

The Cult of the Jakhs in Kutch

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I had the privilege to be introduced to Professor Bhayani almost forty years ago, by my french Guru, Professor Charlotte Vaudeville. She herself, in the early sixties, had worked with Professor Bhayani on old Gujarati Jain poetry (for her book on the Barāhmāsā), at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in Bombay, and, in the process, had come to appreciate not only his profound scholarship, but also his irresistible sense of humor. She always kept good contact, esteem and amity for him. When she sent me, then a student, to Ahmedabad, I was at once amazed and relieved to see one by one all the difficulties I had in understanding the Prabhātiyām of Narasimha Mahetā, solved thanks to the endless knowledge and wide generosity of Professor Bhayani. It took me no time to realize that nobody in Gujarat, like him, could comprehend the totality of Gujarati culture in space and time and put it right into the midst of humanistic studies, from the most classic to the most modern theories, able as he is to combine the discipline of linguistics with literary studies. But, above all, during our long conversations, when I staid at his home, enjoying the cups of tea of Chandrakalaben, filling one notebook after the other with philological notes, bibliographical references, etc. .., I discovered that the most depressed state of mind into which we, scholars, can be plunged facing so many difficulties and fights with our texts, may all of a sudden disappear to make room for the sheer joy of discovery, laughter and happiness, at the mere contact of Professor Bhayani, ever so vivid and enthusiast. Gujarati studies could not be what they are without him. I dedicate to his memory the story of these learned and gentle legendary people, riding through Kutch with a manuscript scroll under their arm.

Kutch is a district attached to the province of Saurashtra, the peninsula adjoining the Arabian Sea and forming the Western province of Gujarat State. This part of Gujarat, due to repeated waves of immigration, is different from the rest of the country not only in its features of physical and human geography but

also through its socio-historic configuration. It is often compared to Rajasthan because of the pattern of its rajput or pseudo-rajput feudalism but its social spectrum is much more complex and diversified.¹

Another distinctive feature of Saurashtra are the wealth and the originality of its religious traditions. It provides shelter on its soil for sanctuaries known all over India like Dwarka or Somnath, Jaina holy places of prime importance like Girnar and Palitana, two of the twelve jyotirlings (*jyotirlingam*), Somnath and Nageśvar, and the puranic geography of Saurashtra is eloquent about the antiquity of the fact that this province was a part of the magnificent tradition of classical Hinduism. Much less well known is the extraordinary wealth of holy men and local cults, its dense network of small popular sanctuaries covering the country. They all belong to what the local authors call *loka-dharma*, popular religion.

These different popular religious currents are not at all mutually exclusive but perfectly open to each other. For instance, what is called *Santa-vāṇī*, a corpus of hymns shared by different communities, all more or less touched by tantric influence, not only is the common property of different faithful but more than that, it is held in esteem by the entire Gujarati public in spite of its use of dialectal features particular to Saurashtra or sometimes even of Kacchi characteristics. For the origin of the *Santa-vāṇī* one must look to the combined action of a group of *loka-dharma* such as the Mahāpanth, Ravibhānpanth, Nāthpanth, Kabirpanth, and - although at present its followers are not any longer conscious of the fact - the Satpanth, the old name of the converted Nizāri Ismailis in Gujarat and Kutch.

In order to finish with this introduction to the popular religion of Saurashtra and Kutch, it is necessary to add a few additional specific features. If like elsewhere in India ascetic exploits and the outward renouncement of the saints are frequently come across, for instance in the case of the founder

of the Nāth community in Kutch, Dharmanāth at Dhinodhar², it appears that very special importance was given to the notions of compassion for the living beings and of devotion to their service in order to attain to the Sants perfection. Examples are numerous : for instance the saint Kāpaḍi Mekaṇ Dādā who, accompanied by his dog Motiyā and his donkey Lāliyā, crisscrosses the Rann of Kutch on the look out for any one having lost his way in the desert in order to provide him with water and food and thus to save him, or Saint Devidās who transforms his *āśrama* at Parab-Vāvdi into a leper-house thus attracting the wrath of his neighbours. Animals will receive equal attention : the shrines belonging to the Sant Vāṇi group will have a *gośālā*, These shrines are provided with all that is necessary for the *sadāvrata* (the vow to feed every day poor visitors), where the visitor will always be told that commensality is compulsory and that caste rules will not be observed. One cannot but be reminded of the presence of Buddhism in Saurashtra until the 13th century³, more exactly in the region concerned by the cult of the Jakhs : Kutch.

Kutch, the northwestern most district of Saurashtra situated between the Arabian Sea to the South, Pakistan to the North East, is physically separated from Pakistan by the Great Rann and from India by the Little Rann; thus is as much connected to the province of Sind than to Kathiawad but historical circumstances determined it being linked to Saurashtra; however Kacchi is a dialect of Sindhi. The preservation of socio-religious traditions in Kutch is in astonishing contrast with its wide opening to the outside world overseas and the resulting migrations of men and ideas. The cult of the Jakhs belongs to Kutch alone.

In Kutch district one may find sanctuaries, more or less abandoned and small, displaying an alignment of statuettes representing 72 horsemen on their horses holding a manuscript scroll in one hand, said to have come from overseas to alleviate the misery of the poor, to look after the sick, to deliver the

country from its tyrant, the king Puṁvrao. Such are the Jakhs⁴. They are treated like gods. Their legend is known only thanks to bardic tales because the Jakhs are responsible for the failure of the first attempt of the Samma Rajputs from Sind to rule over Kutch, through ruining Puṁvrao, nephew of Lākhā Phulāṇi (at the end of the 10th century). Several tales are available. A. Burnes in 1826 provided the first one⁵ and L.F. Rushbrook Williams has summed up the state of the question in 1958⁶. According to the legends, seven holy men had come from somewhere near Byzantium ; called Rikhis (R̥ṣi) or Saṁghar, they are said to have worshipped their god Jakh on a hill not far from the fort of Puṁvrao, Padhargadh. The fact that they were able to heal sterility is said to have been of interest to the queen of Puṁvrao who is said either to have given them access to the palace through an underground passage or to have been offended because having been treated by them like an ordinary woman. Puṁvrao is said to have had them arrested and condemned to winnow grain on a ground covered with nails. A compassionate barber is said to have freed one of them who from the top of a hill had then called for the help of his God. Jakh is said to have arrived from Byzantium in company of his 70 brothers and one sister. As Puṁvrao refused to liberate the prisoners, they are said to have killed Puṁvrao after a lot of vicissitudes and put a curse on Padhargadh which was ruined and abandoned two years after having been built. Later on the 71 Jakhs and their sister were divinized and worshipped astride on their horses.

Another miracle was required in the 18th century to convince Rao Desalji (1716-1751) of the fact that the Jakhs actually existed : they appeared from the sky on their horses near the gold market (*sonī bazār*) at Bhuj. A shrine commemorates the event, it is called Jakh Jar or Jakh Mandir; it is not much visited nowadays but well kept: 24 completely whitewashed niches are aligned on a platform surrounded by constructions, each providing shelter to three manuscript scrolls, doubtlessly standing for the 72 Jakhs ; two Jakh statues stand

in front of the niches and two white flags. There was no trace of *pūjā* going on (on December 12, 1997). Desalji and his successors are supposed to come and celebrate their arrival once a year.

Rushbrook Williams quotes a more rational tale on the presence of the Jakhs, as having been told by the last royal bard⁷. 71 shipwrecked men and a woman are said to have reached on rafts Jakhau (on the West Coast, Abaḍāsā *tālukā*, an ancient harbour the name of which recalls the event⁸). With their clear skin and tall stature and speaking a language unknown to Kutchis however far they had travelled, they were supposed to have come from Byzantium. They started to travel over the country and to teach their art of medicine, and other sciences, and were given horses in exchange. Their popularity is said to have provoked the jealousy of the cruel Puṃvrao who imprisoned some of them. Their brothers, in order to free them, were able to build a ballistic machine on a nearby hill bombarding a part of the palace and killing the king. The queen is said to have organized a massacre of all the Jakhs in revenge, but the people grateful for their kindnesses are said to have worshipped them as saints and even demigods in hilltop temples.

At Jakhau where many Jakh statues existed, the cult seems in recession. The silting-up of the harbour put an end to the commercial activities of the Bhanuśālī who emigrated to Bombay. Their arable land was taken over by Muslims. A small shrine has however been built twelve years ago between the small town and the Sea; seven Jakhs can be seen there on their horses, small statues, 30 to 50 centimeters high. Incense and coconuts bear witness to the existence of a cult.

But the most lively temple is located at the village bearing the very name Jakh near the Padhargadh ruins (Nakhatrāṇā *tālukā*) and near the ruins of a big Śiva temple called Puṃvreśvar. The shrine on the top of a hill is accessible via a flight of steps, it is an open terrace partially covered by

a dome under which stand in a row the 72 whitewashed statuettes of the Jakhs on their little horses, freshly painted, with their characteristic orange turban, their moustache, with the manuscript scrolls under the arm; their sister Sāyari is different only through her smaller size. A series of 72 statuettes has been discarded, but not destroyed because when a series is replaced, the preceding one is simply put aside and continues to receive garlands and some honours. An oil lamp is continuously lighted and hung on a pillar of the entry. *Darsana* is permanent, visitors are numerous.⁹

Local writers as well as English scholars have tried hard to find a plausible explanation for the origin of the strange benefactors from foreign lands. Many theories were put forward, some of them quite fanciful: they were said to be celestial beings as indicated by their name, Hindu or Buddhist *yakṣa*, Greeks or Romans, Śākas or White Huns¹⁰, or even the Varangian (Scandinavian) Guards of the emperor of Byzantium ! More prosaically, Rushbrook Williams proposes an Iranian identity : they might have been Zoroastrians fleeing islamization from Northern Iran (as had the present day Parsis who reached the coast of Gujarat as early as during the 9th century) a group of whom might have been shipwrecked and sought refuge on the coast of Kutch. Their peaceful ways and their knowledge would be in accordance with those attributed to the Jakhs. For Dalpat Shrimali¹¹, a specialist of the religious folklore of the untouchables in Saurashtra and Gujarat, the god Jakh might be an *avatāra* of Matang or Mataim Dev, one of the great Gurus of the Mahāmārgi mythology, born from a brahmin father and an untouchable mother, famous for his astrologic science but who is also one of the great Hindu preachers of Nizāri Ismailism¹².

None of these theories can be proven, and the legend of the Jakhs does not seem to have crossed the Ranns of Kutch.

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Foot-Notes

- 1 Cf. Harald Tambs-Lyche, *Power, Profit and Poetry ; Traditional Society in Kathiawar, Western India*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1997.
- 2 Dalpatrām P. Khakhar, “History of of the Kamphatas of Kacch” in *Indian Antiquary*, 7 (February 1878), pp. 45-53, and in D.P.Khakhar, *Report on the Architectural and Archaeological Remains in the Province of Kacch., with five papers by the late Sir Alex. Burnes*, reprinted at Patna : Indian India, 1978 (1st ed., Bombay: Government Central Press, 1879), p. 3-13.
- 3 Cf. M.S. Moray, *History of Buddhism in Gujarat*, Ahmedabad : Saraswati Pustak Bhandar, 1965, and A.S. Gadre, “Buddhist Influence in Gujarat and Kathiawar”, *Journal of the Gujarat Research Society*, (Bombay), 1939, 1-4, p. 61-70.
- 4 The etymology of *Jakh* can only lead to Sanskrit *yakṣa*, the guardian demigods or servants of Kubera, the god of wealth.
- 5 Alexander Burnes, “An Account of the Ruins near Mujjul or Munjul in Cutch”, appendix no. IV., in Dalpatram P. Khakhar, *op.cit.*, note 8.
- 6 L.F. Rushbrook Williams, *The Black Hills, Kutch in History and Legend : A Study in Indian Local Loyalties*, London : Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1958, pp.83-88, and ill.
- 7 *Ibidem*, p.86-87.
- 8 On Jakhau see G.D. Patel, ed., *Gujarat State Gazetteers, Kutch District*, Ahmedabad : Government Press, Gujarat State, 1971, p. 598.
- 9 I had the oportunity to discover a new sanctuary of Jakhs in January 2001 at a place named leliya, four kilometers of Jangi (Bhachau *tālūkā*). The shrine, open air, was renovated in 2000 and showed the present vividness of cult.
- 10 Cf. Rushbrook Williams, *op.cit.* , note 20, p. 85.
- 11 Dalpat Shrimali, *Harijana santa ane lokasāhitya [kamthasthathī granthastha]*, Ahmedabad : Gujarāta grantharatna kāryālaya, repr. 1993 (1st ed. 1989), p. 223f.
- 12 Cf. S. Nanjiani, *Khojā vṛttānta*, Ahmedabad : 2nd ed., 1892, p. 133-136.