

Is God an Untouchable?

A Case of Caste Conflict in Rajasthan

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Is the category of caste — *jati* or *varna* — relevant to classifying the gods worshipped by the Hindus? Anthropologists have long attempted to establish parallels between the human and the divine hierarchy (Reiniche 1979:220-221); and Dumont has rightly said that “the structure of the Divine needs to be considered in relation to the social order” (Dumont 1994:45). However, the structure which has been deduced from their analysis is essentially the dichotomy between vegetarian and meat-eating gods (Ibid. 45-46), pure and impure ones. But it is not a direct equivalence since “it is the function ascribed to divine categories in relationship to each aspect of the world that can be compared to the function of different social categories” (Reiniche: 220). In other words, as Reiniche reminds us, whether high or low, pure or impure, vegetarian or meat-eater, the god remains, most of the time, identified with the Kshatriya (and, occasionally, Brahmin) model. “It is certainly a general tendency of each society to associate status and power, and Hindus are well aware of this fact when they assert that the Divine, in his manifestations, is always a king and/or a warrior” (Ibid:225). This is confirmed by many examples where so-called “inferior gods” worshipped by untouchables with animal sacrifices are portrayed unambiguously as high-caste Brahmin/Kshatriya incarnations. Therefore, the tentative classifications of gods from a hierarchical point of view does not amount to ascribing them a *varna* or *jati*.

It is, however, the caste identification of a particular god which lies at the center of a rather bizarre controversy which, in the late 1970s, nearly led to a court case in Jodhpur. If this case had really taken place the main accusation brought by the plaintiff could have been formulated as follows: “Baba Ramdev, whom we believe to be an incarnation of Vishnu and whose main priests and descendants we are, was a Rajput (Kshatriya) by caste. The person against whom the complaint was lodged has slandered our God and thus ourselves by asserting that he was an untouchable born in the Meghval (Chamar) community...”

As in the famous Aga Khan court case in Bombay in

1866 (Masselos 1978), where the dispute revolved around the religious origin and affiliation of a particular community, the Jodhpur lawsuit — even if it never took place — would have had as its background similar issues: the power and money associated with religious and caste identities. If the Khojas wished to prove themselves traditional followers of Imam Aga Khan, and if they wished to preserve their spiritual heritage, they would have to pay the obligatory tithe to their religious leader or be compelled to give up their former practices and beliefs and join the Sunnis, the Twelver Shias or the Hindus.

Let us try to imagine what would have occurred in Jodhpur if the person had won the case and the god, produced as the main witness, asserted his low caste origin. Would it have had consequences on the religious movement associated with Ramdev, or on the income derived from the shrine or on the cult?

Before turning to the conjectures that my various informants made on the subject, it will be necessary to say a few words about the cult and retrace the history of this controversy. In modern Rajasthan and Gujarat (also, to a lesser extent, in Madhya Pradesh and Pakistani Sind), Ramdev is considered as one of the most popular folk deities (D.S. Khan 1993, 1995, 1996). The famous *mela* of Ramdeora-Runicha, the religious fair which takes place each year in the Hindu month of Bhado, attracts at least 100,000 devotees belonging to all castes and creeds to the main temple-*samadhi* between Jodhpur and Jaisalmer (about 100 kilometers from Jaisalmer). These worshippers or *bhaktas*, as is usual for other popular pan-Hindu (inter-caste and even sometimes inter-religious) pilgrimages, stay and eat in separate places according to the community to which they belong, but worship the same god in the same temple and take his *prasad* (consecrated offerings) from the hands of the same priests. This is intended to stress that in devotion (*bhakti*) there are no caste barriers. Some enthusiastic devotees of the god of Runicha, belonging to the upper castes, like to emphasize that during the *mela* they mix with all, high or low, although they admittedly refrain from eating

with them.

Tradition has portrayed the god himself — a 15th century warrior-saint — as trespassing caste prohibitions and singing *bhajans* (devotional songs) in the company of untouchables. If these oppressed groups have preserved a highly emotional approach to Ramdev as their protector and savior, the Rajputs perceive him proudly as an heroic ancestor. Even the Muslims, drawing from other oral sources, can view him as a powerful Pir (an Islamic spiritual teacher). As in the case of some other “ambiguous” saints of the sub-continent, the Lord of Runicha can be claimed by every community with more or less success, depending on the current circumstances. However, the dominant trend nowadays is to view Ramdev as a high Brahmanical god, an incarnation (*avatar*) of Vishnu-Krishna belonging to the upper categories of the Hindu pantheon.¹ Through oral inquiry, it is possible to retrace the evolution of the movement, at least during the last 50 years. A very rich tradition, backed by a very scanty number of written documents, also alludes to a more remote past and testifies to the transformation of the tradition related to Ramdev. Some people still remember that Ramdev was often derogatorily referred to as *dhedho ka dev* (the deity of the pariahs), recalling a popular Rajasthani saying asserting that “Ramdev has found only pariahs” (*Ramdevji ne miliya dhedh hi dhedh*) (Binford 1972:123). In other words, the god has been traditionally associated with the scheduled castes (ex-untouchables), who still appear to worship him in greater numbers than the other communities. Even now the priests of the majority of temples dedicated to Baba Ramdev are often untouchables belonging to the Meghval (Bhambi, Balai) or Regar castes, mostly weavers and leather-workers, or to the Kamad community (their gurus). However, Brahmin priests, employed by Ramdev’s alleged descendants, the Tanwar Rajputs of Ramdeora-Runicha, officiate at the main temple where Ramdev’s *samadhi* is located (Ibid. 130).

According to the current version of Ramdev’s hagiography, he was a 14th-15th century Rajput chieftain from the region of Pokaran. It is generally believed that he received this territory as a *jagir* (fief) from the powerful ruler of the Mallani kingdom, Mallinath Rathor (14th century), whose grandson would later marry Ramdev’s daughter (Nainsi 1968:291). Although the figure of this medieval saint is shrouded in legends, stray references made by the 17th century Jain chronicler Nainsi leaves no doubt as to his historicity. Current legend has it that Ramdev was a “secondary incarnation” (*upavatar*) of Krishna (although he is sometimes portrayed as an incarnation of Rama or Kalki)² who descended on earth to restore justice in the evil era of *kali yuga* and, particularly, to redeem the untouchables. Oral tales and devotional songs (*bhajans*, *vanis*) often insist on the friendly relationship which this Rajput high-caste ruler maintained with his father’s impure servants, especially Sayar Megh (a Meghval or Bhambi as his name indicates), in much the same way as his grandfather, a great devotee of Vishnu and the ruler of Naraina Rainsi Tanwar, had been the inseparable companion of an out-caste

bhakta, Khivan Balai, with whom he was martyred in Delhi by the Sunni Muslim sultan (S. Bishnoi 1989:18-20, D.S. Khan 1993:38-39). It is believed that Ramdev attended devotional sessions (*satsang*) in the company of untouchables, and that for a certain ritual ceremony that required the presence of a woman he selected an untouchable girl, Dali Bai, who became his co-disciple (*guru bahan*) as well as his adoptive sister (*dharm bahan*), since his own wife, the princess Netalde, refused to join him (D.S. Khan 1994:447). This rather unusual association with untouchables (considering the customs and taboos of the Medieval period, particularly those that applied to a Rajput-Kshatriya ruler) is always explained as a most natural one in the context of *bhakti*. To support this view the untouchable devotees of Ramdev often mention Kabir and, in a more modern context, Mahatma Gandhi.³

However, even the traditional literature has kept alive the memory of this unusual behavior which was not accepted by other Rajputs. For instance, the chief of Pugalgarh in whose family Ramdev’s sister is said to have been married refused to let her go to Pokaran to attend her brother’s wedding, since they had severed all family ties with the “degraded” Tanwar chieftain: “we are the lords of Pugalgarh, he (Ramdev) is a Kamad, how can we be related? (...) He takes part in *jamas* (...) In our houses one plays the *naupat*, at his home one hears the sound of the *tandura*” (Bishnoi 1989:403).⁴ In this devotional composition Ramdev is clearly compared to an untouchable priest-guru (a Kamad) playing the *tandura* (a five-stringed instrument also called *cautara*) like wandering yogis or other low-caste ascetics. Legend also suggests that he practiced certain Tantric rituals and belonged to the “ill-famed” *Kunda-panth* (Munshi and Munshi 1895, vol. II: 529).⁵ This association with left-handed Tantrism and untouchables was, from the high-caste viewpoint, further aggravated by the fact that, although believed to be twice-born, he chose to be buried in a grave and not cremated. His descendants and followers did the same. This low-caste and *mleccha*⁶ custom was later accepted and integrated into the new high status pattern by reinterpreting it as a “living *samadhi*”⁷ — a custom typical of Shaiva ascetics and connected with their supernatural powers and alleged physical immortality. Even today not everybody is convinced by this interpretation and some high-caste Hindus continue to consider Ramdev’s so-called *samadhi*-temple as an impure place, even worse than the cremation ground (*samsan bhumi*) on which dwell the Ag-hori ascetics (Briggs 1980:224-227) because it is, in fact, a cemetery of the Islamic type (*kabristan*).

According to the Meghval/Kamad hagiography, Ramdev’s, or better, God’s association with untouchables is not an isolated episode in the history of these communities: it has older roots and is part of a divine scheme whose final purpose is supposedly to redeem and free them from their low condition. In a famous Meghval legend, the *Meghri Puran*, sung in the form of a ballad during some of their vigils or *jamas*, Meghri (the embodiment of the Meghval and of the whole untouchable community) agrees to marry a

leper Brahmin who is rejected by all because of the impurity of his disease. Meghri alone has recognized that God had descended on earth in this form to test his devotees. The episode is supposed to take place during the first cosmic age of *Treta yuga*. God, here viewed as Vishnu and Ramdev, once identified by the *pariah* devotee, stops the marriage ceremony, which is about to start, and predicts the following before leaving: Meghri, who is a kind of eternal Kanyakumari,⁸ will be reincarnated regularly as a female devotee and saint and will remain celibate until the end of the *Kali yuga*, when Ramdev (also identified with Kalki, the future *avatar*) will return and marry her to prepare the advent of a new golden Age where caste barriers will no longer exist. Dali Bai, the co-disciple of Ramdev, is said to be one of the successive incarnations of Meghri, and that is why she remains unmarried while remaining very close to Ramdev.

On the other hand, Ramdev, whose guru Balinath appears as an Aghori ascetic, is not only what one might call a deified saint for the Meghvals and other low caste groups but is also perceived as an *avatar* of God, their guru and one of the leaders of their secret sect, the Mahapanth (Gohil 1987:passim). From a guru he has become an *istdev* (chosen deity), while Dali Bai, equally deified, can be claimed as their ancestor, insofar as she was the daughter of the Tanwar ruler Ajmal's (Ramdev's father's) servant, the untouchable Sayar Megh of the Jaipal clan. Dali Bai, as a reincarnation of Meghri, did not marry, but Sayar had other children who have kept his lineage alive to this day, through the present-day Jaipal Meghvals of Ramdeora who claim to be Sayar's descendants. Consequently, they own the tiny shrine dedicated to her, inside the enclosure of the big Ramdeo *samadhi*-temple, whereas the main shrine to Ramdev is the property of the Tanwars who claim Ramdev as their ancestor and a *kuldevta* or "clan deity."

To sum up, one could repeat that although Ramdev is now perceived as a (high-caste) Rajput, he was originally viewed as a low-status god because of the above-mentioned unclean associations. One could, in some respects, compare him to an "inferior god" (*pey*) of Tamil Nadu, Pattan (or Pattanarayan, lit. the Brahmin king or warrior), a Kshatriya who marries two girls from the untouchable leather-worker community of the Cakkiliyar (Reiniche 1978:200-202), and starts behaving like one of them; he eats meat, drinks alcohol, removes the skin of dead cattle, dyes leather, walks accompanied by dogs and so on. Having been thus degraded, he redeems himself by sacrificing his life while rescuing cows. Deified, he becomes an inferior god worshipped with bloody sacrifices by the lower castes. Although the stories associated with the Ramdev and Pattan cults and religious traditions are entirely different, both have at least one feature in common: born in high caste families, they lose their status by mixing with pariahs and behaving like them. The logical consequence is that they have been primarily associated with untouchables. However, the analogy stops here. High caste Tamilians may fear Pattan and even propitiate him by delegating cults and sacrifices to the low caste groups who are his priests, but he

has not been integrated into the "higher religion." Ramdev could be more profitably compared to those meat-eating goddesses who, upon becoming vegetarian, lose their fierce form and are worshipped by all castes, with a Brahmin being appointed to perform the cult (*puja*) in her temples. The process through which this transformation takes place most frequently is a vision or a miracle shown to some higher caste person who subsequently becomes a devotee; as a consequence, the status of the deity is raised. Although the present untouchable groups (in particular the Meghvals and their gurus the Kamads) claim that Ramdev has always been a "higher god" who neither received animal sacrifices nor possessed his devotees, there is ample evidence that until recently a goat sacrifice was performed as a part of the ritual ceremony by the secret sect connected with him. This sacrifice is already reported in an 18th century Rajasthani *bat*, an oral tale later reduced to writing (Bishnoi: 536). One of my Kamad informants confirmed that the sacrifice was performed as late as 1947. Allusion is also made to this ritual in a Rajasthani version of the orally transmitted prophetic *bhajan* of the sect referred to as *Daylami aradh*.

A legendary event believed to have taken place in the middle of the 18th century will help us understand what may have occurred. It has a historical background and may well reflect, albeit in a distorted form, the beginning of this process of transformation which would have led to the Sanskritization of the Ramdev cult. The queen (*rani*) of Nawalgarh, the capital of the petty kingdom of Shekhawati, founded by her husband Nawal Singh in 1737, was secretly worshipping Ramdev whom she considered her *istdev*. When he discovered this the ruler became angry and reproached her for worshipping "the god of the pariahs," reminding her that, as a high status Rajput queen, she was only to revere the higher gods. Some time after this event, the Maharaja of Jaipur, Ishvari Singh, quarreled with the ruler of Nawalgarh and Nawal Singh was jailed and his principality taken over by the Maharaja. The distressed *rani* invoked Ramdev. Answering her prayer, the god of Runicha appeared to Nawal Singh in his prison and declared: "the deity of the pariahs, Ramdev Kambariya (Ramdev the Kamad) has come to set you free." At this point the locks mysteriously opened and the ruler of Nawalgarh walked out of the jail. Impressed by this miracle, the Maharaja of Jaipur forgave him and returned his territory. The grateful Nawal Singh had a temple to Ramdev built in his capital and started an annual *mela*; he himself became a staunch devotee of the Lord of Runicha. The rich hagiography associated with Ramdev tell of other similar miracles which attracted high-caste devotees into his orbit.

On the other hand, not all the devotees of Ramdev necessarily became members of the sect (Mahapanth, Nizapanth) associated with him. In other words, as the number of worshippers increased, the secret sectarian tradition transformed itself into an open cult of the *bhakti* type. This was made possible through a subtle alteration of Ramdev's personality. From a deified guru whose major disciples were untouchables, he became a saint-warrior. This phenomenon

is well illustrated in the rock-cut gallery of heroes and gods (*teintis karor devta*) at Mandore, near Jodhpur, which is said to have been built by Maharaja Abhey Singh (1724-1750). The effigy of Ramdev on horse-back does not differ from the other statues representing various defied heroes of Rajasthan: Ramdev's beard has even been replaced by the conventional Rajput mustache.⁹ This rock-cut shrine associates a number of warrior-saints said to be endowed with supernatural powers, like the Nath Yogis to which they have been linked. This corresponds most probably to a recent trend that reached its peak with Maharaja Man Singh of Jodhpur: the Naths who were previously of rather low status came to be honored as an efficient counter-power to the Brahmin gurus of the local rulers (Sharma 1972). And with the Naths, the heroes endowed with *siddhis* (miraculous powers) would also see their position raised in the traditional Brahmanical hierarchy.

The final move before Independence was perhaps made in the 1920s by Ganga Singh, the Maharaja of Bikaner; through another subtle transformation he raised previously low deities (associated with low caste groups) to the level of hero-ancestor worship and *bhakti*. Two examples may suffice here. While he rebuilt Goga Dev's grave at Gogamedi in marble, Ganga Singh did not modify the shape of the monument which was unmistakably that of a Muslim tomb (*mazar*). He only caused a hero slab to be engraved on one side of the *mazar*. This would satisfy both the Brahmins who conduct the *puja* during the *mela* (lasting one month) and the Muslim *pujaris* who are the caretakers during the rest of the year. This arrangement allowed the latter to maintain their hereditary privilege, while admitting that it "was no longer a purely Muslim *dargah* because of the presence of an image..." Still more interesting is the grand project undertaken by the same Maharaja at Ramdeora-Runicha. He surrounded the shrine, which obviously looked like an Islamic *dargah*, with an enclosure wall and a few other buildings so that it would also resemble a Hindu place of worship. However, he dared not desecrate the old sacred graves (to which ornate cloths or *cadars* are still offered in the Sufi style) by replacing them with Hindu *chattris* or *chabutras* (pillared kiosks and platforms erected over the *samadhi* of a saint or hero). It is only when they built new *samadhis* or temples that the Rajputs — and even the untouchables — started to introduce images and substitute the former symbols (replicas of *mazars* and foot-prints) with the effigy of a horse-rider, a process through which the tradition could be made to fit into the pattern of ancestor and hero worship. This evolution enabled crowds of higher caste devotees to join the cult. Among new worshippers were wealthy merchant communities, Hindus and Jains.

Thus, gradually after Independence, the Tanwars of Ramdeora, who claimed to be Ramdev's direct descendants and owned the main shrine and the land attached to it, began to benefit from the increased number of offerings. They were the first to see the advantages of this transformation. In fact, it can be demonstrated that, until recently, their condition was hardly better than that of their co-disciples,

the untouchable descendants of Dali Bai to whom they were closely linked. Their miserable condition is said to be the result of a curse by their illustrious ancestor for disobeying him and digging up his grave. Without giving any details, Nainsi (1968) mentions that they were the owners of the shrine and its land and were the regular priests. This is attested by the fact that they are referred to by the 17th century chronicler as "Rajput Pandits" and by some oral sources as Pirs. The shrine itself is interestingly enough called *mukam*, the usual name of an Islamic *dargah*. In more recent times, it was also noted that they were so poor that during the famines that regularly occurred in these arid zones of Rajasthan, they were obliged to wander from village to village and beg for alms in the name of Ramdev. They carried a rag-horse, his symbol, on their shoulder, exactly as some untouchable devotees still do today (Pemaram 1977:56). The legendary episode of Ramdev's sister being forbidden to attend her brother's wedding may also serve to illustrate a consequence of their low status prior to the 1950s, owing to their continual intercourse with untouchables, especially during their secret rituals, the *jamas* (which were mistaken for left-handed Tantric ceremonies); most probably, they could not intermarry with other Rajputs who did not belong to the Mahapanth. Mallinath, the ruler of Mallani, was a follower of the sect, and that is certainly the reason why Ramdev could marry his daughter to Mallinath's grandson (D.S. Khan 1997).

Now, after the tradition and the figure of Ramdev had been transformed, the condition of the Rajput Tanwars of Ramdeora started to improve. The *mela* began to attract scores of devotees, among them wealthy groups belonging to the trading communities (Binford: 124), which made generous offerings and donations. The Tanwars had remained throughout the legitimate and hereditary owners of the shrine and its land and nearly all the offerings belonged to them (Ibid: 130). While remaining the traditional "priests of Ramdev," mainly as the leaders of the ritual vigils (*jamas*), the untouchables also became the *pujaris* of the new shrines which they started to erect in practically every village and town of Rajasthan. But these structures had been financed by their caste-fellows, who were also the regular worshippers at these temples. In other words, the benefits derived from the offerings made in these low-caste temples, never visited by the upper castes, could not be compared to the huge profits made by the Tanwars of Ramdeora since that shrine had gradually become the most popular pilgrimage place of Rajasthan. Currently, the Meghvals at Ramdeora receive only the collections and the coconuts brought by the pilgrims to Dali Bai's small shrine, which the upper caste devotees seldom visit. They share these with the Tanwars and the Bhils of the village (Ibid.).

From the current hagiography, as retold by the Meghvals, Regars and Kamads, it is obvious that these oppressed groups have always been proud that their guru and god, being a Rajput, had become the "savior of the poor and special protector of untouchables" (Binford: 120). As long as their *istdevta*, the ruler of Pokaran-Ramdeora, re-

mained “their exclusive god,” even if he was derogatorily called “the deity of the pariahs,” they could endure their poverty in the hope that Ramdev himself would return at the end of the *Kali yuga* to set them free, redeem them and marry a virgin of their caste (Meghri). However, the situation changed after Independence. On the one hand, the concept of untouchability has been abolished by the law, while the policy of “reservations” has enabled some of them to improve their condition; on the other hand, most people belonging to the high castes continued to regard them as inferior and impure. To add insult to injury, Ramdev has been literally “appropriated” by the pure and clean castes, who have started worshiping him regularly and his descendants the Tanwars, once very close to them by status and condition, have seen their rank raised in Hindu society together with the huge profits they were already making during each *mela*.

The Meghvals, Regars and Kamads feel frustrated and betrayed. Ramdev is no longer the “god of the pariahs,” but a high Rajput god worshipped by all. A particular incident that occurred a few times during my field research confirmed this appropriation: knowing that the rich religious tradition connected with Ramdev had been mostly preserved by Meghvals and Kamads, I had chosen them as my major informants. Nevertheless, whenever I ventured to mention that I was going to their houses to record devotional songs and collect information on Ramdev, Rajputs and other high-caste inhabitants of the village did not fail to warn me, “why are you going to these people? they are ignorant and backward! They won’t tell you anything!” Luckily I did not follow their advice to focus my research on Rajput devotees. I never got any interesting data from the Tanwars of Ramdeora, whereas I collected very rich material from the Jaipal Meghvals who claimed descent from Dali Bai’s family. The Jaipals did not hesitate to disclose their feelings about the Tanwars, whom they alleged to be ignorant of their (the Jaipals’) tradition and only interested in making money. They thought it unfair that the regular *puja* in the main temple had not been entrusted to them. What had a Brahmin to do with Ramdev’s cult?

It is in this context that one understands the success among the various untouchable communities of Rajasthan of a booklet entitled *Brahma Purana* written in Hindi. Published in 1967 by Arya Brothers, a small publishing house owned by untouchables and specializing in hagiographical and religious literature in Hindi, the booklet started to sell like hot cakes at Ramdeora and in other towns of Rajasthan where it was on sale during the *melas*.¹⁰ In this hagiographic work the Ramanandi sadhu Ram Prakash (a Meghval by origin) claimed to have made an important discovery. Reconstructing the Ramdev legend according to a series of inquiries he had made in some villages of Rajasthan, he asserted that, in reality, the god was born in the house of Sayar Megh, the untouchable servant of his father Ajmal Tanwar. Accepting the first part of the current legend according to which Vishnu-Krishna had predicted that he would be incarnated at Pokaran to restore justice and slay

the demon Bheru, the author modified the central episode of Ramdev’s birth — his miraculous appearance in the cradle where his elder brother Viramdev was sleeping. The reconstructed story locates the supernatural phenomena in the house of the Meghval servant when his wife gave birth to a son. Understanding that the *avatar* had appeared in his own house the poor pariah was scared and wondered how he could properly bring up such a divine child in his tiny hut. Eventually the couple decided to disclose the secret to their master Ajmal who decided to adopt the baby and bring him up in his palace. However, the ruler of Pokaran did not wish others to know that Ramdev was born of an untouchable woman and so he claimed that the child had appeared there miraculously. Therefore, nobody in the Tanwar family ever knew the real origin of Ramdev, a secret preserved from generation to generation in the Jaipal clan who ultimately forgot about it. Those who knew preferred not to divulge it. Ram Prakash’s evidence is rather scanty, based on an esoteric interpretation of some oral verses, but the argument in itself, he believed, was supported by strong logic. According to him, Ramdev could not have developed such an affection for these people, going so far as to associate freely with them and choosing as his “adoptive sister” the pariah virgin Dali Bai had he not himself been an untouchable Meghval in human form. If Ramdev had not been a pariah on this earth, how could he have become “deity of the pariahs?”

Among low-caste worshippers of Ramdev it became very popular and was read aloud to the illiterate. The result was that the “good news” spread like wild fire: Ramdev, the god of Ramdeora-Runicha, was an untouchable! This theory was immediately accepted by a great majority of Meghvals and other “pariahs,” such as the Regars, Kamads and even the Kalbelya snake-charmers. During my field research between 1991 and 1993, nearly all my informants belonging to the untouchable communities claimed that Ramdev was born in a Meghval family and sometimes even seemed to forget that they had obtained this “information” from the booklet entitled *Brahma Purana*. In other words the idea, which sprang from the mind of a single man, had become so deep-rooted in their psyche as to appear to be part of their oral tradition.

But, if the “discovery” made by Ram Prakash was enthusiastically accepted by the majority of untouchables, it came as a shock to the Tanwars of Ramdeora. In 1978, the Tanwar chieftain of Ramdeora, Rao Rimal Singh, who sat on the *gaddi*, that is to say, the sole leader of the tradition and legitimate heir of Ramdev, sent a letter to the Ajmer publisher of *Brahma Purana* (Ram Prakash 1996:3), as follows: “...who told you to print this book? You have given wrong information about Sri Ramdev and have dishonored us. Therefore we request you to withdraw the book from circulation immediately, otherwise you will have to appear at the court. Be so kind as to inform the author and send us the reply immediately.” Sent on December 11, 1978, the letter was handed over to Ram Prakash whose reply to Rimal Singh on January 1, 1979 went: “...I do not wish to start

with you any kind of quarrel or controversy, but before going to the court, try to think again and answer the numerous questions which I will raise below concerning the life of Ramdev and produce historical documents to prove that you are right. As far as I am concerned, I will give you only one answer. If you accept my challenge then I am quite ready to go to the court" (Ibid.:4).

The challenge proposed by Ram Prakash came in the form of various queries which he first published in some local newspapers in 1980 and later collected in a booklet, entitled *Pol me dol*, printed in 1996 with a few modifications. The questions had to do with all the "mysteries" and ambiguities of Ramdev's hagiography and cult. Not only did the author assert once more that Ramdev was not the son of Ajmal Tanwar, but he began to question a number of details concerning the legend and the worship of the god. He concluded that there was no proof that Ramdev was an *avatar* of Vishnu, since there is no Sanskrit treatise to support this view. He also pointed to the "superstitious" customs associated with the cult (the alleged Tantric rituals) and to the "spurious" elements which seemed to have been drawn from the Islamic tradition. In this book Ram Prakash denounced the present popularity of the cult and of the annual religious fair, stressing that the worship of tombs in the name of Ramdev "was not Hindu," and that the conversion of a cemetery into a temple was not "orthodox" but had been cleverly organized by the Tanwars for their own benefit.

It is interesting that the author who had simply started by disputing Ramdev's identity ended up questioning the whole tradition. Therefore, if in the *Brahma Purana* he appeared as a devotee of Ramdev, in the 1996 booklet he spoke like an orthodox Vaishnava sadhu, influenced by reformist organizations to which he appealed, declaring that "the Arya Samaj or the Hindu Vishwa Parishad should ban these debased forms of Hinduism." His criticism, however, did not affect Ramdev's traditional worshippers, the untouchables, who continued to cling to one single element, the birth of their deity in a Meghval family, ignoring the rest of the controversy. One of my informants from Ramdeora, a Jaipal, asserted that it was obvious that Ramdev had incarnated himself as an untouchable. According to him, during his earthly life, although brought up in a Rajput palace, Ramdev did not develop the character of a warrior and never fought a battle: he was a "typical Meghval," peaceful and non-violent.

Ram Prakash did not receive answer to his letter or his queries and the court case simply did not take place. Each party stood his ground. However, at this time in the 1980s a series of quarrels broke out between Meghvals and Rajputs. The author of the pamphlet himself received a few threatening letters but they were not followed by action. It is at Ramdeora that the conflict took its sharpest form. During that period a sadhu of Meghval origin had settled there and a hut had been built for him by some of his devotees and disciples. He was known as "Parikrama Maharaj" (lit. the circumambulating saint), since each year, during the

mela, he traveled to all the sacred places around Pokaran-Runicha connected with the Ramdev tradition. When I saw him in 1992 he was writing a book confirming Ram Prakash's hypothesis concerning the birth of Ramdev in a Meghval family. At the same time he was trying to convince the Jaipals in charge of Dali Bai's shrine that they had been deceived by the Tanwars, since Ramdev's legacy should be entirely in their hands. His attitude was, however, different from that of Ram Prakash, insofar as he even prompted the Meghvals to resort to violence. Thus the tension which had been latent for a while between the descendants of Dali Bai's family, who now claimed to have Ramdev as their ancestor, and the Tanwars, who equally believed themselves to be the legitimate heirs, gradually increased. A few street fights were reported. The accidental death of a member of the Tanwar clan of Ramdeora was interpreted as a disguised murder committed by a revengeful Meghval, working as a priest in Dali Bai's temple.¹¹

During the same period another place of worship began to be the focus of a dispute between Meghvals and Rajputs devotees of Ramdev. Dudu and Naraina (between Ajmer and Jaipur) each has a shrine connected with the Ramdev tradition (D.S. Khan 1996:38-39). These are actually *gaddis* (seats) of the Mahapanth sect, older than the *gaddi* held by the Tanwars at Ramdeora. The mausoleum at Dudu, which shelters the grave of the untouchable saint Khivan Balai, is at present in the hands of Meghvals who claim to be the saint's descendants or disciples. The case of Naraina is more complex. The shrine contains the tomb of Ransi Tanwar, Ramdev's grandfather. According to the current legend narrated by the Meghvals, the *gaddi* was left vacant for some time when Ransi's descendants migrated to other parts of Rajasthan after losing a battle against the Sunni sultan of Delhi, after which it was taken over by other untouchable disciples of the Rajput chieftain. However, recently the *gaddi* had passed into the hands of Rajputs and they were trying to select their disciples exclusively from among the members of their caste. In this way the shrine of Naraina would become a property of the Rajputs. Their claim was not based on a guru-disciple transmission (members of all castes can become followers of the Mahapanth and *mahants* or *pirs* of the *gaddis*); rather it was derived from the idea that as a Rajput, even of a different clan, Ransi could claim him as their ancestor. In contrast to the shrine of Dudu, which has preserved most of its Islamic features, the *mandir* (temple) of Naraina, as it is referred to at present, has been Hinduized and the old graves replaced by structures which look like Hindu *samadhis* on the top of which footprints are engraved. The Rajput priests deny any connections with a sect and simply claim their rights on the basis of ancestor and hero worship, as well as *bhakti*, Ransi having been portrayed in the modern hagiography as a great devotee of Vishnu-Krishna, descendant of Arjuna, one of the five Pandava brothers of the Mahabharata Epic.

The *pir* (head of the *gaddi*) of Dudu is now trying to question this right and has produced, for this purpose, two allegedly old documents proving that the shrine of Naraina

and its land had been first granted by the sultan of Delhi in the 12th-century, and that the grant had later been confirmed by the Maharaja of Jaipur, Jai Singh II, in the 18th century. The authenticity of these documents, which were shown to me at Dudu and are reproduced in a book written by the Meghval religious leader Swami Gokuldas (Gokuldas 1982:168-73), seems very dubious; however, it is not the legitimacy of the claim that interests us here, but the dispute which is going on between the Rajput and the Meghval *gaddis*. Despite all these efforts Ramdev has not been unanimously accepted among the untouchables as a “pariah god,” nor have the Meghvals succeeded in gaining any advantage over the Rajputs, still less in taking over the shrines of Naraina and Ramdeora. My Meghval informants explained this failure by the total lack of cohesion and solidarity among the Meghvals themselves and among various other communities of untouchables and more so, by their poverty. According to Ram Prakash, the author of the *Brahma Purana*, even if the theory of Ramdev’s birth in a pariah family had been accepted by all, the Meghvals still would not have been able to appropriate the shrine of Ramdeora. Even though the Constitution protects the untouchables, they were weak and disunited in comparison with the Rajputs.

Equally important, perhaps, is the fact that not only the devotees belonging to the upper status groups but the low caste communities themselves insisted on the high-caste identity of their saints and gurus. When the sects associated with the medieval saints Kabir and Dadu (15th and 16th centuries) had established their authority and spread, their tradition underwent a gradual process of sanskritization. In the “official” hagiography of the sect, Kabir, the Muslim low caste weaver, was declared to be a Brahmin child adopted by a Muslim family while Dadu, the cotton-carder, also became a Brahmin by caste, as the *mahants* of the Dadupanth grew more powerful. Being born as Hindu Brahmins, the Muslim Kabir and Dadu could be accepted by a greater number of followers.

As an incarnation of Krishna, Ramdev was naturally perceived as a Kshatriya and his Rajput status was, at least at first, satisfactory to all his devotees, including to his major worshippers, the untouchables. But as the god gradually ceased to be called *dhedho ka dev* (the deity of the pariahs) the Meghvals and other low caste groups logically ceased to be the privileged worshippers and priests. Even if they could not claim the shrine and its land or the exclusive right to perform the *puja* in the numerous temples to Ramdev in Rajasthan and elsewhere, many of them accepted Ram Prakash’s theory, which became part of a “reinvented” tradition. At present their only satisfaction is to see that their god, whom they now believe to be a caste-fellow by birth, is worshipped by all, high or low, rich or poor, and they continue to hope that one day they will be fully integrated into the Hindu society without any discrimination.

If the caste ascribed to a particular god could, as late as the 1980s, become the focus of a conflict, it signifies that the traditional hierarchy that forms the framework of Hindu

society still plays a major role in the social and religious life of India. The bright expectations shared by the Meghvals and other untouchable castes are, once more, postponed to a remote future: while singing their prophetic *bhajans*, it seems they are still waiting for the end of the *Kali yuga* when the pariah virgin Meghri will wed their Lord, Baba Ramdev, who will come as Kalki, the future *avatar* of Vishnu. It is only then that, according to the prophecy, the concept of untouchability, which has persisted 50 years after independence, will disappear.

Notes

¹ His acceptance by a Hindu fundamentalist body, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), which at the same time rejects other folk-deities such as Goga and Teja, as well as ancestor worship, is particularly revealing in this respect. I thank Shail Mayaram for this interesting information.

² The former identification seems to be fairly recent, whereas the latter is probably the oldest (D.S. Khan 1996:48-50,56).

³ The comparison, however, does not hold true as the medieval Sant Kabir was a Muslim low-caste weaver and Mahatma Gandhi belongs to the Indian culture of the 20th century.

⁴ *Jama*, from the Arabic *jama’at* means “congregation of the faithful.” It was also the name of the ritual gatherings in the Ramdev and Mallinath traditions. On the Ismaili connection of the Ramdev tradition, see my articles and book mentioned below.

⁵ For these rituals see, for example, N.N. Bhattacharyya (1982:108-45). In my article (D.S. Khan 1994) on the Kunda Panth I have tried to show that its milder form, the Dasa Panth, was not a left-handed Tantric ritual but was rather connected with Ismailism.

⁶ Originally this Sanskrit word refers to all “foreigners,” but later it also became for the Hindu fundamentalists a synonym of Muslims.

⁷ The custom of *jivit samadhi* consists of having oneself buried alive in a state of deep meditation (*samadhi*). The body is then supposed to become immortal, while the soul can wander in the three worlds. The platform or monument built over this spot is also referred to as *samadhi*.

⁸ For the legend of the Tamil Kanyakumari associated with the famous temple of this name in South India at Cape Comorin, see Ve-tam Mani 1989:386.

⁹ The statues of all the heroes were recently covered with a fresh layer of paint, which makes it difficult to guess their former appearance, as the descriptions of the past century are rather scanty. The detail may thus be recent. In fact many Hindu rulers have been portrayed with beards in 18th and 19th century paintings.

¹⁰ As the name strongly suggests, the publishers were probably influenced by the Arya Samaj and its *suddhi* program. On this subject see Clémentin-Ojha 1994 and Jaffrelot 1994.

¹¹ It also happened in the 1980s. Unfortunately I could not obtain detailed record of the incident.

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