strongly criticised, or barely noticed, by the significant number of people for whom having a '*goonda*' reputation and being actively involved in 'politics' is a matter of pride not shame. The majority of informants strongly value their ability to make 'political' contacts, and often proudly emphasised how in Mathura town people prefer to approach Yadav fixers rather than fixers from other castes. They highlight their ability to 'do politics', and they do not attempt to disguise their illegal activities. To have influential political contacts (better if they are within the family) is locally considered a source of prestige, and not something to be ashamed of. This is not only the case amongst members of the Yadav community, but is also common among other castes. One

of the first things that local Baniyas put in their sons or daughters' bio-data, which they use for marriage arrangement purposes, is their family connections with locally powerful BJP leaders.

In the same fashion, I recorded endless positive comments about Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav, both by Yadav and non-Yadav informants. When local Yadavs refer to their politicians as *goondas*, their use of the word does not necessarily imply moral judgment. For example, during a discussion with a group of Yadavs about the forthcoming municipality elections in Sadar Bazaar, three people were ready to bet Rs. 500 that S.A. Yadav would win. I asked why they were so sure, and they told me that 'he had the look of a *goonda*', and people (especially women) like it. The '*goonda* look' implies a strong muscular physique, a leather jacket (even in 45°C), sunglasses, a powerful motorbike and a mischievous smile. Hence, in many instances, the '*goonda*' appellation is used to convey a 'cool' and 'successful' image.

Most local Yadavs think that it is precisely through 'politics' and 'goondaism' that they obtained 'dignity', 'power' and importantly wealth. It is worth recalling that local Yadavs are generally not victims of 'corruption', but the perpetrators.<sup>140</sup> Accordingly, they view their charismatic and allegedly corrupt politicians as 'heroic protectors' of their community and as models for their sons. In Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar I rarely overheard local Yadavs making moral judgments about the conduct of their charismatic politicians. Whenever politicians were criticised, they were not accused of being corrupt but of not being 'loyal' to their community.

I often overheard comments by local Yadavs which strongly critiqued Mulayam Singh Yadav. However, these people did not criticise him for being allegedly 'corrupt', or for his alleged criminal record, but because he allegedly did not distribute 'the fruits of power' evenly within the Yadav community. In these accounts, Mulayam Singh Yadav is said to have privileged 'his' people from Etawah and Kannauj and forgotten about the Yadavs from western U.P. Similarly, in many instances during fieldwork, local *netas* (political leaders) were

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<sup>140</sup> For comparative ethnography see the case-study of the Jats illustrated by Jeffrey and Lerche (2000).

strongly criticised, and accused of allegedly receiving money from Mulayam Singh and the Samajwadi Party and keeping the money for themselves instead of redistributing it within the community. Accordingly, *netas* are accused of keeping the money for their *parivars* or for their mistresses.

On the occasion of the election campaign for the 1999 Lok Sabha, a local Yadav SP politician was publicly criticised for keeping part of the campaign budget for himself and his alleged 'Brahman' mistress. This contestation was articulated in a spectacular way. One morning, the inhabitants of Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar woke up and found their neighbourhood covered with hundreds of leaflets. The text was written in a powerful ironic language, and portrayed the Yadav politician as a castrated man. It described how the SP politician completely lost control of his manliness and became the puppet of his Brahman mistress. Again, this public contestation did not criticise 'corruption' per se, but it contested the 'unfair' distribution of 'the fruits of corruption'. Importantly, what was at stake, and considered to be 'wrong', was the lack of loyalty from the *neta* towards his community. It was precisely this behaviour that was considered incorrect. In contrast, corruption was taken for granted and as a necessary precondition for politics. After the elections, the U.P. Samajwadi Party committee decided to suspend the local *neta*.

This example shows how local citizens possess the means to make their political leaders accountable. In the same fashion it also suggests that locally, corruption does not provoke strong outrage, or at least not enough outrage to push people into the streets to protest (cf. Osella and Osella 2000b). I suspect that politicians in Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar are generally not openly criticised because, in part, they behave according to the same social norms that are present within the society they operate in. It is true that there are some dissenting voices, like that of Pavan. These voices, however, remain ambiguous. People like Pavan may criticise the dirtiness of politics and verbally distance themselves from it, but their behaviour is not always consistent with their words. After all, Pavan did not refuse his job in the local post office, even if he was aware that his uncle had paid for it. Pavan's behaviour exemplifies how politics remains an ambiguous world which does not give rise to simple 'moral' guidelines (see Ruud 2000).

To sum up, the Yadav political ethnography strongly suggests that not all Indians think their politicians are ‘bullies’ and ‘dirty’, and at the same time not all Indians attempt to distance themselves from politics or to portray their involvements in politics as merely strategic (cf. Ruud 2000). This ‘positive’ way of looking at politicians and politics should be taken seriously. It may help to shed some light on the phenomena of the ‘criminalisation of politics’ in Northern India. In the last U.P. state elections almost 50 per cent of the candidates had criminal charges against them or were under investigation.<sup>141</sup> Indeed, the issue to be explored is why do people vote for gangster-politicians? In my experience, local Yadavs support allegedly corrupt and criminal politicians because of their strong identification with them, and because of the material gains that they can obtain. However, even if materialistic motives count a great deal, the role of charisma and political rhetoric should not be underestimated.

Local Yadavs are indeed under the spell of Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav. Informants describe their charismatic politicians as ‘saviours’ and ‘protectors’ of the poor people, as skilled in statecraft and fighters for ‘social justice’. They often stress Mulayam Singh Yadav’s heroic achievements, and they associate him with local Ahir hero-gods and the god Krishna. These associations should not be a surprise. The Ahir/Yadav pantheon provides local Yadavs with ‘gods’ who are linked with ‘mundane affairs’, and whose ‘morality’ is ambiguous in a similar way to that of charismatic Yadav politicians. It is within this religious and normative system that claims such as ‘Mulayam Singh thinks like Krishna’ should also be evaluated.

In the previous sections, I described how Yadav political rhetoric is explicitly aware of Krishna’s ‘amorality’. Great efforts are made to construct a ‘clean’ Krishna with moral integrity and ‘democratic values’. However, during rallies and political meetings, in order to create a bond with the audience, Yadav politicians compare themselves to a Krishna who has lost his sexual ambiguity, but not his ‘mischievousness’, his ‘statecraft abilities’, ‘his physical strength’ and importantly his human touch (see Chapter 6). In many ways, Krishna’s ambiguity

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<sup>141</sup> See India Today 14 January 2002; The Hindu, 22 January 2002; The Time of India, 3 February 2002; The Pioneer, 8 February 2002; The Indian Express, 10 February 2002; The Times of India, 26 February 2002.

and humanity makes him the perfect ‘god’ for Yadav politicians to claim affinity with.

Although a comprehensive analysis of the nature of contemporary political charisma and of how it enters into conflict with ‘democratic’ ideals is beyond the scope of this thesis, I suggest that in order to understand the successful appeal of charismatic *goonda*-politicians, one also needs to evaluate the local religious systems and the shared social values within which politicians operate. A comprehensive analysis of the ways people understand ‘gods’ and ‘the political’ may also help to explain how political corruption is locally understood and perpetuated.

## Conclusion

By ‘linking’ Krishna with the modern democratic political world the Yadav heritage supports contemporary Yadav political interests and simultaneously the construction of an all-India Yadav community. A number of Yadav subdivisions are said to share the same substance, the ‘same’ political skills and political interests. Paramount to this rhetoric is the idiom of ‘religious descent’. This idiom is used symbolically to create links of ‘substance’ between Ahir hero-gods, Ahir warriors, Krishna-the-politician, Yadav contemporary political leaders and ordinary Yadavs. In the next chapter, I show how the language of ‘primordially’ and ‘essence’ can become extremely dynamic when mixed with the active political representations of the Samajwadi Party (cf. Geertz 1993: 308; Brass 1979: 35-41). I show how Yadav ‘heritage’ becomes visible and effective in Sadar Bazaar and in the streets of Mathura through political performances.

The centrality of mythical and religious themes in Yadav political rhetoric provides insights in to the modern transformation of caste and its relation with politics. What is at stake are the particular ways in which the politics of the past works within the ideological framework of caste. Importantly, Yadav heritage links the local kinship and religious systems with the realm of ‘existing politics’ and ‘democracy’ through sacred descent. This way of ‘being in the past’ and understanding the link between the past and the present helps the Yadavs to

construct their own unique view of 'democracy'. The ethnography of the Yadavs is an example of what has been called the *vernacularisation* of 'democracy'. It also shows the 'different' shapes that the rhetoric of democracy can take in different socio-cultural settings and amongst different communities.



## Chapter 6

### *'We are a caste of politicians': performing politics*

#### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter I showed how 'democracy' is rhetorically reinterpreted by a number of Yadav politicians and intellectuals and how locals perceived 'politicians' and 'politics'. I showed how a specific caste view of 'democracy' is successfully deployed and performed in the political arena and simultaneously used to reinforce a sense of Yadav commonality. In Yadav caste political rhetoric 'democracy' is portrayed as a primordial phenomena passed in the blood from the ancestor warrior-god Krishna to the contemporary Yadavs. 'Democracy' is also depicted as a 'question of numbers' and, as such, as having an affinity with a presumed Yadav 'numerical strength'. Finally, 'democracy' is viewed as a promoter of social justice and equality, and the Yadavs as the natural carriers and promoters of such noble principles. Notwithstanding the multivocal ways in which the language of democracy is employed, Yadav political rhetoric depicts 'democracy', ultimately, as an institution that works for the Yadavs (and to some extent for the 'backward communities') and as 'a stage' (Hansen 2001) on which Yadav interests and demands can be successfully articulated and fought over.

This chapter describes how caste, factions and personal interests are fought over in the local political arena. What is at stake here is the organisational ability of the Yadav caste associations and of the Samajwadi Party which not only shapes ideas of what the Yadav community is, but also promotes the pursuit of power as a way to get economic benefits and social status. This chapter thus explores how caste consciousness shapes active political mobilisation; how active politics informs a sense of commonality amongst Yadavs; and finally how folk theories of descent and constructed 'ethno-historical imaginaries' intertwine and shape such dynamics. I suggest that in order to understand the relation between caste and politics special attention should be paid to the effective ways folk descent theories are deployed and performed in the political arena in everyday

life. Such deployments are not only linked to the process of defining ‘we’ (Yadavs) in opposition to ‘they’ (for instance the local Bania caste, the BJP government...), but also to local perceptions of ‘the political’ and of what it means ‘to do politics’. This complex mix of interactions has an important role in generating political participatory resources and solidarity amongst the Yadavs of Mathura.

The argument presented in the following sections is organised in two parts. To begin with I describe Yadav political involvement in Ahir Para. Thereafter I explore how caste, clan, faction and party attachments manifest themselves in different political processes, such as the milk strike organised by the SP at the beginning of the election campaign for the 1999 Lok Sabha election; the 1999 Lok Sabha elections; and the municipality elections held in Ahir Para in April 1999.

### **‘We are a caste of politicians’**

Today, Mathura’s ordinary Yadavs say that they are by caste ‘natural’ politicians. By saying this they not only refer to the outstanding numerical presence of Yadav MPs in the state, or to the symbolic figures of Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav, but to their marked political activism, their ancestral factionalism and the perceived innate ability of their caste to ‘do politics’. It is my suggestion that with politics they refer to their ability to make political connections and to benefit from state resources. Three of the four ward representatives of Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar/Civil Lines area belong to the Yadav community. Local Yadavs are indeed politically influential.<sup>142</sup> The data on political behaviour collected in a survey of Sadar Bazaar’s main communities confirm such a picture. Table 6.1 shows that 39 per cent of the Yadavs in the survey have a family member in politics, for example a ward or *panchayat* representative, MLA or

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<sup>142</sup> Sadar Bazaar’s Yadavs have been winning at least one seat in the local Municipality elections from 1967. See Meeting Board Registers, Cantonment Board Elections from 1924.

MP.<sup>143</sup> Similarly, a very high proportion of the Yadavs (75 per cent) personally know someone in politics, and 35 per cent had recently contacted a politician in their constituency, which mainly meant an MLA or MP. Yadavs clearly have more political connections than other communities in Sadar Bazaar.<sup>144</sup> Local politicians are local fixers and brokers (*dalal*); most of these men have established their credibility through extended kinship structures, moneylending and patronage. The ethos of action, violence and male honour inform their positions. They act as brokers for all the communities and not only for their caste mates. I saw many high-caste people, who refer to Yadavs as *goondas*, using their ‘services’. Their connections and political influence are thus practically acknowledged.

**Table 6.1: Political connections in Sadar Bazaar<sup>145</sup>**

Caste/Community	Family member in politics	Personally know a politician	Personally contacted a politician	Number
Upper castes	21%	61%	18%	75
Yadavs	39%	75%	35%	65
OBCs	10%	80%	20%	10
Scheduled Castes	18%	64%	27%	22
Muslims	12%	51%	12%	41
Other	10%	33%	10%	10
All	23%	64%	22%	223

Source: Mathura Survey

Notes: Table entries based on all respondents (no information was recorded for 2 cases)

Ahir Para Yadavs are not only very well ‘politically’ connected, they are also politically highly active. Moreover, such political activism is not limited to a marginal elite group. Most of Ahir Para’s Yadavs vote, they are members of political parties, they actively participate during election campaigns and they are

<sup>143</sup> Survey questions: Is any member of your family a politician? Do you personally know any party leaders or any candidates in this constituency? Have you ever contacted any political leader (MLA, MP, Party leader) for any need or problem?

<sup>144</sup> In particular, they are significantly more likely than average to have a family member in politics and to have personally contacted a politician.

<sup>145</sup> The ‘Forward Castes’ category is composed of Brahmans, Banias and Rajputs; the OBCs of Malis and Jats; the SC of Dhobis, Jatavs and Valmikis.

obsessed with politics and love to talk about it. Table 6.2 shows that vote turn-out is high for all the communities in Sadar Bazaar.<sup>146</sup> However, the Yadavs are significantly more ‘politically’ involved than average if we look at their activism during the election campaign (attending rallies, canvassing door to door, collecting money and/or distributing leaflets), and their party membership (41 per cent). Table 6.3 shows the CSDS data on political participation in the whole of Uttar Pradesh. Sadar Bazaar is undoubtedly an exceptionally politicised place if compared with the data on Uttar Pradesh as a whole. Notwithstanding that, compared to the other communities in Uttar Pradesh, Yadav involvement in the election campaign (28 per cent) and in party activity (10 per cent) is still quite high.

**Table 6.2: Political participation in Sadar Bazaar**

Caste/Community	Voted in 1999 LS election	Participated in election campaign	Member of a political party	Number
Upper Castes	72%	23%	24%	75
Yadavs	80%	39%	41%	65
OBCs	70%	20%	-	10
Scheduled Castes	76%	18%	32%	22
Muslim	85%	12%	5%	41
Other	82%	9%	-	10
All	78%	24%	24%	223

Source: Mathura Survey

Notes: Table entries based on all respondents (no information was recorded for 2 cases)

<sup>146</sup> Survey questions: In the last Lok Sabha Election some people were able to cast their vote, while others were unable to. How about you? Were you able to cast your vote or not?; During the election people do various things like organising election meetings, joining processions, contributing money... to help a party or a candidate. Did you do any such things yourself during the election campaign?; Are you member of a political party?

**Table 6.3: Political participation in Uttar Pradesh**

Caste/Community	Voted in 1999 LS election	Participated in election campaign	Member of a political party	Number
Upper Castes	90%	32%	9%	343
Yadavs	84%	28%	10%	102
OBCs	84%	22%	5%	344
Scheduled Castes	91%	23%	6%	272
Muslim	92%	23%	2%	209
Other	93%	24%	-	40
All	89%	26%	6%	1310

Source: National Election Study 1999, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies Data Unit, Delhi.

Table 6.4 shows how interested people in Mathura are in politics and public affairs.<sup>147</sup> Overall, 27 per cent of the sample said they were very interested. The Yadavs and Scheduled castes were the two most interested groups, with 39 per cent and 41 per cent respectively saying they were very interested in politics. However, if we look at all the people who said that they were either very interested, or somewhat interested, in politics, then the Yadavs, with 70 per cent, are significantly more likely than average to be politically engaged. The material on Yadav political behaviour mirrors the existence of a strong culture of political participation. In the last twenty years the latter has been shaped both by the activities of the Yadav caste associations and by the 'local political' battle for the pursuit of power. In the next section I explore the particular relation between Yadavs and the Samajwadi Party and how this is intertwined with the ideology propagated by the AIYM.

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<sup>147</sup> Survey Question: Leaving aside the period of elections, how much interest would you say you have in politics and public affairs?

**Table 6.4: Political interest, Sadar Bazaar**

Caste/Community	A great deal of interest	Some interest	No interest at all	Number
Upper castes	20%	31%	49%	75
Yadavs	39%	30%	30%	66
OBC	30%	10%	60%	10
Scheduled Castes	41%	18%	41%	22
Muslim	12%	22%	66%	41
Other	30%	10%	60%	10
All	27%	26%	47%	224

Source: Mathura Survey

Notes: Table entries based on all respondents (no information was recorded for 1 case)

### ‘Symbolic’ representation and ‘electoral’ representation in Ahir Para

In their political speeches, Yadav politicians often relate themselves and their political agenda to Lord Krishna and his ‘socialist’ deeds. This is an example extracted from a speech by Laloo Prasad Yadav:

‘So Lord Krishna, our god was known as *makhan cor* (butter thief) and when Laloo was seated on Bihar’s throne, he was blamed as a *ghas-cor* (the grass thief). I repeat they blame me as a Grass thief. I ask you to have a glance all around – whether it is a village in Uttar Pradesh...in every police station...you will find Laloo’s name as thief of grass. They want to stop the success of the heirs of Krishna!’ (Laloo Prasad Yadav, AIYM Convention, Vaishali-New Delhi, 26 December 1999).<sup>148</sup>

As illustrated during the Kamsa Festival performance (see Chapter 5) the participants made explicit links between themselves and their ancestor Krishna, and between the latter and Mulayam Singh Yadav. Likewise, when Mulayam Singh Yadav was appointed Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh in 1993, I was told that all the Yadavs of Sadar Bazaar celebrated in the streets of the neighbourhood by screaming ‘I am Mulayam’. Such ‘identifications’ are in line with the AIYM ideology, which portrays the Yadav *samaj* as a ‘natural’ community with ‘natural’ representatives. To quote Spencer: ‘what we have is a kind of politics in which

<sup>148</sup> In this quote Mr Laloo Prasad Yadav is referring to the ‘grass scam’ in which he was implicated in the mid-nineties.

the force of the idea of “representation” had connected it to other areas of popular culture’ (Spencer 1997: 12).

In the specific ethnographic case of Ahir Para such ideas are connected to the local understanding of the relation between Krishna and Yadav political icons, and between local heroes’ cults and contemporary hero-politicians (see Chapters 4 and 5).<sup>149</sup> In Yadav local mythology and local cults, hero-gods who protect and defend the weaker people and the cows, are an overwhelming presence. This idea of ‘representation’ has been locally reinterpreted in a language which has roots in Yadav re-invented ‘democratic’ political traditions. Accordingly, as a symbol of the Yadav community, Mulayam Singh Yadav embodies those he represents, and at the same time those he represents embody him. This kind of ‘representation’ can be independent from elections. Yadav representatives represent Yadavs primarily because they themselves are ‘Yadav’ and not solely because they are elected to do so. The actual voting is not always considered indispensable.

The political ethnography of Ahir Para partly supports such ideas of representation. In Ahir Para the majority of the Yadavs who belong to a political party are members of the SP. Overall, of the Yadavs who said that there is ‘only one party for their caste’, 93 per cent named the SP as being that party (1999 Mathura Election Study). Similarly, in Uttar Pradesh as a whole, in the 1999 general elections, 77 per cent of the Yadavs voted for the SP, and 66 per cent of the Yadavs think that Mulayam Singh Yadav should be the prime minister of India (NES 1999, CSDS).

Such attachment is empirically expressed when factions within the community come together in the name of Mulayam Singh and of the Yadav community. Such an instance is well illustrated by the ethnography of the milk strike presented in the following section. However, as the ethnography of the municipality and parliamentary elections will show, caste/party attachment is not fixed (D. Gupta 2000). Despite the emphasis on homogeneity and unity presented by the local caste associations, local Yadavs are also extremely divided. Competition, rivalry, and divergence between different lineages, clans and

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<sup>149</sup> For the cultural importance of heroes in Indian politics see Dickey (1993) and Price (1989).

factions are endemic. Amongst Mathura Yadavs there is, therefore, an ongoing tension between the unity of the community and its endemic factionalism and heterogeneous interests, and this is reflected in their voting behaviour.

## **Factions and rivalries**

In Ahir Para there are basically three factions which are more or less defined by kinship: the 'Netaji Parivar', the 'Dudh Parivar' and the 'Chaudhri Parivar'. Generally, members of a faction are not individual households but minimal or maximal lineages. Although active faction membership is confined to men, the women are not completely excluded. Women whose husbands belong to different factions are not supposed to talk to each other, even if they come from the same natal place.

In the long term, factions and alliances do not stay fixed (see Rao 1970: 167-215). During my twenty-month fieldwork, Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar Yadavs were divided in two stable factions: the members of the Chaudhri Parivar and their allies, and the members of the Dudh and Netaji Parivars and their allies. The allied castes were composed of other Yadav clans and other castes which were linked with the main factions by patron-client relations. As will become clear in the following sections, the neat divide between the Chaudhri Parivar, Dudh Parivar and Netaji Parivar was determined by the battle for the pursuit of local power.

Factions and their allies seek to promote their own interests and activities rather than those of their community as a whole. Among each faction, members have close interactions. They go to the same *akhara*, the same 'chicken and whisky' picnics and the same tea stalls. Members consult each other on matters related to business and marriage. In particular, it is during the process of marriage arrangement that cooperation and solidarity between members of the same faction become most visible. By custom, the most prominent men of a faction visit the family of the 'prospective' bride 'to check' their background. Marriage arrangements thus rely on the approval of faction members. At the marriage ceremonies, those who belong to hostile factions are not invited.



On a day-to-day basis, members of the different factions spend a great deal of time gossiping (*gap-sap*) about members of rival factions and making 'plans' to put them in a bad light. For example, two months after my arrival in Ahir Para my bicycle was stolen from in front of the house of the leader of the Chaudhri Parivar. Members of the Chaudhri Parivar immediately blamed the members of the Dudh and Netaji Parivars. They said the theft should warn me about the bad nature of the other two factions. They are thieves (*cor*), I was told. By the same token, members of the Dudh and Netaji Parivars told me that this episode should open my eyes to the 'bad' (*badmash*) and 'criminal' nature of the Chaudhri Parivar. According to them, nobody in Sadar Bazaar would have the courage to steal from the house of such a powerful man in broad daylight. In their opinion, only a member of the Chaudhri Parivar could have done it; 'to put us in a bad light'. The bicycle episode is one of many disputes which, most of the time, were created 'out of nothing' to maintain and feed hostilities and rivalries between the different factions. On many occasions these disputes sparked violent confrontations, which mainly took the form of *lathi* fights between the young males.

Rivalry manifests itself not only between different factions but also within factions. Non-Yadav informants often told me that amongst Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar Yadavs there was no recognised leader because every Yadav wants to be the chief. On several occasions local Banias made fun of their Yadav neighbours' endless rivalry. They said that each Yadav believes he is Mulayam Singh Yadav and wants to be the boss.<sup>150</sup> This internal competition is expressed daily by 'talking badly' about everyone who is perceived as a competitor. This internal rivalry is, however, accompanied by a strong pride in being Yadav which on particular occasions enhances a strong caste /community solidarity.

## **Rallying around the milk: the opening of the election campaign, parliamentary elections 1999**

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<sup>150</sup> D. Gupta (1997: 154) describes how also amongst the Jats of Western Uttar Pradesh, every Jat thinks of himself as a *chaudhry* (headman).

The political ethnography of the milk strike held in Ahir Para at the beginning of the election campaign for the 1999 Lok Sabha elections sheds light on how caste consciousness shapes active political mobilisation and how active politics informs a sense of commonality amongst the Yadavs. It shows the complex web of motives that influence individuals' decision-making. Both material interests and considerations of caste are present. Quasi-ethnic caste sentiments are strong because local people realise that there are 'real gains to be made by those who act on a vision of caste as a bond of entitlement and moral allegiance' (S. Bayly 1999: 348).

Due to the political character of the strike I was not able to participate directly in the 'actual' rallies, which were characterised by stopping the public dairy vans from entering the town, violent actions towards the drivers of the milk trucks, and finally by an animated procession which ran from the centre of the town to the District Magistrate's (DM) residence. I was only able to observe these events from a distance. I integrate this passive 'observation' with information gathered from discussions, both overheard and provoked, during the week of the milk mobilisation as well as during the previous and subsequent weeks. Finally, the data collected at various local caste association meetings held in the three weeks before the milk demonstration proved to be particularly insightful in understanding how the strike became a source of caste solidarity.

The ethnography of the milk strike attempts to explore how competition, divergences and rivalries coexist and paradoxically reinforce Yadavs' sense of unity and commonality. The milk strike is one of the events in which the local Yadavs acted as a united community. Internal cleavages like lineages, clans, economic and political affiliations were put firmly in the background. During the strike and collective protests associated with it, members of the Yadav community with no personal material interest in the economy of milk and with different political affiliations found it 'natural' to join hands with the economically lower milk vendors from the countryside and to attack the public dairies, symbolically associated with the BJP government and the local Bania caste.

## The organisation of the strike and the Samajwadi Party

In the last week of July 1999, the Uttar Pradesh BJP government stepped up the campaign against the production of adulterated milk. The campaign developed after different district administrations received a number of complaints that adulterated milk was being supplied in the markets. Soon after, the Anti-adulteration Act was implemented and raids were carried out on the premises of dairy-owners and milk dealers in several districts in U.P.<sup>151</sup>

In response to this action the president of the Samajwadi Party, Mulayam Singh Yadav, called for an all-Uttar Pradesh milk strike and asked his supporters to stop the public dairy vans from entering the towns, and to pour the milk into the rivers. The local newspapers published pictures of a 'white' Ganga river and described how Mulayam Singh Yadav was preparing the ground for his election campaign. The Lok Sabha elections were in fact called for mid-September. Demonstrations in support of the milk vendors (the *dudh-vala*) were organised throughout Uttar Pradesh. Mathura's Samajwadi Party units also quickly entered into action.

Although the Samajwadi Party is not politically strong in Mathura constituency, Mulayam Singh Yadav's party is extremely vocal in Mathura town. During fieldwork, many local issues were politicised and manipulated by the local Yadav Samajwadi Party activists and taken as occasions for demonstrations, strikes or squatting. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the political activism of the SP makes the Yadav community extremely visible and, I suggest, makes it appear numerically strong and powerful.

The ideology of the Samajwadi Party is in some ways complementary to that espoused by the AIYM. The SP network provides dynamism to the quasi-ethnic discourse developed by Yadav caste associations and 'historians'. Yadav caste political rhetoric is centred upon the construction of 'Yadav essences'. Contemporary Yadavs are conceived as heirs of the qualities and skills of their Yadava ancestors. By the same token, charismatic Yadav political leaders tell

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<sup>151</sup> Hindustan Times, 3 August 1999.

ordinary Yadavs that if they want they can become like 'Mulayam'. They say that in every Yadav there is a 'Mulayam', i.e. every Yadav has a predisposition for politics. However, SP politicians explicitly say that these predispositions need to be brought out *by action*. Yadav politicians ask their caste mates to assert themselves, to be proud of being Yadav. To gain self respect (*samman*) and dignity (*man-samman*) is their motto.

In their speeches local leaders of the Samajwadi Party emphasise the party opposition to the 'communist' BJP and to the 'corrupt' Congress. Attention is focused on how these parties betray the 'ordinary' people, the poor people. The Samajwadi Party presents itself as a party that defends the interests of the poor and weak and helps them gain self respect.

A.P. Yadav, one of the prominent Yadav political leaders of Ahir Para, was in charge of the organisation of the strike in Mathura. He is currently the district president of the Samajwadi Party unit in Mathura town and he is also the president of the Uttar Pradesh Yadav Mahasabha. In the main entrance of his house there is a big picture of him with Mulayam Singh Yadav. Many consider his personal friendship with Mulayam his primary source of power and wealth. A.P. Yadav is the leading personality of the 'Netaji Parivar', one of the Yadav factions in the neighbourhood of Ahir Para.

The atmosphere between the different factions in the neighbourhood was often incredibly tense, and violent confrontations between them regularly occurred during my fieldwork. The battle for economic and political resources was the cause of most of the disputes. Ahir Para Yadavs are also politically divided. Despite the fact that in Ahir Para the majority of Yadavs who belong to a political party are members of the Samajwadi Party, and the majority of Yadavs who feel close to a political party feel close to the Samajwadi Party, a substantial number are also supporters of the BJP and Congress.

The milk strike was undoubtedly a Samajwadi Party political mobilisation and at the local level the 'Netaji Parivar' was at the helm of organising the protest. The day the strike was called I met A.P. Yadav in front of the DM's office. He was waiting to obtain permission to organise a demonstration in support of the U.P. Yadavs (interestingly, he did not say 'in support of the milk

vendors or the SP'). He told me that 'Sahib' (Mulayam) had asked his State party units to intensify their agitation against the U.P. 'communalist' government. He showed me a 'circular' written by the State SP chief in Lucknow. The letter called for the immediate cessation of milk supply in the city. It asked all the district and city party units to step up their agitation against the BJP Government until the "harassment by police and other official agencies was brought to an end". A.P. Yadav added that state and police officials were harassing milk vendors in Mathura on the pretext of samples taken from other places in U.P. He said that policemen and other officials were harassing milkmen coming with their milk cans from the villages to the town. He added that he had just met some Yadavs from the nearby countryside who told him that every day they had to give Rs.70 to the police, otherwise they were threatened with jail. Bribing helped them escape the sample testing but those who didn't pay up had their supplies tested. 'I don't know what tests they conducted but they said that my milk was adulterated', said one village milkman who was accompanying A.P. Yadav: 'finally I had to bribe them otherwise they would have put me in jail'.

A.P. Yadav said that the milk issue was a great opportunity to embarrass the BJP government. The parliamentary elections were very close and this 'milk issue' was a good way of starting the election campaign, 'this issue will help the SP to consolidate the Yadav vote'. He also added that the campaign against adulterated milk was a conspiracy organised by the high castes and the BJP 'to crush' them (the Yadavs). He accused the BJP of conspiring against the part-time milk producers and defending the interests of the big milk dairies patronised by the BJP itself. At the same time, he made it clear that his party favoured a complete ban on the manufacture of adulterated milk, which, he said, posed serious health problems. He admitted that the part-time milk vendors could dilute milk by adding water to increase the quantity. 'But they do not manufacture adulterated milk', and he accused the big dairies of being responsible for its manufacture.

The same evening I went to Ahir Para and saw the local milk vendors milking their cows and buffaloes as usual. However, they informed me that they were firmly behind the strike. I then asked them what they were going to do with their milk and they promptly replied that they were going to sell it. 'I thought you

were on strike', I said. 'Yes we are, but the demand for milk is high at the moment, and we will be able to sell it for an expensive price on the black market, but technically we are on strike', a milk vendor said. I asked if they were being harassed by the police and they looked at me in disbelief: 'of course not, in Ahir Para nobody dares to bother us, as you know in Sadar Bazaar *thana* (police station) most of the police officers are Yadavs and they protect us'. It was soon clear to me that the milk vendors of Ahir Para were not participating in the strike because they were being 'harassed' or because they had to pay bribes to police officers. They said that they were supporting the protest because they wished to support their caste-fellows from the countryside who were not allowed to do their job in peace. S.G. Yadav, one of largest producers of milk in Ahir Para, said that all Ahir Para Yadavs were backing the strike, despite the fact that the majority were not milk-sellers.

The same evening an informal gathering was held in the courtyard of A.P. Yadav's house. The purpose of the meeting was to organise and coordinate the protest to be held on the outskirts of the town the following day. The aim of the protest was to stop the Public Dairy vans and to pour the milk into the Yamuna river. The local SP party workers and activists and three leaders from the nearby villages were present at the gathering. Ten young Yadavs who belonged to the Youth branch of the MYS, joined the meeting and enthusiastically signalled their availability to participate in the demonstrations planned for the next day. Hari Singh Yadav, one of their leaders and an active member of the BJP, emphasised that what was at stake for him was the reputation of the Yadav community. He added that the demonstration would remind the allegedly anti-Yadav government that the Yadavs were not to be trifled with, and that the authorities should not think that Yadavs were push-overs. By moving together aggressively and displaying their militancy in public space they wished to signal their power and strength. They felt that they had an opportunity to show off their *lathis* (sticks). This desire to fight the authorities and to 'do exciting and risky actions' was accompanied by a verbally expressed commitment to defend the weaker cowherders and milk-sellers from the injustices of the government and the upper-caste BJP officers.

‘We will strike to support our village brothers. Tomorrow we will all go to the demonstration organised by the SP’, a young boy who had nothing to do with the milk business and was himself an active member of the BJP told me. I was quite surprised by this display of support, given the proximity of the election campaign, and the fact that the SP politicisation of milk was above all an anti-BJP action. However, for many of the participants in the meeting, the strike was an anti-upper caste action and therefore only indirectly an anti-BJP one. The upper-castes were mainly identified with the Bania merchant and business community. They were the ones who had the monopoly of the big private dairies as well as the management of the public ones. The Bania community in Uttar Pradesh is a solid BJP vote bank and consequently anti-Bania and anti-BJP sentiments fused together and united Yadavs with different political views.

What was extremely surprisingly was to see members of the ‘Chaudhri Parivar’ and the ‘Dudh Parivar’ giving their support to A.P. Yadav and indirectly to the ‘Netaji Parivar’ despite their disputes and rivalry. During the gathering Balbir Singh Yadav, a leading member of the ‘Chaudhri Parivar’, improvised a speech. The following is an extract from his talk.

‘the milk-strike is a Yadav issue; political differences and personal quarrels do not count. We all descend from Krishna, and our *dharma* is to be cowherders, to protect the cow and as Kshatriyas to protect the weaker sections of the society’.

This statement was warmly cheered by the audience. Young modern minded Yadavs, old milk vendors and middle-aged new businessmen engaged in transportation, construction businesses and moneylending all agreed that the issue of milk was a caste issue and that they had to support it.

### **Talking about the strike**

The themes of the speeches delivered during the gathering were quite close in content to the conversations I overheard in Ahir Para during the week of the milk mobilisation. Caste action was believed to be the answer to the problems faced by the milk vendors. Quite a number of people were outraged at the newspaper

reports which informed them about the number of people arrested under the Anti-adulteration Act, and about the tons of adulterated milk which had been found to contain traces of glucose and urea. Ahir Para Yadavs kept on pointing out how local milk vendors did not adulterate their milk and how big public dairies were the ones to be blamed.<sup>152</sup>

Most people were of the opinion that Mulayam Singh Yadav made the right decision to ask people to pour the milk of the public dairies into the rivers. It was considered a good way to teach the government a lesson. In Mathura, in the Trans-Yamuna area, Yadav milk vendors were supported by the SP social leaders. A group of Ahir Para residents seized milk from a public dairy van, poured it into the Yamuna and forcefully stopped milkmen who were coming to town to sell their milk. A group of Ahir Para Yadavs, aged between seventeen and twenty-five, returned from their 'expedition' in the Trans-Yamuna to recount to their friends how they 'had taught the *sarkar* (government) a lesson'. They were excited and they did not see anything wrong in the violent acts they had just performed.<sup>153</sup> There was an almost unanimous consensus about the fact that there was a conspiracy against the Yadavs, and it was alleged that the state government had launched a misinformation campaign against milkmen. This made many people think that the honour and reputation of the community needed to be defended. Arun Yadav (moneylender, 20 years old) said: 'We have a reputation to defend. In Sadar Bazaar, and in Mathura, everybody respects us, they are afraid of us. We are not scared to use muscle power'.

I encountered very few dissenting voices. A number of Yadavs said that Mulayam Singh Yadav was very cunning to instrumentally exploit the issue of milk to mobilise Yadav votes for the next election. The discussions often switched between the milk strike and the coming elections. A highly critical old Yadav said that Yadavs always follow Mulayam. 'What benefits did we have during his CM tenure? Everybody knows he helps only the people of Etawah' (his own natal area). This statement aroused several critiques. 'After all he is one of

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<sup>152</sup> Amar Ujala, 31 July 1999; Amar Ujala, 1 August 1999; Amar Ujala, 2 August 1999; Time of India, 31 July 1999; The Hindustan Times, 5 August 1999.

<sup>153</sup> Hansen (2001: 232) points out that to destroy public properties during political rallies is in India entirely accepted and rarely considered a punishable crime.



us, he tended cows as we did and he will protect us', said a taxi driver (50 years old).

On August 4, people assembled at Holi Gate to start the procession to the DM's house. Ahir Para Yadavs arrived at Holi Gate in different groups. Members of all the three main factions were present. Yadavs from the countryside and from other Mathura neighbourhoods joined the procession as well. The red and green colours of the SP flag were everywhere. From the microphones the music of popular Hindi movies was accompanied by songs which glorify Mulayam Singh Yadav and the Samajwadi Party manifesto. The SP anthem was played and re-played at high volume. Different tunes from famous 'bollywood movie' soundtracks were dubbed with the following lines:

'The Socialist Flag, carries the history of sacrifices, it reflects the aspirations of Lohia and Gandhi; it shares the grief of the poor, hardworking people, the farmers and ordinary people, friends of all religions, women, students and soldier...the socialist flag...(four times) Red colour signifies revolution and youth, green colour signifies prosperity; the crimson new morning is accompanied by the greenery of the new crop; assorted are our civilizations; capable to maintain world peace; Id and Diwali are no different; this Socialist Flag; it is an umbrella to democracy, self-esteem and independence; caution! The foreign financial investments are destruction of India; the hands in whose control the time has handed over the reins of defence; his name is Mulayam Singh, whose determination is as strong as iron; it is a land of the great soldiers who have sacrificed their lives, augments its respect; hoist it to the maximum possible height in the sky; its place is temple, place of worship, shrine – light its candle in every home; sing its song of pride in all languages in one tone; this is the socialist flag' (SP party anthem, election campaign 1999).

Before the departure of the procession several speeches were delivered. J.N. Yadav mobilised the audience by saying that Krishna had also successfully organised milk strikes in Mathura and local Yadavs should be proud of following the deeds of their ancestor. This type of rhetoric, which emphasises the link between the god Krishna and the Yadavs, not only found expression in the verbal speeches which preceded the manifestation but also in the political rituals of the procession itself. During the procession to the DM's headquarters the participants shouted out SP party slogans and chants of Jai Sri Krishna! Jai Yadav! As I mentioned before, I was not allowed to participate in the demonstration and I observed it from a distance on the margins of the road. Together with me there

were many other persons who were curiously watching what was happening. From the crowd I overheard numerous comments which recognised the unity of the Yadavs as well as their bellicose and aggressive outlook. An old businessman commented on the procession by saying that when they felt threatened, the Yadavs knew how to act as an *ekta samaj* (a united community). A Brahman man in his thirties told a friend who was accompanying him that when he was at I.P. College in Mathura one of his companions slapped a Yadav and the day after all of Ahir Para waited for him outside the school and beat him up. 'They base their strength on muscle power, they are *goondas*, he added.

During the procession, the Yadavs certainly displayed an aggressive image. They brandished their *lathis* and shot their guns in the air. This militant display contributed to the building up of their local aggressive image, which made local Yadavs appear as 'intimidating' and 'numerous'. The crowd walked for two kilometres and at the end of the procession a delegation of Yadav and SP leaders met the DM. They demanded the proper collection of milk samples. After prolonged negotiations an agreement was reached between the administration and the representatives of the milkmen. It was agreed that the police would have no role in the collection of samples. The milk vendors, on assurance from the District Magistrate, called off their strike on August 4, and the Yadavs of Ahir Para ceased 'to defend' their community.

Why did people participate in the strike? Why did Yadavs affiliated to the BJP participate in the strike? Why did members of the different factions join hands? In the following sections, I attempt to answer these questions by exploring how caste solidarity is constructed in everyday life in Ahir Para and how different resources (economic, institutional and cultural) facilitated participation in the strike and political activity in general. I analyse the political rhetoric of the local Yadav caste associations, the local antagonism between the Yadav and the Bania community and finally Yadavs' understanding of what 'the political' means and what it means to participate in politics.

## Caste Association and Yadav-Bania antagonism

To begin with I explore why the milk issue managed to successfully mobilise Yadavs who were not engaged in the cowherding profession. The Ahir/Yadavs have been traditionally associated with cowherding. While other peasant castes do own cows, the tasks of tending and breeding cows, keeping cow herds and taking them out for grazing and looking after their health are traditional duties of the Ahirs. Yet, in the past and in the present, only a small proportion of them were or are engaged in specialised pastoral activities (see Sopher 1975).

Despite this, the cowherding profession plays an important role in the politics of Yadav community formation. The claim to descend from Krishna 'the cowherder god' justifies the creation of fictive kinship relations between different pastoral castes and legitimises the process of *Yadavisation*. In the constitution of the AIYM, it is specified that 'the word Yadav includes those who claim their descent from Krishna and those who were traditionally engaged in the pastoral profession' (AIYM 1984: 6). The pastoral occupation, therefore, plays an important role in the ideology of the All India Yadav Mahasabha and similarly it is also a source of caste pride. Hence, Krishna the lord of the herdsmen (Govinda) is still present in Yadav caste rhetoric. However, his lover career is again forgotten. Krishna with the flute appears with his 'wife' Radha, or with a cow. He does not appear surrounded by the Gopi lovers. Radha is depicted as a 'wife' not a mistress. More often Krishna with the flute is represented as the protector of cows. It is in this version that Krishna-the-cowherder is present in Yadav political rhetoric (see Plate 19).

For instance, Laloo Prasad Yadav, the ex-Chief minister of Bihar, loves to present himself as a rustic 'cowherder' politician. He likes to give interviews to the national press while tending his cows and buffaloes, and describes himself as an *avatar* of the god Krishna. By the same token, Mulayam Singh Yadav's biographical anecdotes, published in the press or in Yadav caste literature, always portray his childhood as resembling that of Krishna. He grew up amongst cowherders and was a mischievous child who loved sports like wrestling. The cowherder heritage is strategically emphasised to their political audience.



Plate 19: Krishna and Radha (AIYM Convention, 1999)

Rich Yadav businessmen in Delhi also proudly showed me their farms in the countryside where they keep buffaloes and cows and where during the weekend they play the cowherder game. They proudly say that being rich does not make them forget their origins and their traditional skills. The Yadavs are not only proud of their genealogical link with Krishna the cowherder but also of the animals that they rear. In India the species of animal a caste domesticates has a bearing on its social status and since the cow is at the top of the animal hierarchy the Yadavs consequently think that they must have a high ritual status. Their 'pastoral knowledge' is also a matter of caste pride.<sup>154</sup> 'We are a caste of cowherders and politicians' they like to point out, 'it is our work therefore, we know it best'. They consider these skills to be acquired through birth (see Chapter 5). Ahir Para Yadavs who are not involved in the pastoral profession say that they were born knowing how to deal with the herd: 'we learn it the womb'. The pastoral profession is perceived by members of the Yadav community as the privileged *dharma* of the Yadavs and one of the symbols of Yadav cultural distinctiveness.

During fieldwork I soon became aware of the symbolic salience of the herd. In order to collect economic data on cattle trading I bought a pet buffalo at the local cattle fair. This purchase was enthusiastically cheered by Ahir Para Yadavs who interpreted it as a sign that I was a 'Yadav'. Throughout my study they kept on asking me if I belonged to an Italian Yadav community. When I told them that I came from a village in the Alps where there used to be many cowherders, Ahir Para residents said that I must have had a cowherder ancestor and that therefore I was descended from Krishna as well. The small buffalo, named Stella, turned out to be a useful passport to the Yadav community and exploring their ideas of descent.

Besides disseminating a rhetoric centred on the unity of all the 'sons of Krishna' with a pastoral tradition, the AIYM and Yadav politicians also promote the Dairy Industry and the implementation of development programmes which aim to defend the interests of pastoral people. Yadav social and political leaders

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<sup>154</sup> For comparative ethnographic data on the subject see Srivastava (1997).

lobby the state and the central government to defend the interests of the cowherds and milk-sellers as well as to support the 'cow-protection movement'.

The Yadav caste meetings held in Kanpur and in Ahir Para a month before the strike empirically illustrate how the pastoral rhetoric of the AIYM is deployed and assimilated in Mathura and how it influenced the dynamics of the strike. Moreover, it shows how Yadav caste association meetings enhance unity in the community in a successful way. At the end of June 1999, the Uttar Pradesh Yadav Sabha regional meeting took place in Kanpur. This meeting was carefully organised in Mathura. Local newspapers advertised the regional meeting and the MYS organised three informal gatherings in Ahir Para to organise the trip to Kanpur. These meetings were reported in the local newspapers Amar Ujala, Aj and Danik Jagran.<sup>155</sup> This is an example of how vernacular media are heavily used by the local Yadav caste association and of how important printing material is in placing the Yadav community in the public arena. The members of the Samajwadi Party were the most active in organising the regional meeting whose main agenda was to discuss the proposition of the central government to eliminate the so-called 'creamy layer' of the OBCs from the reservation programme (see Chapter 2). Fifty people from Ahir Para went to Kanpur. On their return, the MYS organised a meeting to discuss the resolutions approved in Kanpur and to update the persons who did not manage to attend the meeting.

A.P. Yadav, the organiser of the strike, is a leading member of the Netaji Parivar. He is highly involved in the elite politics of the AIYM and had a pivotal role in the organisation of the Kanpur meeting. Members of the Chaudhri Parivar and Dudh Parivar went to Kanpur as well. Interestingly in Kanpur (or at other regional meetings), members of the different factions who hardly speak to each other in Mathura, look like a compact and solid group lobbying for common interests and trying to portray their delegation as the best one. Regional meetings contribute, therefore, to create a sense of commonality and solidarity between the different Yadav subdivisions and factions. During the Kanpur regional meeting, different social and political leaders emphasised how it was important to act like a

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<sup>155</sup> Aj, 20 April, 1999; Amar Ujala, 23 May, 1999; Aj, 2 May 1999; Aj, 18 May 1999; Danik Jagran, 25 May 1999; Aj, 25 May 1999.

united community. It was acknowledged that Yadav internal rivalries were endemic and ancestral. Leaders tend to joke about this aspect of 'Yadav culture' and the audience usually respond by laughing. It almost appears that Yadavs are proud of their internal competitions and feud-like conflicts. For most it is further evidence that they are fighters and 'political animals': born to compete and rule. As A.P. Yadav said to me, politics after all, is about quarrels and fights and Yadavs are undoubtedly masters of that because they spend their life competing with their brothers. Social leaders are well aware of these divisions and encourage external unity. One of the resolutions approved in Kanpur emphasised how Yadavs should act in the political arena as a united community.

'The Yadavs should unanimously choose the political party that will work for the development of the Yadav community. The Mahasabha strongly discourages the nomination of more than one Yadav candidate per constituency. This is to avoid Yadavs losing energy in fighting each other. In no circumstance should votes be given to one who does not serve the interests of the community in particular and the weaker section of the society in general' (Uttar Pradesh Yadav Mahasabha Convention, Resolutions, 1999, Kanpur, 5-6 June 1999).

By the same token, it was emphasised that the Yadav community had to oppose the harassment of the police towards Yadav milk-sellers. The following is the approved resolution:

'Cattle rearing rights: police officers do not allow the rearing of cows and buffaloes in urban areas. A cow or a buffalo caught in one of these areas is captured, and the owner must pay a fine in order to have his animal back. We demand more land for our herds.

The price of fodder: the cost of fodder is increasing day by day. We demand fodder at seasonal prices. Milk prices should be amended according to the period of the year and should be changed every 6 months (price Rs. 20 per litre)

Adulterated Milk: we soundly complain about the process of checking adulterated milk. They said that the police usually ask for bribes from 'innocent' milkmen in return for not deeming their milk adulterated, and claimed widespread police harassment of Yadav shopkeepers and milkmen. We demand that the corrupt officers should be punished and strictly treated by the administration'.

At the end of June, Kanpur's resolutions were discussed in a local meeting in Ahir Para. Members of Ahir Para's different factions attended this meeting even if it was led by the Netaji Parivar. All the main local political leaders participated; and they mostly attended the meeting because they wished to check what the others

had to say or to establish their position as men of power. They all arrived with their followers, namely lineage or clan kin linked to them by patronage ties.

Since most of the participants were not involved in the milk business the discussions in these meeting revolved mainly around social and political issues rather than economic ones. Not surprisingly, what caught the attention of the participants was the harassment of the Yadavs by the police. The SP leader expressed his grievances by saying how this was obviously an anti-SP and anti Yadav action.

‘The communalist BJP is afraid of the confrontation with the SP in the next elections... they are afraid of the Yadavs!!!!’. ‘We have to act united and to protect our kin brothers who are prevented from working and put in jail by the BJP government’.

And then:

‘We should follow Sri Krishna. Krishna made impossible tasks possible. His contributions in those days made the Yadav community respectable, not only in India but even abroad. The Yadav community should follow his path. This is the only way we can reinforce our power... Krishna’s parents were imprisoned and their seven children were killed by Kamsa. In the life of Krishna, his anger towards the bad and rude persons is clearly expressed: he never tolerated the exploitation of people and always helped the poor and oppressed and saved women’s reputation. He killed many bad kings and often took their kingdoms and gave them to good kings’.

The speeches quoted here show how the anti-BJP ideology of the Samajwadi party mixes with the political rhetoric of the AIYM which portrays Krishna as a leader of social justice. In doing so the mobilisation to strike hinted at themes that are inscribed in the Yadav ‘ethno-historical imaginary’. The portrayal of Krishna-the-trade-union-leader suggests to the audience that generations of Yadavs before them have participated in milk strikes. Moreover, the multivocal symbolism of Krishna is also used to legitimate violent acts toward the ‘enemy’ (‘He (Krishna) killed many bad kings...’); here we again find the violent ethos and actionist ideology of the SP.

During the meeting the issues of cow protection and relations with the Muslim neighbours, traditionally Kasais (butchers), were also discussed. A BJP local activist emphasised how ‘cow protection, Dharma protection, nation



protection were Yadav duties' (G.S. Yadav, 25 years old and in the milk business). He reported the story described by Munnar Yadav during the Kanpur meeting. The story narrated the problems between Muslims and Yadavs in a village near Delhi. G.S. Yadav ended his speech by saying that, as heirs of Krishna, Yadavs have the duty to protect the sacred cow and stop cow slaughter. In the meetings of the MYS, the political rhetoric of the BJP and the SP mixes together without creating any kind of contradiction in the eyes of the participants. A number of SP political activists were supporting the liberation of the Krishna birthplace even if their party had a strong anti-communalist agenda. Rakesh Yadav (30 years old, moneylender and SP activist) said: 'The demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya was a wrong act, but I support the liberation of *Krishnajanmabhumi*. Ram is Ram but Krishna is our *kuldevta*'.

However, during the strike 'the enemy' were the big public dairies which locally were symbolically associated with the BJP government and the local Baniyas. The antagonism between the Yadavs and the merchant community expressed during the caste meetings as well as during the strike is rooted in the social and economic transformations that occurred in Sadar Bazaar over the last fifty years. As mentioned previously local Yadavs improved their economic status through shifting occupations as well as through illegal activities. The Bania is the community that mostly resent such an economic transformation. The Yadav local political and economic upsurge has in fact disempowered them. Sadar Bazaar's Bania commonly complained that they are not able to conduct their business anymore. They complain that they have to pay 'protection money' to the Yadavs in order to keep their shops open. In the villages near Mathura there is a similar trend. Baniyas are often scared of travelling on certain buses. In a village near Aligarh, the Brahmans do not set up their weekly bazaar anymore because they said that the Yadavs do not want 'the upper castes' to do business there.

The Yadavs became Sadar Bazaar's main moneylenders. Unlike the Baniyas, they lend money without mortgage and thus they can be more competitive in the market. They can apply this policy because they can make sure that their creditors will pay them back in due time. As B. Yadav said: 'creditors know that we do not have water in our guns'. The Yadavs' local economic and political upsurge also redesigned the ritual complex of Ahir Para. In the last fifty years, the

Yadavs of Ahir Para have begun to patronise two temples, which were previously controlled by the local Bania community. By the same token rich Yadavs tend to embrace Vaishnava sects, such *Pusthi Marg* or *Gaudiya Samapraday* in the same fashion as the local business community traditionally did. Yadavs' recent economic and political success has also led them to consolidate their relationship to Vedic forms of social ascription and to depict themselves as 'Kshatriyas who behave like Vaishyas' (see Chapter 4). Yadavs and Banias compete, therefore, to occupy the same space, whether it is religious, social, residential or occupational. However, it is the Yadavs who are in the ascendant, and it is the Yadavs who are managing to dislodge the Banias from the temples they patronise, the houses they own, and the businesses they run and ultimately they seem to claim the same caste status. The participation in the milk strike should be also understood as a reminder to Banias and their BJP leaders that those with the real power now are the Yadavs. Indirectly, it also shows how much the Yadavs' local sense of identity vitally rests on 'self respect' enforced by power and by their *physical presence* in the neighbourhood.

In the previous sections, I described how social leaders tap deep-rooted feelings of solidarity by using the symbolism of Krishna and of the cow. The strike hinted at themes that are inscribed in the Yadav mythological past. Ordinary people are more likely to participate in forms of action that they know from before or to which they can relate. Moreover, as the extracts from the speeches delivered in the meeting suggest, the institutional pressure of the caste association which calls for a unitary behaviour, partly influenced Yadav mobilisation. Ideology can, however, be a dry way to describe what moves people to action. Ahir Para milk-sellers said that despite the strike they were selling their milk and they were selling it at a higher price. Market opportunities seem, therefore, to have motivated a number of strikers more than the need to defend some idea of 'Yadav-ness'. Other participants, on the other hand, felt that what was at stake was the reputation of the community. The Yadavs' heavy involvement in criminal activities and their reputation for violence surely gave many of them a quite self-interested motive for reminding the police and the authorities that they are not to be trifled with, and that the police should not think that they are push-overs. It can be argued that for many of them, more than caste

solidarity it was 'a gang solidarity'. Finally, it was the urge to obtain or to defend a share of state resources which united the different factions of Ahir Para. What was at stake more than the milk-vendor issue was the defence of Yadav local power. Despite factionalism and competition a common interest united the different '*parivars*', namely to ensure that Yadav political power at state level was maintained and 'money' and 'resources' kept flowing into Ahir Para.

During the strike it was precisely the defence of Yadav political power which enhanced the solidarity of Ahir Para Yadavs. It was in the common interest of the members of all the three factions to act in a demonstration which had not only the purpose of defending poor milk vendors but also to highlight and preserve the power of the Yadav community at Uttar Pradesh level. Participating in the milk strike was also an act of support for Mulayam Singh Yadav and at the same time a way to reinforce the links with his political network. After all it is through these networks that Ahir Para Yadavs have access to state resources and pursue their political careers. More than their traditional pastoral profession what was at stake was therefore the defence of their 'new' profession, namely politics.

Interestingly 'this gang solidarity' is locally conceived of as being based on Yadavs' 'innate' capability to 'do politics', namely to exploit state resources. Yadavs think that they are better at doing that than other castes. They are born knowing how to do it. The statements of a number of Yadavs suggest that even their ancestral factionalism trained them to 'do politics'. Economic and political strategic interests are therefore framed within the emotional appeal of the ideology of descent and caste identity. Yadavs' protest is fought in the name of collective identity as well as in the name of pragmatic interests. The overlap of identity-based motivations and instrumental motivations reveal a powerful and effective basis for political mobilisation and for reinforcing Yadav community solidarity. The following part of the chapter further explores how such motives work when played out in other political acts and in particular how they influence Yadav voting behaviour.

## **Lok Sabha Elections 1999**

In mid-April 1999, the coalition government led by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) lost a vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of Parliament, by just one vote. The BJP-led government fell because one of its alliance partners, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK), withdrew the support of its 18-member Lok Sabha delegation. A week later, having made a confident attempt to put together a majority coalition, Sonia Gandhi of the Congress Party reported her failure. At the direction of the President, K. R. Narayanan, the cabinet requested the dissolution of the Lok Sabha and the calling of fresh elections. These elections took place over five waves, beginning on September 5, 1999. The main contestants for Mathura's parliamentary constituency were the BJP, BSP, Lok Dal-Congress and the SP. The BJP candidate, Tej Veer Singh, had won the previous elections of 1996 and 1998, and was re-elected in 1999 with a margin of 41,727 votes over the second placed Congress-Lok Dal candidate, Rameshwar Singh.<sup>156</sup>

The Yadav vote was distributed between the Congress-Lok Dal, BJP and SP. Given the support expressed for the SP during the early stages of the election campaign, the results from the last parliamentary election in Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar may appear to be contradictory. According to the Mathura survey, in 1999, only 28 per cent of the Yadavs voted for the SP candidate. In 1998, however, 58 per cent had voted for the SP. The shift in voting behaviour between 1998 and 1999 has a lot to do with local rivalries and disputes within the community. Yadav voting behaviour makes 'sense' if contextualised within the factionalised world of Sadar Bazaar's Yadav community. Voting is used locally to express divisions and personal interests. The SP lost support in the last general election not because Ahir Para Yadavs were no longer close to the Party, but because of rivalries within the community which penalised the local SP leader and thus, indirectly, the SP. I know of people who campaigned for the SP candidate but then did not vote for him.

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<sup>156</sup> In 1998, Tej Veer Singh (BJP) won with 48.1 per cent of the vote and beat the BSP (18 per cent) and SP contestants (16.3 per cent). In 1996 Tej Veer Singh won against the Congress and BSP candidates by polling 33.9 per cent of the votes. See [www.indiamap.com/elections/constituencies/mathura.htm](http://www.indiamap.com/elections/constituencies/mathura.htm).

This should be understood as a vote against the local SP leader and his faction, the locally named 'Netaji Parivar' and its contemporary allies the 'Dudh Parivar'. Voting was used, in this case, to express rivalries. It should be added that the fact that the SP was not competitive in the Mathura-city electoral constituency, and that the candidate was not a Yadav, made Ahir Para Yadavs privilege in their voting decisions clan/faction loyalties over party/caste loyalties. A significant number of Ahir Para Yadavs who voted for the Congress candidate campaigned for the SP during the election campaign. In particular local Yadavs campaigned for the SP in the nearby districts of Jaleshar, Etah, Kannauj and Farrukhabad. In these districts Yadavs have affinal and agnatic relations through which they extend their regional political networks. The SP and the Yadav candidates are extremely politically competitive in this part of the Yadav belt. In 1999, it was in the interest of Ahir Para Yadavs to help their 'relatives' who were in constituencies where the SP and Yadav candidates had a good chance of winning. As a matter of fact the SP candidates won in Kannauj, Etah, Farrukhabad, Jaleshar and Mainpuri constituencies.

Going back to the election performance in Sadar Bazaar, in order to understand the shift in Yadav voting behaviour in Ahir Para between the elections of 1998 and 1999 one also needs to take into consideration issues that are not explicitly linked to the political realm, but to personal economic interest and questions of honour. The election held in September 1999 was in fact informed by the acrimonies that arose out of two municipality elections, held, respectively, in April 1998, and April 1999.

### **Municipality elections and 'primordial factionalism'**

Local municipality elections are the arena in which factionalism and personal issues and economic interest are fought over. The pursuit of local power is driven by the urge to obtain a share of state resources. To be a municipality representative has its own practical advantages. To each ward representative a certain budget is yearly assigned for the development of the local area. Allegedly, part of this money usually ends up directly in the representative's pocket.

Furthermore, a ward representative has access to the state administrative machine which provides access to government employment and to jobs or contracts. Each of the *parivars* struggle, therefore, to get one of their members elected in the *Nagar Palika* (municipality board). The ethnography of the municipal by-election for Ward 2, held on 18 April 1999, shows how local elections are used to sort out personal interests as well as questions of honour. Ward 2 includes a part of Ahir Para. This section of the neighbourhood is better known as Regimental Bazaar and it is under the Cantonment Board administration. There are a total of 870 registered voters in the ward. It is inhabited by Yadavs (300 votes), Dhobi (200 votes), Valmiki (75 votes), Brahmans (50 votes), Brahman-Carpenters (50 votes), Muslims (100 votes), Christians (60 votes), and others (35 votes).

Arjun Yadav, an advocate and moneylender in his early forties and a member of the 'Dudh Parivar', was elected in 1992. At the time, he defeated Shiv Yadav, a member of the 'Chaudhri Parivar'. In 1998 he contested again and was beaten by seven votes by Shiv Yadav, who died six months later from a 'heart attack'. The 'Chaudhri Parivar' accused the 'Netaji Parivar' and the 'Dudh Parivar' of killing him. The stories behind the 'homicide' are highly contradictory. Needless to say, the atmosphere in Ahir Para was incredibly tense, and violent confrontations between the different factions regularly occurred during my fieldwork.

When the by-election campaign was finally called on 27 March 1999, such acrimonies became even more explicit. Shiv Yadav's son, J.B. Yadav, contested against Arjun Yadav. Amongst the other candidates were G.S. Yadav and V. Yadav, both local young BJP activists who tried to create a third front. When the election campaign began all the residents got involved in it. The men of the different factions sat outside their houses with the voting list in their hand discussing in little groups. They had the air of planning a war and they looked as though they were really enjoying the 'election game'. Needless to say, all the candidates asked me to campaign for them. They were not only thinking that my support would have been of general benefit for them, what they were aiming to do was mobilise the Christian votes and 'who better than a Christian from Italy to do it?' Arjun Yadav said, 'you are the Sonia Gandhi of Sadar Bazaar'.

The election campaign was extremely important because each vote really mattered. The 'Chaudhri Parivar' was confident of being supported by all the Yadavs of their clan (*Jaweria*) and by the Dhobis. The Muslims and the *Harijans* were regarded as 'Arjun' votes. In the evening, the candidates and their followers canvassed door to door. The 'Chaudhri Parivar' offered saris and fabric in exchange for votes. Vinob Singh, an uncle of the contestant, said 'we do not buy votes we just make presents'. However, Arjun Yadav bought the votes of the *Harijans* and Muslims for two hundreds rupees a piece. The battle for every last vote was a matter both of honour and interest. Out of 870 votes, only five persons did not go to vote because they were either in bad health or out of town. Such high turn-out reflects how seriously local people took the election. J.B. Yadav won by a margin of 52 votes.

The 'Chaudhri Parivar' organised a party to celebrate his victory. In the evening, the youngest men of the *parivar* walked through the streets of the bazaar screaming 'J.B. Yadav *zindabad* ('long live J.B. Yadav') and '*Jai Sri Krishna*' (hail the victory of Lord Krishna), while shooting in the air with their guns. The death of J.B. Yadav's father was partly vindicated and the honour of the family re-established.

Winning an election, then, does not only mean gaining state resources. These are not the only fruits of politics. It is a question of honour as well. The passionate political participation during the municipality election campaign mirrors, after all, the intense feeling of competition and rivalry that exists between the different *parivars*. As others acknowledged, the literature on factionalism in India often emphasises its modern side (Dumont 1997: 53). It considers factions as responses to 'modern' changes. In the case of the Ahir Para Yadavs such phenomena are not recent. Rivalries have been described as structurally endemic in communities such as the Jats, the Gujars and the Ahirs. In western Uttar Pradesh, competition is, likewise described as endemic: 'As nobody within the caste, and no caste by itself, enjoys pre-eminence, the rivalry is perennially there...' (D. Gupta 1997: 166). It is plausible to suggest that the internal equality and horizontal organisation of the Yadav community, coupled with a significant amount of economic graduality (see Chapter 3) contributes to the high degree of observed factionalism.

In Ahir Para, informants also explicitly said that rivalries within their community are endemic and do not only concern material resources. Rivalries are considered ancestral. Paradoxically, the same symbols of Krishna and the ancient democratic Yadavs, which are so often mentioned as symbols of a successful and united community, were also used locally as metaphors for expressing the 'primordial' origin of rivalries existing within the community. Various local tales try to explain this 'ancestral' phenomenon. Most of these tales have as a protagonist the god-ancestor Krishna and narrate how the Yadavs are the cause of the death of their ancestor and of the endemic rivalries within their community. Amongst these tales the most commonly known in Ahir Para is the one about the curse of *Durvasa Rishi* (sage). The tale goes like this:

'A group of Yadav children went to play nearby Durvasa Rishi. They covered their bellies with a metal plate (*tasla*) and asked the Rishi what he thought their bellies were covered with. Very annoyed, the Rishi answered: 'whatever it is covering your bellies, that will be the cause of your destruction and endless battles among your people'. The children got scared and went back to the elders and told them about the incident. The elders said the words of the Rishi could not be untrue and ordered the children to destroy the metal plate. With the help of stones, the children broke it into pieces, and then into powder. In the end, only one small piece was left, and they dropped it in the Yamuna river. A fish then ate the metallic piece. When a fisherman opened the fish and found the small piece of iron, he kept it and used it as a spear to hunt animals. He went to the forest to hunt and, taking him for an animal, by mistake he shot the toe of Krishna, who died'.

As Vinob Singh said: 'Yadavs will never stop fighting each other, we will never change'. Competition between different factions during the elections is, therefore, locally perceived as an old phenomenon. If, on the one hand, formal electoral processes are locally used to express divisions within the community, on the other these internal divisions have also had the indirect effect of introducing 'democracy' to the neighbourhood. Since the 1960s, the 'democratic' political socialisation of the majority of Ahir Para Yadavs has been mainly carried out by the 'fever' of the municipality elections. Most Yadav males begin their political career or interest in politics at a very young age by helping their father, grandfather, uncle or cousin in the election campaign for the *Nagar Palika*. This active participation in the local political process also introduces them to the city and to district party politics. It is my suggestion, therefore, that the high political



participation found amongst the Yadavs of Ahir Para partly has its roots in the political 'battles' provoked by the rivalries within the community.

## CONCLUSION

The concluding chapter has shown how Yadavs' endemic factionalism, as well as their ability 'to do politics' and to succeed in the democratic arena, are all locally conceived as primordial phenomena. This perception partly informs the way in which a number of Yadavs in Mathura town conceptualise 'democracy' as well as their role in formal democratic processes. The ethnographic exploration of the culture of political participation of the Yadavs in Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar locality illustrates, therefore, how 'culture re-enters the political stage' (Spencer 1997: 12) in an urban neighbourhood in western Uttar Pradesh. Such an exploration suggests that the interaction between caste and democratic political processes cannot be reduced to simplistic models. Different castes have different economic and political histories and different social status. However, their cultural constitution can be different as well, and this can partly influence the way their members engage with modern politics. The successful formation of the Yadav community and the political activism of its members should be partly linked to their descent-centred view of caste, to their horizontal organisation, to their factionalism and to their cultural understandings of 'the past' and 'the political'.

The analysis of 'the Yadav archive' illustrates how, by the end of the nineteenth century, a (religious) discourse of patrilineal descent emerged as a very powerful source of identity amongst the northern Indian Yadavs. The model had the potential of transcending the extreme diversity of religious practices, marriage patterns, spoken languages and regional cultures of different pastoral castes (Ahir, Gopa, Goalla...) that defined themselves as Yadavs. 'Yadav-ness' is, in Yadav caste rhetoric, primarily defined as a matter of descent. This rhetoric was based on the active reshaping of Ahir indigenous folk modes of representation based on patrilineal descent and common stock. The logic of descent intertwined with indigenous conceptions of the relations between gods and ancestors and with related ways of understanding 'the past'. Indigenous notions of identity were

reinforced and enriched by the use of new vocabulary. Yadav intellectuals selectively used the language of science (anthropology, biology, history, archaeology) and of governance (e.g. military classifications, administrative categories) to refashion their community.

Hence, the Yadav community has grown out of caste groups and lineages which had historically been equipped with particular historical and socio-cultural features which have helped them to adapt first to the colonial caste-homogenising processes, then to post-colonial caste classifications and finally to democratic political dynamics (see Chapters 5 and 6). More specifically, the Ahir kinship system was traditionally informed by openness and flexibility and this characteristic meant that Ahirs never constituted a *jati* in a conventional sense. Ahir/Yadav historiography depicts a 'caste cluster' composed by hundreds of subdivisions occupying similar but not equal positions in the caste system. In such a social system real and symbolic kinship bonds were informed by a descent-centered kinship ideology.

The Ahir caste/community also had an ambiguous ritual status in the caste hierarchy historically. Amongst the Ahir/Yadav caste we find *rajas*, *zamindars*, *sepoys* and cowherders who have been conceived and categorised either as warriors and as belonging to the Kshatriya *varna*, or as lower-caste and belonging to the Shudra *varna*. More specifically, in Ahirwal, members of Ahir seigneurial lineages have come to be known by the title of Rajput. I argue that the Ahirs' ambiguous status and the fact that members of this large heterogeneous community were (and are) recognised as a Rajput-like community made it possible for all the Yadavs to think of themselves as a martial and valorous caste with a Kshatriya pedigree. During the colonial time this presumed noble status was instrumentally used by Ahirwal-Braj Ahirs to be included in the 'martial races' and to be recruited in to the British Army. In post-colonial India, 'the Kshatriya card' has been played to ask the Indian government for the formation of a Yadav Regiment. In addition, it is used to depict the Yadavs as 'natural' politicians in the Yadav political rhetoric (see Chapter 5). Similarly, the fact that part of the community was depicted by colonial ethnographies as low in ritual terms and as belonging to the Shudra *varna* provided the Yadav community with resources to claim OBC status in post-colonial India.

It was precisely this ambiguity and imprecision that helped Yadavs to craftily 'define' and 're-define' themselves. Hansen (2001) shows how the most effective processes of community identity formation usually occur when the constructed identities are in reality extremely 'imprecise'. He argues that 'the politics of identity is generally driven by the paradox that no identity, no sense of community, and no imputed property of a place ever can be self evident and stable...' and that 'the efficacy of a name, and thus an identity, in terms of fixing or accruing of meaning and connotations, depends, therefore, on its constant performance in authoritative writings, in public speeches, images, songs, rumours and so on' (2001: 2-3). In the case of the Yadavs, colonial ethnography and orientalist literature provided the material for caste histories and the development of political writings and speeches. In addition, the essentialising nature (and emphasis on descent and blood) of these ethnographic 'official' accounts had (and have) an elective affinity with Ahir/Yadavs' traditional descent-view of their community, and thus it made caste forms of social classification a very effective material for the re-definition of Yadav caste community boundaries.

In addition, the importance of the idiom of kinship over the idiom of purity-pollution in Ahir/Yadavs' understandings of their community has gained extra force in a democratic political world in which political parties collect their support by mobilising 'horizontal' caste blocs. Within the Ahir/Yadav community 'substantialised' manifestations of caste are not recent phenomena. Indeed, the Ahir caste-cluster has been historically a substantive community of people that shared past, myth of origin and military and martial culture. Such features contribute to the absence of clear-cut ranking within the community and at the same time facilitate aggregative processes through preferential hypergamous marriage practices. Thus, the ethno-history of the Ahir/Yadavs of the Braj-Ahirwal areas has also shown how it is highly reductive to conceptualise 'traditional' and 'ethnicised' manifestations of caste in opposition or in contradiction to each other; and equally problematic to use terms such as 'modern' and 'traditional' to label different 'caste systems', for example: vertical system ('traditional') versus horizontal system ('modern'), or organic system ('traditional') versus separation/competition ('modern'). In addition, it has shown that the decline in the principle of purity-pollution in terms of defining endogamous caste units

which has contributed to reinforcing Yadavs' descent-centred kinship set of values, has not delinked the Yadav caste/community from 'Hinduism'. If on the one hand ritual hierarchy has been undermined as a principle of social stratification, on the other 'religious' descent still encompasses the contemporary Yadav community and dynamically facilitates its adaptation to the modern political world.

The substantive nature of the Yadav community, which is linked to Krishna as a 'substantial deity' and to the adoption of higher form of Hinduism (vegetarianism, abandonment of sacrifice and spirit possession and so on), helped Ahir/Yadavs from different parts of the country to interact with one another horizontally. Thus, such interactions are still permeated by a religious ethos. Similarly, if on the one hand contemporary Yadavs view themselves as an homogeneous category shaped by primordial sacred origins, their relations with low castes are still partly regulated by the purity-pollution idiom. The pollution barrier, which divides castes which can claim 'clean origins' from untouchable castes, is still a very vivid reality (cf. S. Bayly 1999: 322-326). This is reflected also at the macro-level by the inability to sustain alliances between Yadavs and Dalits (see Chapter 1).

Indeed the idiom of religious descent not only frames the Yadav-Dalit antagonisms, but also frames the rhetoric which depicts the descendants of Krishna as privileged vessels of a moral and 'democratic' knowledge by the very fact of their ancestry. Yadav 'historians' devote their efforts to constructing through their narratives superior Yadav 'essences' rather than Yadav chronological histories. This goal is achieved by selecting and reworking specific qualities and skills of the god Krishna. Particular value is given to masculinity, bravery, political skills, morality, and the abilities of statecraft, all of which are qualities that contemporary Yadavs are said to have inherited from their ancestor Krishna-the-warrior. Hence, folk theories of sources of knowledge linked to indigenous conceptions of the relations between human beings (ancestors) and gods facilitate the assimilation of a particular rhetoric and help the Yadavs to construct their own unique view of 'democracy'.

The Yadav idiom of 'democracy' although permeated by 'primordialism' is not passive. Being 'Yadav' is not an inactive state. Indeed, if on the one hand

Yadav political rhetoric depicts Yadavs as ‘born to be politicians’, on the other it asks them to act, to participate, to assert their strength and self-respect and bring out their ‘ancestral’ predispositions. Action is their motto. And action is also the maxim of the SP. Ordinary Yadavs are not therefore passive recipients of a political rhetoric which emphasises their essentialist qualities. In contrast, their ‘primordialism’ is extremely dynamic when mixed with the SP’s emphasis on action, the organisational ability of the Yadav caste association network and importantly their factionalism.

Thus, this thesis has shown how the ‘secret’ of Yadav community political success lies partly in the kinship/religious traditions of its members and their ‘permanent political performance’ (Hansen 2001). Ahir/Yadavs’ cultural constitution, together with the impressive organisational ability of the Yadav caste association network and the imaginative political strategies of the SP, have helped the Yadav community to adapt to the ‘modern’ political world and are at the base of statements such as ‘we are a caste of politicians’.

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### Web-links

Election Commission of India, [www.eci.gov.in](http://www.eci.gov.in)  
Global Yadav Forum, [www.yadav.com](http://www.yadav.com)  
Maps of India, [www.mapsofindia.com](http://www.mapsofindia.com) and [www.expendia.com](http://www.expendia.com)  
Samajwadi Party, [www.samajwadiparty.org](http://www.samajwadiparty.org)

**Appendix**  
**Mathura Survey<sup>1</sup>**  
**September 1999**

1. How long have you lived in this town?
  1. Less than 5 years
  2. 5-10 years
  3. 10 years or more
  4. Entire Life
  
- 1a. (If not entire life) From which village/ town did you come from?  
Name of village/ Town: \_\_\_\_\_  
Name of the district: \_\_\_\_\_  
State: .....
  
- 1b. Where have you lived most of your life – in a village or a town?
  1. Village
  2. Town
  3. Both
  9. Inapplicable
  
2. In the last Lok Sabha Election some people were able to cast their vote, while others were unable to. How about you? Were you able to cast your vote or not?
  2. Yes
  1. No
  8. Not sure
  
- 2a. (If Yes) Who did you vote for?  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
- 2b. (If not voted) Why did you not vote?
  1. Did not know I was a voter
  2. Out of station
  3. Not well
  4. Have no interest/ did not feel like voting
  5. Prevented by some people from voting
  6. Somebody had already voted before I went to vote
  7. Fear of violence at polling station
  8. Any other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

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<sup>1</sup> This is an English translation of the Hindi questionnaire employed in the survey.

3. And what about the 1998 Lok Sabha elections – did you vote?

2. Yes                      1. No

3a. (If Yes) Who did you vote for? \_\_\_\_\_

4. And what about the latest (1996) U.P. Vidhan Sabha elections – did you vote?

2. Yes                      1. No

4a. (If Yes) Who did you vote for? \_\_\_\_\_

5. And what about the last Municipality elections – did you vote?

2. Yes                      1. No

5a. (If Yes) Who did you vote for? \_\_\_\_\_

6. During the election some people do various things like organising election meetings, joining processions, contributing money, etc. to help a party or a candidate. Did you do any such things yourself during the election campaign?

2. Yes                      1. No

6a. (If Yes) For which Party? \_\_\_\_\_

6b. (If Yes) And, what did you do?

- 1. Helped organise election meeting
- 2. Joined processions
- 4. Participating in canvassing
- 8. Distributed publicity material
- 16. Contributed money
- 32. Other (Specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- 99. Inapplicable

7. Did any candidate, party worker or canvasser come to your house during the campaign to ask for your vote?

2. Yes                      1. No

7a. (If Yes) From which party did they come (record first three in order mentioned)

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

8. In deciding who to vote for, were you guided by anyone?

1. Yes      2. No

8a. (If Yes) Who was that?

1. Spouse  
2. Other family members  
3. Caste/community members  
4. Friends/co-workers  
7. Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_  
9. Inapplicable

9. In today's situation, who do you think would make the best Prime Minister of the Country?

\_\_\_\_\_

10. Generally speaking, do most of the people from your caste group vote for one party or for different parties?

1. One party      2. Different Party's      8. D.K.

11. Do you think it is important to vote for a member of your own caste?

2. Important      1. Not important      8. D.K.

12. Some political parties specially care for the interests of a particular caste group or community, while others do not. How about your caste group/community? Is there a political party that specially looks after the interests of your caste group/community?

2. Yes      1. No      8. D.K

12a. (If Yes) Which party \_\_\_\_\_

13. And is there a political party that you feel particularly close to?

1. Yes      2. No

13a. (If Yes) Which is that party? \_\_\_\_\_

13b. What are the things about (name party) which you like most?

\_\_\_\_\_

14. And is there any political party for which you will never vote?

- 1. Yes            2. No**

14a. **(If Yes)** Which is that party? \_\_\_\_\_

14b. What are the things about **(name party)** that you do not like?

\_\_\_\_\_

15. Do you think your vote has effect on how things are run in this country, or do you think your vote makes no difference?

- 3. Has effect**  
**2. Other** \_\_\_\_\_  
**1. Makes no difference**  
**8. D.K**

16. Now, leaving aside the period of elections, how much interest would you say you have in politics and public affairs, a great deal of interest, some interest, or no interest at all?

- 1. A great deal at all                      2. Some interest                      3. No interest**

17. Are you a member of a political party?

- 1. Yes            2. No**

17a. **(If Yes)** Which is that party? \_\_\_\_\_

17b. **(If No)** Have you been a member of a political party in the past?

- 2. Yes                      1. No**

17c. **(If Yes)** Which political party?

\_\_\_\_\_

18. Is any member of your family a politician?

- 2. Yes                      1. No**

18a. **(If Yes)** To which party does he/she belong?

\_\_\_\_\_

19. Let us talk about associations and organisations other than political parties: are you a member of any religious or caste associations?





c. Tension between Dalits and non-Dalits has increased over the last five years			
d. Relationships between people in this mohalla and government officials has become more cordial over the last five years			
e. Now there is more tension between the rich and the poor than there was five years ago			
f. Compared to five years ago, life and property are less safe now in this Mohalla than before			
g. Condition of the poor has improved in this mohalla during the last five years?			

23. Have you heard of the disputed building (Babri Masjid) at Ayodhya?

**2. Yes**                      **1. No**

23a. **(If Yes)** Some people say that the demolition was justified, while others say it was not justified. What would you say? Was it justified or not justified?

**3. Justified**                      **2. Can't say/D.K.**                      **1. Unjustified**  
**9. Inapplicable**

23b. **(If heard about the demolition).** What would you suggest should be built on that site now?

**1. Neither a mosque nor a temple**  
**2. Mosque should be built**  
**3. Temple should be built**  
**4. Both Mosque and temple should be built**  
**5. Any other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_**

24. Have you heard of the disputed building (Idga Mosque) at Mathura?

**2. Yes**                      **1. No**

24a. **(If Yes)** Some people say that it would be justified to pull down the mosque and replace it with a temple for Krishna, whilst other people say that this action is not justified. What about you? Do you think it is justified or unjustified to pull it down?

**3. Justified**                      **2. Can't say**                      **1. Unjustified**  
**9. Inapplicable**

25. Now I would like to ask about government officials and political leaders. Have you ever contacted any government official for any need or problem?

2. **Yes**                      1. **No**
26. Have you ever contacted a political leader for any need of problem?
2. **Yes**                      1. **No**
27. And do you personally know any party leaders or any candidates in this constituency?
2. **Yes**                      1. **No**
28. Who is your current MP from this constituency?
2. **Correct**                      1. **Incorrect**                      8. **DK**
29. Who is the Chief Minister of this state?
2. **Correct**                      1. **Incorrect**                      8. **DK**
30. Who is the Prime Minister of our country?
2. **Correct**                      1. **Incorrect**                      8. **DK**
31. I would now like to ask some further questions about yourself and your household. Do you personally read any newspapers?
2. **Yes**                      1. **No**
- 31a. (If Yes) How often – regularly, sometimes or rarely?
3. **Regularly**                      2. **Sometimes**                      1. **Rarely**  
9. **Inapplicable**
- 31b. (If Yes) Which language newspaper(s) do you read?
1. **Hindi**                      2. **English**                      3. **Hindi and English**
32. And do you listen to radio?
2. **Yes**                      1. **No**
- 32a. (If Yes) How often – regularly, sometimes, or rarely?
3. **Regularly**                      2. **Sometimes**                      1. **Rarely**  
9. **Inapplicable**
33. And do you watch TV?

**2. Yes**                      **1. No**

33a (If Yes) How often – regularly, sometimes or rarely?

**3. Regularly**              **2. Sometimes**              **1. Rarely**  
**9. Inapplicable**

33b (If Yes) And do you watch cable?

**2. Yes**              **1. No**

33c Which of these sources do you depend on most for getting information about elections, parties and candidates?

**0. None**                                      **4. Newspaper and Radio**  
**1. Newspaper**                              **5. Newspaper and TV**  
**2. Radio**                                      **6. Radio and TV**  
**3. TV**    **7. All three**

34 Now, I would like to ask your opinion about different institutions of India in which you may have a good deal of trust, some trust or no trust at all.

Institutions	Great Deal	Somewhat	Not At all
a. How much trust do you have in the central government – a great deal, somewhat or not trust at all?	3	2	1
b. How much trust do you have in the state government?	3	2	1
c. How much trust do you have in local government/ panchayat/municipality?	3	2	1
d.			
e. How much trust do you have in the Judiciary?	3	2	1
f. How much trust do you have in political parties?	3	2	1
g. How much trust do you have in government officials?	3	2	1
h. How much trust do you have in elected representative?	3	2	1
f. How much trust do you have in the police?	3	2	1

35. Now, I would like to read you some statements, please tell me whether you are personally for or against each of the following.

Statement	For	D.K., No opinion	Against
a. Marriage between people from different religions	3	2	1
b. Marriage between people from different castes	3	2	1
c. Marriage between people from different subcastes	3	2	1
d. Reservation in government jobs for Backward castes	3	2	1

36. And now please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the following?

Statement	Agree	D.K., No opinion	Disagree
a. More should be done for the needs and problems of Muslims in India	3	2	1
b. India should make efforts to develop friendly relations with Pakistan	3	2	1
c. Every community should be allowed to have its own laws to govern marriage and property rights	3	2	1

37. Now I would like to talk about your personal finances. During the last few years, has your financial situation improved, worsened or has it stayed the same?

**3. Improved                      2. Stayed the same      1. Worsened                      8. DK**

#### BACKGROUND DATA

1. Name.....
2. Age (in years) .....
3. Sex                                      **1. Male                                      2. Female**

4. Religion: 1. Hindu 2. Muslim 3. Christian 4. Sikh

5. Buddhist 6. Jain 7. Parsi

8. Other (specify)

5. (For Hindus) Varna: 1 Brahman 2 Kshatriya 3 Vaishya

4 Shudra

6. Caste/Community: .....

7. Subcaste: .....

8. Got/gotra (natal got/gotra for married women).....

9. Myth of origin of caste (record)

1. Know it

2. Don't Know it

9. NA

10. Myth of origin of got/gotra (Record)

1. Know it

2. Don't Know it

9. NA

11. Marital Status

1. Unmarried

2. Married

3. Divorced etc.

12. (If married) Age at marriage \_\_\_\_\_

12a. Age at *gauna* \_\_\_\_\_

13. Type of marriage

2. Arranged marriage

1. Love marriage

14. How did your father write his name \_\_\_\_\_

15. How did your grandfather write his name \_\_\_\_\_

16. Do you have any children?

2. Yes

1. No

16a. (If Yes) How many? \_\_\_\_\_

17. Highest level of education:

Level	R	Spouse	R's Father	R's Mother	Spouse Father	Spouse Mother	Son	Daughter
1. Illiterate								
2. Literate-no formal education								
3. Primary								
4. Middle School								
5. High School								
6. College-no degree								
7. College-degree								
8. Graduate/ Professional								
9. NA								

18a. What is/has been your main occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

18b. What is/has been the main occupation of your husband/wife? \_\_\_\_\_

18c. **(If in business)** In which of the following income categories does your business fit?

**3. Small business (up to Rs. 3000 per month)**

**2. Medium business (from Rs. 3000 to Rs. 10.000 per month)**

**1. Big business (more than Rs. 10.000 per month)**

19. What is/has been the main occupation of your spouse? **(Ask for details of main skills)**

20. What is/has been the main occupation of your father?

21. What is/has been the main occupation of your grandfather?

22. Now I would like to ask about your household necessities. How much monthly do you spend on food, medicine and education?

23. Have you, or any member of your family, benefited from the OBC/SC reservation policy?

2. Yes                      1. No

*If the respondent is a Medium or Big Businessman, ask Q. 24 to Q.32:*

24. Please describe how you came to be involved in your business: Did you start it up yourself? If so, why?

**Record the main reasons:**

25. *(If they started it themselves)* How did you finance your operation at the outset?

1. Bank loan              2. Family              3. Friends              4. Money lender

26. How do you recruit employees?

27. Do you employ any family members?

2. Yes                      1. No

28. Do you maintain significant business links with your extended kin?

2. Yes                      1. No

28. On the whole, who buys your goods or services? How would you describe your main customers?

\_\_\_\_\_

29. Total Number of Employees \_\_\_\_\_

30. Thinking about the nature of your business, please say whether you think the following are very important, important, or make no difference to the success of your business.

	Very Important	Important	Makes no difference
Family connections	2	1	3
Political connections	2	1	3
Education	2	1	3
Social (school or club) connections	2	1	3
Business skills	2	1	3
Product quality	2	1	3
Marketing	2	1	3





i. Bullock-cart	2 Yes	1 No
j. buffalo (no. _____)	2 Yes	1 No
k. cow (no _____)	2 Yes	1 No
l. Bullocks	2 Yes	1 No
m. Goat/sheep	2 Yes	1 No

37. Source of drinking water: (Multiple sources expected)

- |              |                      |         |                     |
|--------------|----------------------|---------|---------------------|
| 1. Tap       | 2. Hand pump         | 4. Well | 8. River            |
| 16. Jet Pump | 32. Submergible Pump |         | 64. Other (specify) |

38. Have you ever borrowed any money?

- |        |       |
|--------|-------|
| 2. Yes | 1. No |
|--------|-------|

38a (If Yes) From whom did you borrow it?

1. Caste fellows
2. Other jatis
4. Relatives
8. Friends
16. Banks
99. Not applicable

38b (If Yes) At what rate of interest did you borrow the money \_\_\_\_\_

38c (If Yes) And did you have to mortgage anything to receive the loan

- |        |       |
|--------|-------|
| 2. Yes | 1. No |
|--------|-------|

40. Now I would like to talk about religion. Do you consider yourself a religious person?

1. Non religious
2. Very religious
3. Moderately Religious

41. And do you visit religious shrines?

- |        |       |
|--------|-------|
| 2. Yes | 1. No |
|--------|-------|

41a (If Yes) Which of the following:

- |           |                   |
|-----------|-------------------|
| 1. Mandir | 3. Hindu Samadhis |
| 2. Majsid | 4. Durghas        |

41b How often?

- |              |              |           |
|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| 3. Regularly | 2. Sometimes | 1. Rarely |
|--------------|--------------|-----------|

**9. Inapplicable**

41c (If Yes) Which temple? Which mosque? Which durgas? Which church?  
(record the names and locations)

\_\_\_\_\_

42. How often do you perform *puja/namaz*? Regularly, rarely, or never?

**1. Regularly            2. Rarely            3. Never**

43. Who is your *kuldevi*? \_\_\_\_\_

44. Who is your *kuldevta*? \_\_\_\_\_

45. Do you worship any particular local god? (for example Gogaji, Mekhasur...)

**2. Yes                    1. No**

45a. (If Yes) Who do you worship? \_\_\_\_\_

46. Are you vegetarian?

**2. Yes                    1. No**

47. (Ask Hindus about Muslims and Muslims about Hindus) Do you usually attend Muslim/Hindu marriages and /or festivals?

**2 Yes                    1 No**

47a (If yes) Which ones?

48. Do you have a Guru?

**2. Yes                    1. No**

48a (If Yes) Give the name?

\_\_\_\_\_

49. Are you a member of a particular *sampraday*?

**2. Yes                    1. No**

49a. (If Yes) Give the name?

\_\_\_\_\_

50. Has any member of your family ever become a *Sadhu*?

**2. Yes**                      **1. No**

51. Do you do *bali* (sacrifice)?

**2. Yes**                      **1. No**

52 Did your father or grandfather used to do it?

**2. Yes**                      **1. No**

52b **(If Yes)** For which occasions?

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