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SUBALTERNITY, ITINERANT TRADE
AND CRIMINALITY:

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF
MEMBERS OF THE KATHIAWAD
VAGHRI COMMUNITY.

Thesis submitted by

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In November 2003

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the School of Anthropology, Archaeology and Sociology
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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of the Kathiawad Vaghri, a depressed community of itinerant traders who hail from Gujarat and engage in various forms of trade all over India. It explores the history of the caste, examining their social marginalisation and ambiguity from the 1700s. As forest hunters and itinerant traders who maintained patron-client relationships with local Rajputs, worshipped goddesses and held origin myths connecting them to the Middle East, the Vaghri did not fit easily into the category of caste or tribe as these categories became more rigidly codified during the colonial era. At the same time, their ambiguous marginality is picked up by a regime that articulated a fantasy of occult criminality in the nineteenth century figure of the *thugg*. This resulted in the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) (1871) through which the social marginalisation of the Vaghri was greatly extended and a stigma attached that persists into the present day.

The second section of the thesis considers the adaptive responses of the Vaghri to this history of alterity, stigma and persecution. It traces their departure from Gujarat in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the nature of their migration, their emergence as hawkers and petty traders on the streets of Mumbai and their continuing connections with their original villages in Gujarat. These new practices made control under the CTA more possible as the Vaghri are increasingly identified as petty thieves who use trade as a cover for theft. De-notification of the criminal tribes occurs in 1952. However, the stigma of criminality persists and is reproduced in the development agenda, which the Vaghri largely reject. Their response was to create a caste for themselves, the Vaghri Sarvodaya Samaj through which a new Vaghri identity was imagined through a partial internalisation of the colonial surveillance apparatus as a moralistic and welfare-oriented control apparatus that articulates the Vaghri with the national project.

The removal of the Act also sees the Vaghri return to forms of mobility and trade not seen since the beginning of the century, through which an earlier Vaghri pattern of itinerant trade with a fairly strong sense of community is reproduced. Trade in embroidered Gujarati textiles and antiques emerges in the 1970s as a response to the presence of a new and comparatively wealthy client base in the form of international tourists whom Vaghri call “the Hippies”. Bolstered by the careful arrangement of marriages within the caste and the role of the Vaghri Samaj as a trade guild, extensive familial and caste-based trade networks continue to develop and by the 1980s an increasing number of families are moving into handicrafts and travelling to tourist centres throughout India. However, the perils and ambiguity of itinerant trade continue. This is explored through a case study of a small tourist centre in Kerala, dominated politically and economically by members of the Ezhava community—a depressed caste with a history of exploitation and oppression who, unlike Vaghri, chose the affirmative action path. The thesis shows that social change in contemporary India continues to reflect the problems and difficulties of bureaucratic ‘capture’. The story of the Vaghri is one of struggle, prejudice and victimisation. It is also a story of adaptation and resilience that provides an ethnographic account of the history and contemporary practices of a depressed community.

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PICTURES AND DIAGRAMS

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Led by the *bhua* (Vaghri spirit medium) of this particular temple-village, and followed by the men and finally the women, this procession began at the Vaghri temple, moved through the pathways that intersected the houses and out onto the main road. At the edge of the large village pond and within site of the cemetery, the *paliaya* (commemorative stone tablet) seen here on the back of the truck was interred in the ground, next to five other tablets, each identified with a particular Vaghri *bhua* ancestor from this clan.

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STATEMENT OF SOURCES

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

Signature

16.4.04
Date

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In memory of
Jill Wells
and
Joni McNaughton.

A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The Vaghri assert that while their dialect shares many similarities with Gujarati, most Gujarati speakers have great difficulty understanding it. The translations featured in this work are those provided by interpreters fluent in the Vaghri dialect, in Gujarati and in English. They are not derived from any formal system of transliteration, largely because none exist where the Vaghri dialect is concerned.