The Bhils and Shahukars of Eastern Gujarat

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The Bohra has harassed us,
now rise up!
The Vaniya’s rupees are outstanding,
""
He has taken a pile of rupees as interest,
""
But as soon as he does this,
""
The time to pay up comes,
""
We have sold off our grain, pots and utensils,
""
By selling them we somehow paid up,
""
The grain-pots are lying empty,
""
The children are dying of hunger,
""
The wife is complaining all the time,
""
We have suffered through the winter and summer,
""
We have no clothes on our backs or bedding,
""
The children are wandering about naked,
""
Now we are discussing what to do,
""
The children are dying,
""
We go to the forests and wastelands,
""
We collect gum from the trees,
""
We collect timru,
""
We cut fodder and bring it,
""
We go and sell it to people,
""
We obtain one measure of grain,
""
There are eight to share it,
""
We toil night and day,
""
And still sleep half hungry,
""
We have acted stupidly,
""
We have trusted in fate,
""
That is why we have suffered,
""
Life is now a misery,
""
Now let’s sing the song,
""
I

After the rains had failed in the Poshina area of Gujarat one year, the Bhil peasantry gathered together with their bows and arrows and other weapons and went in a procession to the town of Poshina. Standing in front of the houses of the shahukars they shouted aggressively to them to come out. The shahukars, all Jain Vaniyas, feared their houses might be sacked and so came out. The Bhils ordered each Vaniya head of house to take an earthen pot full of water and place it on his head. The Bhils then took the shahukars in a procession, dancing and shouting as they went. At a fixed spot the shahukars were made to stand in a row with the waterpots on their heads. The Bhils shot arrows at the pots, smashing them and drenching the shahukars with water.

The Bhils took this action because they believed that the shahukars were a cunning people who through their craft were able to control the forces of nature. The shahukars had stopped the rain so as to cause a dearth and consequent inflation of prices to their advantage. By smashing the pots with their arrows and freeing the water the Bhils believed they could break the Vaniya’s spells and bring rain within a day or two. The shahukars were subjected to danger and humiliation and they were thus unlikely to again try to stop the rain or attempt to profiteer from the drought—for a time at least.¹

In this episode we find illustrated some of the essential features of the relationship between the Bhils and their shahukars. Firstly, it reveals the power which the shahukars exercised over the Bhils, a

ABBREVIATIONS: CR=Collector’s Report, Panchmahals District; ACR=Assistant Collector’s Report, Panchmahals District; DCR=Deputy Collector’s Report, Panchmahals District; BA=Bombay Archives (Maharashtra State Archives, Bombay); NAI=National Archives of India, New Delhi; JD=Judicial Department; R.D.=Revenue Department; F.D.=Famine Department.

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¹ This event was recorded by a colleague of mine at the Centre for Social Studies, Surat—Dr Harbans Patel, who carried out research in the Poshina area in 1985. His informants both Bhils and Vaniyas, told him that this type of ritual had been carried out at least three times in the preceding eighteen years.
power so great that they were believed to be able even to control the rain. The shahukars did indeed dominate the lives of the Bhils. Each year, in the long dry months before the monsoon, the Bhils depended for their survival on hand-outs of foodgrains from the shahukars. When the rains came they had to borrow seed-grain to sow their fields. After the harvest they paid their taxes from money given to them by the shahukars. Their marriages, funerals and festivities were financed by the shahukars. In return the Bhils handed over the lion’s share of the crop at harvest time.

The Bhils were well aware that this was not a reciprocal relationship. Their proverbs are eloquent. ‘The innocent-looking Vaniya comes in our midst and takes advantage of us’;² ‘The peasant toils with his hands for the sake of the Vaniya’s son’;³ ‘One man’s shahukari is built on another man’s sweat’;⁴ ‘I love the Sheth-Vaniya so much that I have given him a fat stomach.’⁵ Being an independent-minded group with a long tradition of rebellion against tyranny, the Bhils did on occasions resist. The Bhils of Poshina, faced by famine, came together to force the shahukars to rescind their spells and stop their profiteering. What is perhaps surprising is that they did not resist more often. On the whole, cases of violence by Bhils against shahukars have been rare. This fact has been noted in a somewhat exaggerated manner by an official who worked in the Bhil region of Jhabua in Madhya Pradesh.

One particular trait of the Bhil character is that a Bhil never attacks his moneylender. I have not come across a single case of a money lender having been done to death . . . He [the shahukar] travels proudly on his pony and can visit the remotest places in the Bhil territory without any fear of any one even being disrespectful to him. No one ever shoots an arrow at him.⁶

For many observers such behaviour has presented a paradox. Why in the normal run of events have the Bhils allowed themselves to be so exploited by the shahukars when they could have resisted? In the literature on the Bhils two explanations have been commonly advanced, which we may label respectively as ‘evolutionist’ and ‘culturalist’. In the evolutionist explanation the Bhils are seen as

² Fuljibhai Bhili, Rajasthani Bhulo ki Kabavate (Udaipur, 1954), p.137.
⁴ Ibid., p.21.
⁵ Ibid., p.140.
primitives who cannot grasp the intricacies of modern social and economic organization and thus have to rely on intermediaries who can too easily exploit them. From such a viewpoint the solution is to provide education so that the Bhils can be raised from a state of 'barbarity' to 'civilization'. Once educated, it is argued, they will be able to resist the wiles of the shahukars. Although characteristic of bourgeois thinking, such beliefs are found amongst certain Marxists who maintain that groups such as the Bhils lack the maturity of understanding needed to struggle with success against their exploiters. Again it is believed that education—in this case by socialist cadres—will enlighten the subordinate group as to their true interests. Such thinking is tainted with an elitism which sets itself up to be a judge of what is best for the lower classes. Historians should not in my view rank forms of consciousness on a scale (which is inevitably ethnocentric), but rather see how consciousness relates to specific historical conditions and ways of life in different circumstances. Thus, if we take the case of the Bhils of Poshina, we may argue that although their belief that the shahukars could control rain did not accord with a scientific-rationalist point of view, their consciousness did not prevent them from taking highly effective action to prevent profiteering by the moneylenders. It is hard to see how a scientific-rationalist understanding could, in this instance, have served them better.

The culturalist explanation is of a different sort, though equally elitist. Marx has pointed out how the bourgeoisie 'promulgate the doctrine that the accumulation of capital is the first duty of every citizen.' On such a scale of merit the Bhils rank very low, being trapped, so it is believed, within a culture of thriftlessness and commitment to pleasure. G. Morris Carstairs, carrying out anthropological research near Udaipur in 1951–2, reported this 'cultural trait' when a group of Bhils arrived one day in the caste-village in which he was staying. 'Here was clearly a people whose values were strikingly different to those cherished by my Hindu informants ... The Bhils were boisterously demonstrative. They shouted, sang, laughed aloud and were unashamedly drunk in the public gaze.'

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joying themselves, although they are so poor that they often do not know whether they will have anything to eat for their next meal—isn't that a strange thing!" Another bystander observed that the display proved that the Bhils were 'nearer to monkeys than to men.'

Similar culturalist explanations for Bhil poverty run through the reports of colonial officials; for instance that 'a thrifty Bhil is almost unknown',

or that 'he lays by nothing, spending as he makes in liquor and personal indulgence. He is extremely lazy and drinking is 'his great amusement.'

From such a standpoint the Bhils are condemned by their moral failings to a life of indebtedness while their exploiters are absolved of all blame.

In this essay I shall adopt an alternative approach by arguing that the relationship between the Bhils and the shahukars was formed out of a particular history which brought the egalitarian society of the Bhils into a close economic relationship with the hierarchical society of the shahukars without changing in a fundamental manner the internal social organization of either. To illustrate this I shall focus on a clearly defined region, that of the Eastern Mahals of Gujarat. I shall start by describing the functioning of the relationship during a period for which there is particularly rich documentation, that of the late nineteenth century. As a part of this exercise we shall try to see how both Bhils and shahukars viewed the relationship. From there I shall go on to look at the preceding history, to see how the system evolved. I shall then examine the relationship when it was in a state of crisis, during the famine of 1899. During that year the shahukars refused to hand out grain from their well-stocked stores at a time when the Bhils were in desperate need. The Bhils rose and looted the shahukar's shops, carrying away large amounts of grain. They rose, it was said, not because they were starving, but because the shahukars had acted in a morally unacceptable manner. This appears to accord with the idea of a 'moral economy of the peasant', and I shall look at this concept in a critical manner, using the evidence from eastern Gujarat. I shall conclude with a few words on the history of the relationship in the years after the famine of 1899.

9 Ibid., p.135.
10 Ibid., p.126.
The Eastern Mahals of the Panchmahals district of Gujarat formed a compact block of territory surrounded by princely states and isolated from the rest of the British-ruled district by a strip of territory ranging from about 12 kilometres broad in the north to over 40 kilometres broad in the south (see the accompanying map). The area was divided into two administrative sub-divisions, called ‘talukas’ or ‘mahals’, Dahod and Jhalod. Situated on a plateau about 400 metres above the plains of Gujarat, the Eastern Mahals formed a border region between Gujarat, Central India (Malwa), and Rajasthan. The plateau consisted of a series of rolling hills, the highest of which rose to 486 metres. Between the hills lay fertile valleys with deep black soil and numerous streams and rivers. Although in Mughal times the area had much thick forest, being a home for wild elephants, by the nineteenth century the trees had been almost all cut, leaving only a few, mostly babul, growing around the fields of the Bhil peasants. The Panchmahals gazetteer of 1879 reported that ‘the land has a long settled look.’

The two talukas had a population in 1872 of 100,298, of whom 64,071 were returned as Bhils (64 per cent). There were two other communities who were considered like the Bhils to be adivasis, the Labanas (1844 in 1872) and the Patelias (no figure is given for 1872, but in 1901 there were 10,194). In all, therefore, the adivasis made up over three-quarters of the entire population.

By the late nineteenth century the Bhils of the Eastern Mahals had long since ceased to be shifting, migratory cultivators, slashing and burning small fields from the jungle each year. They lived in well-defined villages and had regular fields which they cultivated with bullock-drawn ploughs. In contrast to most peasants of the plains they did not live in compact villages but built their huts on the land which they cultivated. According to one Assistant Collector,

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15 Ibid., pp.300 and 302.
Map of North-eastern Gujarat during the Colonial Period

- British territory
- Princely States of Rajasthan
- Baroda state
- Princely States of Central India
- Princely States of Gujarat
- Talukdari estates
The fact of cultivators not gathering together in one narrow circle or forming a nest of habitations, as is the case in other parts of the country, does not, I think, render the Panch Mahal cultivators liable to the name of nomadic tribes, &c. The collections of huts in the Panch Mahals are just as much 'villages' as any in Kaira or Ahmedabad: the boundaries are defined, patels and village institutions exist, and the cultivators appear to dwell apart from one another, in order to be close to the land they cultivate. In fact, I doubt Bheels ever settling in regularly built villages, even if they were to become in the highest degree civilized. The Panch Mahal cultivators are fond of changing their land, but this arises a good deal from their poverty and inability to provide manure. They do not, however, without some reason, leave their villages.\textsuperscript{17}

As a rule, once settled, a Bhil family stayed in the same village for generations.\textsuperscript{18}

As there was plenty of spare land in the area, most Bhils kept a larger amount of land than they could cultivate in a particular year. In 1874–5, 6523 Bhil landowners are recorded as having cultivated 35,320 acres in the Eastern Mahals, an average of 5.4 acres per family.\textsuperscript{19} Over the following decade the peasants were made to register all the land which they used, whether or not they cultivated all of it in a particular year. As a result, records for 1884–5 show 5128 Bhil landowners (many had left the British territory in protest) owning 54,615 acres, or an average of 10.6 acres per family.\textsuperscript{20} These figures reveal that although an average Bhil family had rights to over ten acres of land, they would probably only cultivate half of it in a given year. It was possible for the Bhils to cultivate in this manner because land was freely available and, on the whole, without any market value. In 1884–5 only 95,406 out of a total of 154,431 cultivable acres of the Eastern Mahals were under occupation. Thirty-eight per cent of the arable land thus lay uncultivated.\textsuperscript{21}

The chief crop grown during the monsoon was maize, the staple food of the area. In 1877–8, 42 per cent of the cultivated area was under this crop.\textsuperscript{22} The other major monsoon crop, rice, accounted for 8 per cent of the cultivated area during that year.\textsuperscript{23} After these

\textsuperscript{17} W. H. Propert, Assistant Collector, Panchmahals, 27 November 1874, Godhra Taluka Settlement Report, 1874, Selections from the Records of the Bombay Government, no. cccxxviii—new series (Bombay, 1904), p. 47.


\textsuperscript{19} DCR 1884–5, BA, R.D. 1885, vol. 26, comp.500.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{22} Panchmahals Gazetteer, 1879, pp. 300 and 302.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
two crops were harvested the soil normally retained enough moisture for a second crop, the most common of which were chana dal (gram; 21 per cent) and wheat (no figure for 1877–8, but in 1898–9 it accounted for 4 per cent of the cultivated area). 24 These crops were grown largely without irrigation. Although all of these crops could be consumed by the peasants themselves, they found a ready market in the towns. Rice, wheat and chana dal, in particular, were grown for the market. The Dahod Settlement Officer reported in 1878, 'The rice cultivation, or rather the quality of rice produced in this taluka, is very good and the demand for it very great in Malwa and Marwar, where this grain is not raised.' 25 The Jhalod Settlement Officer wrote in 1896 that, 'The wheat crops of Jhalod are as fine as those of the Tapti valley; and whereas in the latter case wheat is the sole crop of the year, in Jhalod a crop of maize has already been taken off the ground.' 26 Another major commercial crop, grown up to 1878, was poppy. In 1881 it was reported of Jhalod taluka that, 'This tract was until recently a poppy garden as far as the eye could reach, the brilliant red and white flowers mixed with the blue of the flax presented until the month of March a carpet of fairy weaving.' 27 The juice was extracted, dried, and the resulting opium handed over to the shahukar, who sold some of it locally and exported the rest to Baroda and Bombay. 28 Cultivation was banned by the Abkari Act of 1878 and after that the poppy was seen no more in the Eastern Mahals.

The Bhils did not live by such agriculture alone, for once the crops were harvested and in the hands of the shahukars large numbers left their villages in search of seasonal work. This migration normally started around January, being at its peak over the next three months. The large majority went east to the plains of Malwa, where there was always a demand for labour during the rabi harvest. 29 Malwa was also an important poppy-growing region and,


26 Jhalod Taluka Talukdari Villages Settlement Report, 1896, p.11.


as juice-extraction was a highly labour-intensive task, many Bhils of the Eastern Mahals found work in these poppy fields.\textsuperscript{30}

The Bhils also found work in the forests which lay in the princely states to the south of Dahod. They could cut headloads of wood for sale as firewood in the towns. There was a big demand for gum and lac (used for lacquering wood), both of which had to be gathered from forest trees. The gazetteer of 1879 recorded that in ordinary years about five tonnes of lac were exported to Ahmedabad and seven and one-seventh tonnes to Ratlam from the Panchmahals each year.\textsuperscript{31} This trade had been going on since at least the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{32} There was also a demand from the towns of Gujarat for forest honey, and this was collected by the Bhils during the winter season.\textsuperscript{33} The other important forest product was the flower of the \textit{mahua} tree, which was used for making country liquor. Mahua trees were found all over the region, but they were concentrated in particular in Devgadh Bariya state, to the south. The tree flowered in late March and early April and during this period large numbers of Bhils trekked to Devgadh Bariya to harvest the flowers. Being edible, they provided a nourishing food during the hot weather.\textsuperscript{34} Most of the mahua flowers were, however, sold or handed over to merchants and shahukars, who either sold them to liquor distillers or exported them to South Gujarat or Bombay.\textsuperscript{35} In many cases the Bhils took the produce which they had gathered from the forest to their personal shahukars, who credited it in the account books against their debts.\textsuperscript{36}

In May and early June the Bhils returned to their villages to prepare the land for sowing. It was at this time that they were most dependent on their shahukars for advances of foodgrain and seed. As a rule the shahukars were tight-fisted up until the break of the monsoon. Once they were reasonably sure that the season would be


\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Panchmahals Gazetteer}, p.249.

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Rewa Kantha Gazetteer}, p.53.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{34} CR 1878–9, BA, R.D. 1879, vol.24, comp.1016.

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Panchmahals Gazetteer}, 1879, p.247.

\textsuperscript{36} Varma, \textit{The Bhil Kils}, p.354.
favourable they handed over the seed to their clients for sowing. They also continued to provide food handouts so long as the crops were growing.

As soon as the crops were harvested and on the threshing-floor the shahukars set out for the Bhil villages with empty bullock carts.

Harvest over, the moneylender with one or two friends starts on a collecting tour ... With much wrangling, in which the ignorant Bhil is always worsted, the accounts are balanced, the debt running on while the original amount lent continues to increase. Money or grain is taken in part payment of debts, and however scanty his debtor’s stock of grain, as much as can be seized is carried off.

Estimates as to how much of the crop was taken by the shahukar varied. The normal terms of borrowing were that one and a half times the amount of grain advanced during the preceding months had to be repaid at harvest time. However, as debts were normally running ones paying compound interest, the shahukars invariably claimed far more. According to a report of 1878 the peasants usually handed over half their crop of maize to the moneylender at this time. Another report, of 1881, estimated that three-fifths of the crop went to the shahukar. One District Collector, writing in 1912, even claimed that the whole crop was taken away. Another Collector reported in 1903: ‘In Dohad and Jhalod where almost one third of the cultivated area is double cropped it is not uncommon to find that the Bania gets the whole of the valuable wheat and gram while leaving most of the first crop which is almost always maize to the cultivator.’ It is most likely that the shahukars took about half, and sometimes more, of the maize crop, and almost the entire crop of rice, wheat and chana dal. Likewise, while poppy was still being cultivated in the region, they took away almost all of the opium produce by the Bhils. The crops were taken on the understanding that once the Bhil’s meagre reserves were exhausted they could come to the shahukar’s shop for fresh supplies. As many Bhils were absent from their villages for much of the following dry season,

37 DCR 1888–9; Symington, Report, 61.
38 Rewa Kantha Gazetteer, p. 41.
39 DCR 1877–8, BA, R.D. 1878, comp. 1024.
43 ACR 1874–5, BA, R.D. 1875, vol.6, pt 3, comp.963.
leaving their huts empty and unprotected, it was often not in their interest to keep large stores of grain. The arrangement therefore had a certain convenience to it.

A Bhil was expected to deal with only one shahukar. The relationship often stretched back several generations on both sides and was, in the words of one official, ‘practically unaffected by competition’.\footnote{Jhalod Taluka Revision Settlement Report, 1909, Selection from the Records of the Bombay Government, no. 841—new series (Bombay, 1911), p.3.} It was common for the shahukar to refer to his clients as his asami. Originally this term meant merely ‘peasant’,\footnote{In Mughal India asami meant an ‘individual cultivator — having similar connotations to the term ryot.’ Irfan Habib, ‘Agrarian Relations and Land Revenue: North India’, in Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib (ed.), The Cambridge Economic History of India, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1982), p.239.} but in the context of the Eastern Mahals it was defined by one British official as ‘serf-like clients, who at the same time live their own lives’\footnote{Collector’s comments, 18 October 1915, on DCR 1914–15, BA, R.D. 1916, comp.511, pt 3.} For the shahukar his asami was like a chattel. ‘An Asami is bequeathed or bestowed in dowry, &c., just as any other property.’\footnote{Dahod Taluka Revision Settlement Report, 1904, p.6.} The gazetteer for the adjoining Rewa Kantha states noted in 1880, ‘In the Rewa Kantha every Bhil or Koli has his own Vania or other moneylender who has more power over him than even his chief. So much is this the case that sometimes a village is spoken of as so and so’s village not because he is its owner but because its people are his debtors.’\footnote{Rewa Kantha Gazetteer, p.41.} Any Bhil who borrowed from another moneylender or took a takavi loan from the government was likely to incur his shahukar’s displeasure and a corresponding drying up of credit.\footnote{DCR 1894–5, BA, R.D. 1895, vol.37, comp.569. This explained why so few Bhils took takavi loans — see DCR 1886–7, BA, R.D. 1888, vol.18, comp. 500.} The monopolistic nature of this relationship is brought out well in a more recent description of Bhils and Bohra shahukars in the Ratanmal area of what was Devgadh Bariya state:

usually, people of a village transact their business as far as possible with one trader only—occasional trips to the haats not counting—and are on pretty familiar terms with him. Whenever they go to him, he might give them some groundnuts and jaggery and allow them to rest in the courtyard of his shop—a privilege never permitted to strange Bhils, for reasons of security. He particularly wants them to buy all their feast requirements from him and gives then on each such occasion, some extra
coconuts, jaggery and groundnuts, free of charge, as a mark of goodwill. So much importance does he attach to these special purchases, that he might actually berate on old client who bought his feast-requirements elsewhere. Once I heard the old Vohra of Kanjeta reproach a man; 'Why do you come to me for other things all the year round, when you buy for Holi elsewhere. I don't want your custom. You can take it away.'

By thus denying their clients free access to the market the shahukars took full advantage of price fluctuations, advancing produce in 'loans' when prices ruled high and taking 'repayment' when prices were low. The shahukar was thus able to boost the size of the peasant's debt as recorded in his books. These debts grew over the years, especially as they were inherited from father to son. They were enhanced further by the comparatively large sums borrowed for expenditure on ceremonies, particularly marriages and memorial ceremonies to the dead. Bridegrooms had for instance to pay a brideprice which in 1894 was estimated as being at least eighty rupees. The hospitality on such occasions had to be generous, with an ample flow of liquor.

In 1876 H.A. Acworth, an Assistant Collector, attempted to estimate the extent of indebtedness in the Eastern Mahals. He examined 128 peasants of eleven villages of Jhalod taluka and 100 peasants of eight villages of Dahod taluka. Of the 228 peasants, only three had no debts and only one of these three was a Bhil. Acworth calculated that the average debt of a Bhil of Jhalod taluka was Rs 91 and of a Bhil of Dahod taluka Rs 151. He explained this difference by the fact that Dahod taluka had better communications and marketing facilities and that the 'aborigines' of Dahod were in consequence more advanced in 'civilization', and therefore more creditworthy. By the standards of the day these sums were large. The normal rate for field labour at that time was two annas a day, which represented an annual wage of Rs 45 (an unlikely sum, as few Bhils would have found employment for a whole year). Clearly, it was virtually impossible for a Bhil to find sufficient cash to pay off such debts. Very few bothered even to try. What mattered was creditworthiness. This was maintained by handing over a large share of their crop after the

50 Y.V.S. Nath, Bhils of Ratanmal. An Analysis of the Social Structure of a Western Indian Community (Baroda, 1960), pp.52–3.
52 DCR 1914–15.
53 ACR 1875–6.
harvest and by making a point of bringing dry-season gleanings from the forest to their shahukar. With such creditworthiness they could normally hope to get adequate advances from their shahukars, whatever their debts on his books.

While land was freely available the Bhils had a potential weapon against excessive exploitation by the shahukar: they could migrate. However, it is clear from the nineteenth-century evidence that this was not a weapon used lightly. For a Bhil to be able to cultivate in a satisfactory manner it was necessary to be creditworthy, and such creditworthiness depended as a rule on a long-standing relationship with a shahukar. To this extent the Bhils were bound to their villages by debt. Although in this sense debt-bonded, it is important to note that they were not exploited in the onerous manner of a bonded labourer. In the latter case adivasis or other low-caste peasants were forced to work as virtual slaves for masters from whom they had taken a loan to meet marriage or other expenses. Such a system was almost unknown in the Eastern Mahals, for credit-giving cultivators did not as a rule live in the villages. In some neighbouring princely states in which there were Rajput jagirdars, Bhils sometimes repaid a loan from such landlords by working a stipulated number of years, but they worked more as sharecroppers—handing over a proportion of the crop to the jagirdars at harvest time—rather than as supervised agricultural labourers. In Dungarpur state a system known as sagri emerged in the late nineteenth century as high-caste peasants, such as Patidar migrants from Gujarat, began to grab adivasi land and cultivate cash crops. By advancing loans to destitute Bhils they secured for themselves a cheap permanent labour force.54 The sagri system never emerged in the Eastern Mahals, in which there were few such migrant high-caste peasants.55 The Bhils of this region did not therefore suffer daily humiliations at the hands of village landlords or high-caste peasants.56 The shahukar was a relatively distant figure. This helps

54 These systems of labour-bondage are described in N. N. Vyas, Bondage and Exploitation in Tribal India (Jaipur, 1980), pp.89–109.

55 Kanbi or Patidar peasants were afraid to settle in the region lest they be attacked by Bhils. A Collector of the Panchmahals wrote in 1879: ‘The Mhye is at present regarded as a kind of Styx dividing Kaira or civilization from Hades. Hence a vast and superstitious reluctance to cross the river and settle in the Mahals’. CR 1878–9.

56 The Bhil’s hatred of such exploitation is revealed in their proverb: ‘Doing service is like being impaled on the point of a sword.’ F. Bhil, Rajasthan Bhilo ki Kahavate, p.106
to account for a relative lack of bitterness amongst the Bhils against the shahukars as a class.

III

The professional shahukars lived almost entirely in the three towns of Dahod, Jhalod and Limbdi. Dahod was the largest of these towns, with a population in 1901 of 14,003. The population of Jhalod was 5918 and of Limbdi 2379. A few shahukars ran shops in large villages such as Garbada, Gangardi, Jesawada, Chandavana and Boriala. In 1901 the average population of these five villages was 1124. In the rest of the villages, 213 in all with an average population of 295, there were no shops at all. There was therefore in the Eastern Mahals a sharp divide between town and country, with the villages being inhabited almost entirely by adivasis and the towns by businessmen, artisans, government functionaries, high-status cultivators and other service groups, such as the Ghanchi carriers who operated fleets of bullock carts for the long-distance trade in grain. No Bhils lived in the towns.

The Bhils were, however, frequent visitors. According to the Panchmahals gazetteer of 1879, 'the streets of Dohad are crowded with Bhils trafficking with grain dealers, crowding round the moneylender's door, mixing with the people, making purchases, chatting with their friends and selling grain, vegetables, wood and grass.' A more recent observer has described the scene at the shahukar's shop thus:

The Bhils throng there day in and day out; there is hardly any moment when one does not find 10 to 15 Bhil men and women sitting or loitering around the moneylender's home. They are either selling or buying something and are putting their thumb-impressions on some papers. They never look so meek, so humble and so docile as when they are dealing with the moneylender. There is hardly any occasion when voices are raised and the smooth manner in which dealings go on could be a model for any business house, even in a metropolis.

The Bhils came also to make purchases. There were no artisans working in their villages, and although the Bhils were skilful in making many objects of everyday use they generally bought items such as pots, metalware, clothing and ornaments from the towns.

57 Panchmahals Gazetteer, p.220.
Bhil women normally wore a full skirt, a cloth over the head (odhanī) and a bodice, and men a loincloth, waistcoat, turban and, in some cases, a short coat (angarkhu). All of these items were woven, dyed and printed in the towns. Both men and women wore ornaments, generally of cheap metal. Women wore heavy brass anklets, bracelets and necklaces, as well as ear and nose-rings. Men wore ear-rings, bracelets and ornamental metal belts. These were all made by urban metal-workers. The cash to buy these items was normally advanced by the shahukar.

By community the large majority of the shahukars were Vaniya or Daudi Bohra. In 1872 there were 3176 Vaniyas in Dahod and Jhalod talukas, making up three per cent of the population. The largest single sub-caste amongst these Vaniyas was the Dasa Nima, a group with a reputation for acquisitiveness. As a proverb put it, 'Where a sheep grazes or a Nima trades, what is there left for anybody else?' This sub-caste dominated the towns of Dahod, Jhalod and Limbdi, being in control of the Anaj Mahajans, the guilds of grain-traders which were considered the most important and influential of the guilds of these towns. There were other Vaniya sub-castes with smaller populations, such as Osvals, Vagadias, Porvads and Modhs. That many of these Vaniyas were very well off is apparent from a report by a Deputy Collector, written in 1893:

The Bania of the Mahals particularly those of Limbri and Jhalod are so much better off that they on the occasions of their son's weddings spent more than Rs 5000. They spent about Rs 500 on fireworks, about Rs 300 for ordering out bands from Surat &c., about Rs 400 paid to the dancing girls called from Baroda, Ahmedabad and Rutlam, about Rs 1000 on marriage procession, about Rs 1500 for distributing copper and brass pots to all the members of their respective castes.

A story current in Dahod in 1915 spoke of a Vaniya who started with a capital of five rupees and was able to retire in a few years with half a lakh. Times could, however, be hard, particularly after periods of dearth and famine. The famine of 1877 threw many Dasa

63 DCR 1914-15.
Nima Vaniyas into debt, so that even a decade later some were still 'living hand to mouth'.

The Daudi Bohras were found chiefly in Dahod and to a much lesser extent in Jhalod and Limbdi. In 1901 there were 3220 Daudi Bohras in the Eastern Mahals, making up nearly four per cent of the population. Besides being heavily involved in shahukari and grain dealing they also dealt in cloth and hardware, and many worked as artisans, making metal tools and ornaments for the adivasis. Some owned fields in the area around Dahod which they cultivated with hired labourers. They were described in the late nineteenth century as a prosperous community, owning many large and costly townhouses. Like the Vaniyas they spent lavishly on weddings.

These two communities dominated the moneylending business of the Eastern Mahals. There were, however, some other groups which lent money on a smaller scale. The liquor shopkeepers of the region supplied liquor on credit, taking payment in grain, so that they were in effect moneylenders. Their shops were often piled high with maize which had been taken as payment in kind. However, unlike in South Gujarat the liquor dealers of the Eastern Mahals were never more than petty moneylenders. Some Leva Kanbis who farmed land around Jhalod and three other villages of Jhalod taluka lent money to their Bhil neighbours with an eye to gaining ownership of their land in settlement of the debts in time. Though only a few, their activities caused considerable resentment amongst the Bhils, and, as we shall see, the Kanbis were to be one of the chief targets of attack in the uprising of 1899. There were even a few Bhils who had sufficient reserves of grain to be able to lend to their neighbours. Such men appear, however, to have been very few and far between.

In the towns there was a distinction between the shahukars who

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64 DCR 1885-6, BA, R.D. 1886, vol.30, comp 500.

65 Ibid.

66 DCR 1892-3.

67 DCR 1888-9.

68 They were mostly Kalal by caste and of low status. In South Gujarat the liquor dealers were Parsees whose chief ambition was to accumulate land and become powerful landlords, and they used liquor debts ruthlessly as a means to achieve this. See David Hardiman, 'From Custom to Crime: The Politics of Drinking in Colonial South Gujarat', in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies IV* (New Delhi, 1985).

69 DCR 1890-1.

70 DCR 1885-6. DCR 1888-9.
dealt direct with the villages and the big merchants and bankers who acted as middlemen between the shahukars and distant markets. It was common for a shahkar to have dealings with a particular man of capital who purchased his produce, shipped it to distant markets, provided cash and, where necessary, credit at low rates of interest. These men combined wholesale trading with banking. Their banks (pedis) took deposits and gave credit, and issued hundis or bills of credit, which were encashable in Baroda, Ratlam, Bombay and other distant markets. In Dahod these big sheths came from both the Daudi Bohra and Vaniya communities; in Jhalod they were almost all Vaniyas.

Many small shahukars were heavily dependent on such men of capital, taking loans from them which were used for giving advances to the Bhils. In years in which the monsoon failed these sheths sometimes refused such credit. According to one Collector the shahukars

have to go in turn for their capital to the big capitalists, and in a bad year they cannot get much advance from them—for not having received any crop from the agriculturists they cannot pay the annual instalment due to these capitalists. So the withdrawal of credit from the agriculturists is often due more to inability than to want of sympathy.  

Thus, even if the shahkar felt sorry for his clients in a year of famine, he was often unable to provide relief due to the drying up of his own credit from sheths who had no such personal ties with Bhil peasants.

The economic life of the towns revolved around the trade in grain and related products such as chana dal, oilseeds and hemp. The produce of the surrounding villages, both British and princely, was channeled into the towns, which more than anything else resembled great store-houses. The shahukars hoarded large amounts of grain in their houses, awaiting favourable prices in outside markets. 'I have visited several such granaries', wrote one Deputy Collector, 'and was surprised to see the quantity of grain stored up in big and good houses which otherwise would have made splendid dwellings.' A report of 1894 mentioned how after hemp prices rose the merchants of Dahod sold off hemp which they had been

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71 DCR 1888–9.
72 DCR 1911–12.
73 DCR 1885–6.
hoarding for five years. Before the coming of the railways in the 1890s most surplus grain was exported to Malwa and Rajasthan. There was a big demand for maize for the manufacture of pop-corn (dhani), described in 1885 as ‘a dainty among all classes rich and poor.’ In 1887–8 about 200,000 maunds of maize were exported from the Eastern Mahals to Malwa, whereas only about 20,000 maunds were exported west to the Gujarat plains. Chana dal, oil seeds and hemp were exported mainly to Gujarat, Kathiawad and Bombay. The produce was taken either in carts, owned mostly by Ghanchis of Dahod, or by pack-bullocks owned by Banjaras. During the 1890s a railway line was built linking Dahod to Gujarat and Bombay on the one side and Ratlam and Central India on the other. After this increasing amounts of produce began to be exported to Gujarat and Bombay. The Bombay Tramway Company even began buying maize and chana dal for horse-feed direct from Dahod. According to a Deputy Collector, writing in 1896, ‘The inhabitants of the Mahals have begun to feel the advantages of the introduction of the railways to their very threshhold. All the superfluous stock of grain is smoothly passing away to distant foreign countries at high prices to so much benefit of the cultivator.’ In fact, the benefit to the Bhil cultivators would have been minimal as they never received the market value of their crops. It was, rather, the grain dealers who were enriched by the opening up of new markets through the railway.

IV

The shahukars had no doubts that theirs was a worthy occupation. A moneylender was a mahajan, a ‘great man’, possessing abru, which in Gujarati means ‘reputation’, ‘honour’, as well as ‘credit’. The term ‘shahukar’ had similar connotations. It originated from the Sanskrit word sadhu, meaning, in the earliest texts, an upright

74 DCR 1893–4.
75 DCR 1884–5.
76 DCR 1887–8.
77 Dahod Taluka Settlement Report, 1878, p.11.
78 For good details see Panchmahals Gazetteer, 1879, pp.241–2.
79 Jhalod Taluka Talukdari Villages Settlement Report, 1896, p.3.
and honourable man. This was later modified in Prakrit to sahu. The sahukar was a respectable man who did people a favour by lending money to them. The shahukar saw his role as a patriarchal one. He liked to think of his Bhil clients as being members of a kind of large family of which he was the head. He was happy when they addressed him respectfully as ‘kaka’ (paternal uncle). He liked to invite his clients to his residence at the time of important family festivals, such as marriages. During periods of dearth he helped his clients with acts of charity, as in the famine of 1877 when the shahukars of the Panchmahals were recorded as having distributed handouts of grain in a most generous manner.

The mahajan claimed that with all of his economic strength, he had always stood by the village community in the days of drought, famine and hardships and had proved useful to the members of the village in their social and ritual needs and commitments. Thus, the mahajan proclaimed that he was a saviour of the people.

To what extent did the Bhils accept such claims?

As we have seen, it was important for a Bhil to maintain harmonious relations with a shahukar. At a personal level the shahukar was more to be relied upon than other members of the dominant classes with whom the Bhils came into contact. The shahukar provided them with the bare necessities of life, advancing produce and money on the spot without any lengthy bureaucratic procedures or demands for bribes. Shahukars often supported their clients against petty officials or the police, out to harass them for ‘crimes’ such as illicit distillation, forest offences or robbery. It was reported in 1876, for instance, that the Vaniyas of Banswara were protecting their Bhil clients against the state authorities when attempts were made to recover stolen goods. It was because the relationship had such values for the Bhils that they were prepared to treat the shahu-

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83 Jean-Claude Galey, ‘Creditors, Kings and Death’, in C.Malamoud (ed.), *Debts and Debtors* (New Delhi, 1983), p.103. In Gujarati the s became sh, as is common in Gujarati pronunciation; hence shahukar.
84 Vyas, *Bondage and Exploitation*, p.31; interview with Girdharlal Shah in Dahod.
87 C.E. Yates, Political Agent in Banswara, to Political Agent in Mewar, 6 December 1875, NAI, Foreign Dept., Pol — A, 106-8, Sept. 1876.
kars with the deference and respect remarked on by outside observers.

This did not mean that the Bhils accepted the claims of their shahukar-patrons as such. They knew that for all of their boasted ‘generosity’ the shahukars would return to take back what had been given, and more. In the creation myth of the neighbouring Rathwas of Chhota Udepur, the archetypal shahukar was named Valyo Vaniyo, the ‘come-back’ Vaniya (valvu means ‘to come back’ in Gujarati). Valyo Vaniyo was a supplier of provisions on credit and a moneylender who always returned to collect his dues. For the Rathwas the foremost characteristic of the shahukar was not therefore his gentility or philanthrophic nature, but the unrelenting manner in which he pursued his debtors.

In the myth Valyo Vaniyo was brought into being by God so as to follow the profession of moneylending. He was one of the original inhabitants of earth, along with the archetypal king, Raja Bhoj, and the first Rathwa peasant. The shahukar was thus seen as enjoying divine sanction for his activity. Ranajit Guha has pointed out how peasants imprisoned by debt are likely to form their idea of power largely on their experience of the creditor’s power over them. As a result indebted groups often idealize the figure of the moneylender. The Rathwas certainly did this. In the wall paintings which illustrate the myth, Valyo Vaniyo is shown as being driven in a huge horse-drawn carriage, attended by a lackey. Shahukars did not as a rule travel in such elaborate conveyances—bullock-carts or ponies were their normal modes of transport—so that they were here granted a degree of status which they hardly had in reality. In his analysis of the Rahu myth, Guha goes on to show how the untouchables made their patron deity into a moneylender.

He comments: ‘Those who are reduced to a state of near servitude by the moneylender pay him the ultimate tribute of making a moneylender of their own patron deity. The apotheosization of the usurer could hardly go further.’ The Rathwas did not go as far as this: Valyo Vaniyo was created as a human being and was no god.

88 Jyotindra Jain, Painted Myths of Creation. Art and Ritual of an Indian Tribe (New Delhi), p.36.
90 See illustration on p.36 of Jain, Painted Myths of Creation.
Similarly, no moneylender-deity was found in the Bhil pantheon of gods. The domination of the shahukars over their lives was not such that they were prepared to accord them a divine status. Furthermore, they did not see the power of the shahukar as something eternal. In the Rathwa myth the peasants are able eventually to pay back their debts after the god Pithoro has entered and blessed their houses:

The debt of Valyo Vaniyo is repaid,  
Money and silver in abundance,  
Begin to descend in the houses [of the Rathwas].

In the better days ahead the power of the shahukars will thus come to an end.

The Bhils did, however, believe that the shahukars possessed occult powers. We have seen at the start of this essay how the Bhils of Poshina thought that their shahukars had the ability to control rainfall. This notion was based on the idea that all natural forces were subject to the control of supernatural powers. Humans could attempt to control nature by interceding with these powers through the magical ceremony of propitiation. For the Bhils the rite of propitiation was as crucial an act in the agricultural process as ploughing and sowing. From such a viewpoint it was logical to infer that if the rain failed it was because someone had cancelled the Bhil’s act of propitiation through the use of superior magic. As the shahukars had most to benefit from drought, it was reasonable to conclude that it was they who were responsible.

In a world in which all power was seen as having magical qualities, it was hardly surprising that the Bhils believed the shahukar’s magic to be more powerful than theirs. By using such powers the shahukars were believed to be able to manipulate prices to their advantage, use the law courts to serve their interests, and keep the police and petty officials in their pockets. Above all they possessed that seemingly most magical of all powers, the ability to read and write. Ranajit Guha has shown how such a consciousness flourishes in a milieu in which literacy is used as a direct instrument of authority. The account-book controlled the lives of the indebted peasants and the written word was used by clerks, judges, lawyers and usurers to rob them of their land and livelihood. Writing was for the

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92 Jain, *Painted Myths of Creation*, p.77.
peasant an instrument of exploitation rather than a path to knowledge. The peasant regarded the ability to write not as a social, empirical phenomenon, but as something that was quasi-religious and magical: to write was not a matter of skill but of inspiration. The written word was endowed with the same sort of mediatory, occult quality as [the peasant] customarily attributed to the spoken utterances of an oracle possessed by the spirit of the dead during a propitiatory ceremony.

The Bhils therefore had a healthy respect for the powers of the shahukars, which they invested, as they did all power, with magical qualities. This power was, however, by no means unchallengeable. The action taken by the Bhils of Poshina against the Vaniyas showed that they believed that it was possible to break their spells.

Despite this respect which the Bhils had for the power of the shahukars, they did not accept their moral hegemony. Far from internalizing the values of the dominant class, the Bhils maintained their distance, believing strongly in the superiority of their culture and way of life. They did not accept the religion of the shahukars, having for the most part their own deities and refusing to accept the sanctity of Brahmans. They did not allow the shahukars any control over their internal social and political affairs. Thus, although their bonds of debt operated so as to divide them by making each the personal client of a particular moneylender, their community solidarity was such that in a crisis they could unite to fight the shahukars as a class. We have see how this happened in Poshina, and we shall see again later in this essay how this happened during the famine of 1899.

What we see here are two systems of social organization and morality interacting and coming into occasional conflict without the one exercising moral hegemony over the other. The one world, of the shahukars, was characterized by physical concentration in the towns of eastern Gujarat; the other, of the Bhils, by physical dispersal over the countryside and forests of the region. One was bound together by a dense economic network and a value system which stressed self-restraint, abstinence, fastidious observation of pollu-

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94 Ibid., p.54.
tion rules and pious action. The other was bound together by ties of community and a spirit of egalitarianism which placed a low value on accumulation of wealth.

In the egalitarian society of the Bhils it was considered wrong for one Bhil to be substantially richer in material wealth than another. Honour lay in the willingness to share; hoarding beyond certain limits was considered reprehensible. For example, when liquor was distilled all neighbours were invited to partake; no Bhil would have dreamt of drinking alone.96 When a Bhil suffered misfortune, such as the loss of his cattle, others would contribute and make good his loss.97 T.B. Naik, in his book on the Bhils, shows how this principle of give and take pervaded all spheres of Bhil life.98 Accumulation of personal wealth was even considered personally dangerous, for there was a common superstition that the glances and envious thoughts of poorer neighbours could cause evil consequences for the affluent individual. The whole Bhil attitude towards accumulation was summed up most succinctly in their proverb: ‘Whatever you spend will be beneficial, whatever you hoard will stink.’99

Such sharing of resources helped to reinforce the community solidarity of the Bhils. This was seen most obviously during festivities, when consumption was carried out in a demonstrative, joyful and deliberately wasteful manner. By dancing, drinking, smoking and eating together the Bhils voiced through their actions their rejection of the puritanical values of the merchant classes while emphasizing their comradeship and identity as Bhils. To be a Bhil was to share a rich culture and a common poverty.

Further reasons can be suggested for the prodigality of the Bhils. They well knew that if they did not spend whatever came their way as quickly as possible it was likely to be grabbed by an exploiter. In this respect their so-called ‘thriftlessness’ reflected a sharp awareness of the realities of their subordination. But over and above this they displayed an almost aristocratic contempt for financial prudence. Hans Medik has commented on such a mentality in a different context:

96 Nath, Bhils of Ratanmal, pp.45–6.
99 F. Bhil, Rajasthan Bhulo ki Kahavate, p.168.
In comparison with the principles of bourgeois thrift and foresight, where wealth was due 'not so much to great income as to moderate expenditure' the economy of the plebeian orders distinguished itself by the fact that their expenditure stood in no 'proper' relation to their revenue. In this respect the behaviour of the small producers was closer to that of the 'man of rank' than to that of the 'properly earning class, those of middle rank.'

Medik argues that the 'plebeian orders' of early modern Europe were imitating the nobility in their contempt for bourgeois values. In the case of the Bhils this proud behaviour was less an imitation of the local Rajput chiefs—who they as a rule resented as their usurpers—than based on a belief that they, the Bhils, were the rightful lords of the hills and forests. Surajit Sinha has noticed a similar mentality amongst the Bhumij of Manbhum who, three generations ago, owned most of the land of the region: 'The initial abundance of landed property and their monopoly over political power must have had a lot to do with the uncalculativeness and the spirit of abandon of the Bhumij.'

For all these reasons the Bhils were notoriously poor as businessmen. Bhil peasants who were in a position to give credit to their relatives and neighbours tended to be generous in their loans and lax in collecting debts. Hardly a single Bhil made a living from moneylending or trade. A mamlatdar of Dahod taluka commented in 1931: 'The main occupation of the Bhils is agriculture and labour. They stick to these two forms of occupation. There is no Bhil in this taluka who can be said to have taken up trade as his occupation.' On the surface, the reason for this might appear to have been their illiteracy. But if they had wanted to go in for trade some at least would have made the effort to learn to read and write. In fact, they did not bother. Such an occupation required an outlook on life which was anathema to the Bhils.

The Bhils therefore needed a relationship with a shahukar who was not of their community to carry out an economic function which they themselves were not prepared to perform. For this

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103 In 1881 only six Bhils of Jhalod taluka were recorded as being literate, out of a total population of 14,688. Jhalod Taluka Settlement Report, 1881, p.52.
reason we come across cases during Bhil uprisings when the Bhils, far from trying to free themselves from the shahukars, went out of their way to encourage them to stay in the region. For instance, when the Bhils of Pol state (on the border between North Gujarat and Rajasthan) rose against their ruler in May 1881, they were afraid that their action might scare away the local Marwari shahukars, and in the agreement reached subsequently with the ruler the final clause stipulated that the Marwaris should stay. The ruler commented on this to the British Resident: ‘The Bhils are the customers of the banias, and on good terms with them . . . if they would cease to deal with the Bhils, the latter will experience great difficulty and would find it hard to get on.’

This was not in a material sense a reciprocal relationship, for the Bhils gave far more than they received. But they were prepared to pay this price so that they could lead what they considered to be a correct life. It was a relationship which required a certain amount of trust on both sides and conformity to an unwritten code. So long as the Bhils believed that the shahukars were operating according to this code, they acted towards them in a respectful manner. But when the shahukars broke the code the Bhils were quick to teach them their lesson. In acting thus they did not seek to change the social order or reconstitute the world, but only to claim what they believed to be theirs by right and correct aberrations. Being fundamental to their way of life, the Bhils wanted the relationship to continue in what they considered to be the time-hallowed manner.

The relationship between Bhil and shahukar was not something which had existed unchanged since time immemorial but was the product of a continuous evolution. It is important to stress this fact for most existing studies on moneylending in India have been curiously ahistorical. Thus Malcolm Darling in his classic work *The Punjab Peasant in Prosperity and Debt* portrayed India as a static society in which the relationship between moneylender and peasant had remained unchanged for millennia: ‘Whenever, therefore, we are tempted to revile him [the moneylender], we should remember that by his assistance to agriculture for 2,500 years he has made life

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possible for millions who must otherwise have perished or never been born'. For Darling shahukari was, historically, a form of economic organization which had functioned largely independent of the state. It was only with the coming of the British, with their legal system and civil courts, that the state began to have an impact on this system, changing it in his view largely for the worse.

Similar problems are found in a recent collection of essays on the debt relationship in India. Thus Charles Malamoud, an orientalist who likewise sees pre-colonial India as a static society, seeks to understand indebtedness in India through an analysis of Brahmanic texts ranging in date from the Vedic period to the sixteenth century. No attempt is made in this exercise to relate such beliefs to any historical state formations. Another essay by the anthropologist Jean-Claude Galey on the Tehri-Garhwal region provides a subtle blend of economic with cultural analysis but places it in a strangely timeless context in which rajas are always sovereign.

Some Marxists have gone to the opposite extreme, depriving the relationship of its pre-colonial past. Here, moneylending is portrayed as an early form of capitalist relationship which was brought into existence in India by colonial rule, being a transitional stage on the path to more developed forms of capitalism. Thus Jairus Banaji, writing on moneylending in nineteenth-century Maharashtra, says: ‘The penetration of the monied capitalist into the small production economy of the Deccan coincided with, and sheltered behind, the take-over of these districts by the British bureaucracy’. In the case of Maharashtra there is, however, plenty of evidence to show that shahukari was highly developed in the pre-colonial period, and that the changes which took place under British rule were more in the nature of a modification of the system rather than any profound alteration of the structure. H. Fukazawa describes how Gujarati Vaniyas had been moving into the villages of


107 Charles Malamoud (ed.), *Debts and Debtors* (New Delhi, 1983).

108 Ibid., p.xi.


the region from the beginning of the seventeenth century, followed in the eighteenth century by Marwari shopkeepers-cum-moneylenders:

He advanced seed and foodgrains to the peasants and took in return a share of the harvest, which he then sold within and outside the village. He rarely lent cash except for weddings and other special occasions... The sahukar stood security for the revenue, and was allowed to collect the revenue as well as his own dues.112

Moneylending of this sort went on all over India in the pre-colonial period.113 Fukazawa’s statement reveals the role played by the shahukar as both a financier of agricultural operations and a local agent for the collection of the land tax. Merchant capital was thus entrenched deeply within the polities of pre-colonial states.

The system of shahukari found in the Eastern Mahals appears to have had a similar history. Unfortunately there is little recorded information on the subject. It is, however, possible to infer a good deal from the history of urban settlement in the region if we couple it with what we know of the history of other areas. But first we may start with the history of the Bhils themselves.

It is probable that until the eleventh century the Bhils ruled this entire region. Although displaced to some extent by the Solanki rulers of Gujarat, and later by the Muslim rulers of Gujarat and Malwa and Rajput rulers of Mewar, they continued throughout the medieval period to control large areas of the hilly region forming the border between Gujarat, Mewar and Malwa. They are mentioned in the Muslim histories of Malwa and Gujarat as a powerful group of people with independent chiefs and rajas who held their own durbars.114

The Bhil polity was not all centralized. It consisted of a large number of localities, each of which was under a hereditary chief

In personal appearance and living conditions the chiefs, as a rule, could hardly be distinguished from other Bhils. There was no system of taxation which would have enabled them to accumulate a large surplus, and thus set themselves apart physically from their fellows. At best they received occasional offerings of tribute from other Bhils. The principle power of the chief was his ability to call on the Bhils of his area to serve as bowmen under him. This he could do either to defend their territory or to carry out a raid on the peasants of the adjoining plains. It was through such raids that the chiefs and their followers made ends meet, particularly in years of shortage. Some of the more successful chiefs maintained small bands of mercenaries who were paid out of plunder rather than taxation. As our knowledge of the Bhils during the medieval period comes entirely from their enemies, we hear only about these warlike chiefs and their bands and know nothing about the agricultural practices of the Bhil peasantry. It is probable, however, that these peasants lived in small scattered clearings in the forest, practising slash-and-burn cultivation without the use of a plough, supplementing their agriculture with gatherings from the forest as well as the occasional raid.

It was only during the reign of Sidharaj Solanki (1094–1143) that a part of the Eastern Mahals was wrested from the Bhils. While campaigning against the King of Malwa, Sidharaj based himself at the place which was to become Dahod. During his prolonged stay there he constructed the large reservoir called the Chhab Talav, which remains one of the features of the town to this day. At this time he also fought the Bhils, and it would appear that he had to do this to subjugate the region. The Dasa Nima Vaniyas claim to have first settled in Dahod during his reign. The town of Jhalod is also supposed to have been founded around this time by a Rajput called Jalamsinh, after whom the town is named. This town must have been very insignificant for, after two centuries, it was shifted a couple of kilometres to its present site and no trace of the original town has remained except for a small shrine to the goddess Jhalai Mata.

117 A. K. Forbes, Ras Mala, p.136.
118 Interview with Mithalal Parikh, a Dasa Nima Vaniya, in Dahod.
119 Rewa Kantha Gazetteer, p.133.
Both Dahod and Jhalod appear to have been unimportant settlements in a largely Bhil region until the end of the fifteenth century. It was only after 1485, with the conquest of Champaner by the Sultan of Gujarat, Mahmud Begada, that the two places increased in size and importance. Champaner, which was ruled by a Rajput prince, had until then been the chief city of eastern Gujarat. After its conquest by Mahmud Begada, a fervent Sunni Muslim, many of the Dasa Nima Vaniyas of the city migrated east to Dahod and Jhalod. In Dahod they founded a new quarter of the town known as Gujarati-vada. Another wave of migrants at this time were the Daudi Bohras, who were Shiah Muslims fleeing from persecution at the hands of the sultan. They settled outside the walls in an area called Payaga. Some Sunni Muslims also constructed a new suburb which became known as the Kasba.120

What was the relationship between the people of these towns and the surrounding Bhil peasantry? It is likely that links were first forged by the Bhils themselves when they sought to obtain products not available locally, such as salt, iron or cloth. Their normal practice was to barter goods by quantity, using measuring pots and baskets.121 They probably believed in a customary value for goods, not accepting the concept of a variable price which depended on supply and demand.122 Intermediaries were therefore needed who could obtain goods required by the Bhils from outside markets and supply them in the manner to which they were accustomed, i.e. by quantity and at customary rates. These rates would have had to have been beneficial to the intermediaries so as to offset the fluctuations in market prices they would have had to face. It is likely that money was not well understood by the Bhils at first. D.P. Sinha relates how in the nineteenth century the Orails of remote parts of Chhotanagpur regarded money as a commodity rather than as a medium of exchange or a measure of value. They measured money by quantity, using their customary measuring-cups. It was only through extended contact with intermediaries that they learnt how to handle money.123

120 Interview with Mithalal Parikh in Dahod.
121 This was still the practice in the nineteenth century amongst the Bhils of Alirajpur in Central India. See Petition of Bhil headmen to J.Biddulph, 14 February 1883, NAI, Foreign Dept., Pol. — 1, 20–79, July 1884.
122 This was the case amongst the Orails of Chhotanagpur. See D.P.Sinha, Culture Change in an Intertribal Market (New York, 1968), pp.37–8 and 63–5.
123 Ibid., pp.38, 64, 99.
Once in contact with such middlemen, a demand for credit would have arisen as the need for goods would not have coincided with the annual agricultural cycle. The intermediaries were able to extend credit because of their links with wider networks from which they could obtain their own credit. There were several advantages for the Bhils in taking credit in this manner. Living as they did, it was difficult for them to save sufficient quantities of produce each year to see them through till the next harvest. If a monsoon failed they were in a particularly difficult position. With timely advances from a middle man it was possible to bring more land under cultivation and grow more grain: grain which was then handed over to the middleman to store until needed. The latter sold a part of the crop to pay his expenses as well as to make a profit from the enterprise; the rest he held in his storehouse and used for seasonal advances to the Bhils. A report written by an Assistant Collector of the Panchmahals in 1886 on the process of Bhil settlement in a forest area to the east of Godhra reveals how central the Vaniya middleman was to this whole process.

Having lighted upon some suitable spot, usually near a former co-villager, who had started out before them, they [the Bhils] settle down... and are advanced seed and grain by him [the Vaniya]. They next build huts of a very meagre kind, the walls and roofs consisting of leaves of the palm tree (brab): but yearly they manure to improve them, until they appear fairly substantial. The crop they sow in the first year is usually tal [sesame], then kodra [a millet], and in the third year makai [maize]. The Vania pays the assessment and they repay the Vania in produce.\footnote{ACR 1885–6, BA, R.D. 1886, vol. 30, comp. 500.}

A report of 1888 revealed that the area of land cultivated in a particular year in the Eastern Mahals varied according to the amount of shahukar’s credit available in that year. If the shahukar failed to advance seed before the monsoon, the area under cultivation contracted.\footnote{DCR 1887–8.} Although these accounts relate to a much later period, it is not improbable that they describe a form of settlement with a long history.

In time, as the Bhils learnt how to handle money, it might have been expected that some of them would have become middlemen between the villages and towns. In fact this did not happen even to a limited degree, the reason being the one discussed in the previous section: that such an occupation required an outlook on life which
contradicted fundamental Bhil values. It was because of this that the Bhils are likely in the past to have recruited the services of Vaniya and Bohra shahukars. At that time they would have regarded the shahukars more as their servants than masters. One is reminded here of the Arora moneylenders of the North-West Frontier who, according to Malcolm Darling, were no more than a servile adjunct to the Pathan cultivators. They were forbidden to wear turbans, allowed to ride only on a donkey and were treated in a humiliating manner. Cases were recorded in which Pathans kidnapped moneylenders—not for ransom but to avail of their services.\textsuperscript{126}

Once dealings were established between the Bhils and the shahukars, the relationship provided a means by which the state could extract a surplus from the Bhils. This would have been taken in cash, as was the practice in Gujarat from the fourteenth century onwards.\textsuperscript{127} The Shahukar acted as an intermediary, converting a part of the Bhil’s produce into cash and either giving them the money to pay to the tax-officials or, more probably, handing it over directly himself. The normal practice would have been to levy a fixed sum from an entire village. Later on a plough tax was introduced, assessed on the number of ploughs in use each year.\textsuperscript{128}

It is likely that the expansion of the towns over the centuries went hand-in-hand with the extension of shahukar-sponsored settled cultivation. The first major expansion occurred, as we have seen, in the period after 1485. However, much of the Eastern Mahals continued to be covered by thick forest until the eighteenth century, which suggests that the operation of shahukari was confined to a fairly small area around the towns. Dahod was in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries an important staging post for long-distance traders and a halting place for armies. The future emperor Aurangzeb was born in the town in 1618 when his grandfather Jahangir had halted there.\textsuperscript{129} In 1678, after becoming emperor, Aurangzeb built a cara-

\textsuperscript{128} In Alirajpur, a remote Bhil region, the former system was in operation until 1869, when it was replaced by the latter. Griffen to Grant, 17 March 1883, NAI, Foreign Dept., Pol.—I, 212–58, June 1883. In the Panchmahals both the lump-sum and plough-tax systems were in operation during the Maratha period. \textit{Halol Taluka Revision Settlement Report, 1880, Selections from the Records of the Bombay Government}, no. clxx — new series (Bombay, 1885), pp.16–17.
\textsuperscript{129} \textit{Panchmahals District Gazetteer} (Ahmedabad, 1972), p.108.
vansarai in the town to commemorate his birth. This huge structure, still standing, contained no less than 360 rooms for travellers, which indicates the importance of Dahod at that time.\textsuperscript{130} Jahangir, when he was emperor, had presented various villages in \textit{inam} to Muslim notables of the town, such as the Kanungo and Kazi. More interesting for us, however, is the fact that he presented an \textit{inam} village and a \textit{desai-giri} to a Dasa Nima Vaniya of the town.\textsuperscript{131} The choice by the emperor of a Vaniya to serve as chief-tax-gatherer in the area reveals that they, rather than the Muslim notables, had the stronger links with the Bhil peasantry of the region.

The transition from shahukar to official tax-collector was a process which occurred in many parts of India during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{132} A well documented case is that of Amber state in Rajasthan. The rulers of Amber actively encouraged shahukars to give advances to the peasants and to take produce in return. After selling the produce they paid the peasant’s land tax to state officials. Often the shahukar merely issued a hundi to the official which had to be encashed with a banker in the \textit{pargana} headquarters town. In many cases the urban bankers did not encash these hundis there and then but issued a fresh hundi for the tax proceeds of the whole pargana, which was sent to the Dewan in Amber. As the local officials tended to be in debt to the urban bankers, and as they often depended on them for a security to be paid on appointment, they were very much in the pockets of these Vaniyas. In fact the rulers of Amber themselves were deep in debt to state-level bankers, who served as ration suppliers and paymasters to the army. In time the ‘state-level bankers were repaid with land-tax assignments in different parganas, so that they became directly responsible for tax collection. The big bankers made arrangements with pargana-level bankers, who in turn made arrangements with local shahukars to collect the tax.\textsuperscript{133}

Similar arrangements were found in the Maratha states which

\textsuperscript{130} \textit{Dahod Taluka Settlement Report, 1878}, p.8.

\textsuperscript{131} Interview with Mithalal Parikh in Dahod.


emerged in the Deccan in the late seventeenth century. The Eastern Mahals came under Maratha rule in 1761, when the region was conquered by Mahadji Sindhia, who ruled at that time from Ujjain, and later from Gwalior. Contrary to the impression given in many colonial histories, the Marathas made sustained efforts to encourage the development of trade and agriculture in many of the areas which came under their rule. In Dahod the Dasa Nima Vaniyas were encouraged to build a new market street in 1779, followed by four additional streets in 1782. In 1805 a new market known as Daulatganj was constructed, and in 1809 the Bohravada. An account of 1785 mentions Dahod as one of the best towns on the line of march between Gujarat and Malwa, with brick houses and well-to-do inhabitants. In Jhalod, Sindhia's officials constructed temples and a town wall with four gates, two of which still stand. Kanbi peasants were encouraged to settle in the area around Jhalod through grants of land on which they did not initially have to pay any tax. In 1825 Bishop Heber visited Jhalod and wrote that it had a market, a mosque, a small temple, and some good solidly built two-storeyed high brick houses.

It would appear that almost the entire region was cleared of forest and brought under the plough at this time. A report of 1878 described the area around Dahod as a land of long occupation, with many village tanks of remarkable size. There are a number of villages in this taluka which seem to have been places of note, and once thickly populated, as extensive foundations within a few feet of the surface indicate. It is said that severe shocks of earthquakes reduced many fine villages to their present ruinous condition. Another indicator of the extension of cultivation under Sindhia's rule is that three new desais had to be appointed to collect the land tax. Each was presented with an inam village. Like the first desai appointed by

135 Pavlov, India’s Transition to Capitalism, p.104.
137 Interview with P. P. Upadyaya in Jhalod and personal observations in the town.
138 Interview with Mathurbhai Dayaljibhai Patel in Jhalod.
140 Dahod Taluka Settlement Report, 1878, p.7.
Jahangir, the three new desais were all Dasa Nima Vaniyas.¹⁴¹

British rule came late to the area. Sindhia handed over the management of the Panchmahals to the British in 1853; formal annexation followed in 1860.¹⁴² Although the colonial rulers brought certain innovations, such as a bureaucracy to replace the tax-farmers, taxation based on area of land held rather than number of ploughs owned, and courts of law, the domination of the shahukars over the Bhils was hardly affected or altered in nature.

- The establishment of property rights in land did not, unlike in many other parts of India, have a profound social effect because land was plentiful in the Eastern Mahals and, being free for the taking, had almost no market value. The shahukars did not therefore try to acquire the land of their clients. Rather than land they needed cultivators to grow a crop. Land was therefore hardly ever mortgaged as a security for debt and rarely sold in repayment of debts.¹⁴³ In 1912–13, when the first figures relating to landlordism were compiled for this region, only eight per cent of the land of Dahod and Jhalod talukas was recorded as being owned by non-agriculturists.¹⁴⁴ The combination of shahukar and landlord—so common a feature of other parts of colonial India—was not found to any important extent in the Eastern Mahals.

When the British took charge they replaced the tax-farmers with a tax-collecting bureaucracy. The taluka offices, under mamlatdars, were located in Dahod and Jhalod, and village officials (talatis) were posted in the larger villages to take responsibility for a circle of villages. In 1876 there were 58 talatis in charge of 221 villages, or one for every 3.8 villages. The talatis were almost all high-caste men from the plains of Gujarat who resented having to serve in a ‘jungly tract’. As a result they made every effort to stay in the taluka towns rather than go to live in Bhil villages, as they were meant to do. It was a common complaint of the higher officials that the talatis refused to live in the villages and had no interest in their work.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ Interview with Keshavlal Desai and Mithalal Parikh in Dahod.
¹⁴³ Panchmahals Gazetteer, p.238; QCR 1884–5.
Assistant Collector, writing about the Bhil villages of Godhra taluka, reported in 1880:

The talatis throughout my charge are certainly the laziest and most inefficient I have ever had under me and those of the Godhra taluka have evidently been in the habit of considering their offices as sinecures. I found that they were never to be found in the limits of their charge, that they were deliberately disobedient to positive orders, systematically shirked and neglected their work and that it was a common practice for them to bring the ryots into Godhra from long distances to pay their instalments.\(^{146}\)

According to the rules the talatis were meant to collect the taxes from the peasants in their villages. However, as the talatis were reluctant to go to the villages and as the Bhils tended to leave their villages for seasonal labour after the harvest and before the date due for tax collection, the talatis normally made arrangements directly with the shahukars. It was understood by both the shahukars and Bhils that the moneylender who took the crop would provide the cash needed to pay the peasant’s land tax.\(^{147}\) Generally, it was in the interest of the shahukar to pay, for refusal could have led to the confiscation of a Bhil’s land and his possible migration, leaving his debts unpaid. The shahukars therefore paid the tax direct to the officials at the taluka headquarters. In the words of one Assistant Collector, ‘the Banya usually comes to the Chora [government office] with a bag of rupees and shells out.’\(^{148}\) As a result, the government generally had no difficulty in collecting the land tax. Between 1878–9 and 1898–9 the annual average land-tax demand for Dahod taluka was Rs 63,661, of which only Rs 554 was on average left unpaid at the end of each financial year.\(^{149}\) In effect, this meant that the government machinery hardly stretched to the village, and it was left to the shahukar to appropriate the peasant’s surplus and hand over a share to the state at the headquarters town. In this respect the shahukars were of far more importance to the colonial state than its own petty officials.

The shahukars also held effective sway over the civil courts of the area. Between 1872–3 and 1875–6 an average of 1173 debt cases were


\(^{147}\) DCR 1890–1.


\(^{149}\) Dahod Taluka Revision Settlement Report, 1904, p.24.
initiated each year in Dahod court, of which 627 (53 per cent) resulted in the confiscation of a debtor’s property. The Assistant Collector commented on this:

The Soukar files his suit, obtains his decree and follows it up by an application for execution. He then goes to his debtor and advises him to compromise the matter and save his property by signing a fresh bond which the latter immediately does, and therefore it follows that on an average warrants for attachment actually issue in not more than half the cases in which a decree is passed and an application for execution made.

The Civil Court is thus a powerful machine which is practically under the control of the Soukar, inexorable when he sets it in motion, but ready to pause when he requires it.

Needless to say, although the Bhils greatly resented the courts they were quite incapable of defending their cases, and more often than not did not even bother to attend hearings against them. On the whole they lost their bullocks and moveable property through such confiscations, for, as we have seen, their land had no value.

This history reveals that over the centuries the shahukars had as a class been gradually increasing their power at the expense, on the one hand, of the ruling classes and, on the other, of the Bhil peasants. By the late nineteenth century they were firmly entrenched as the dominant power in the countryside. Not only were they expropriating the mass of the peasant’s surplus, they were acting also as the chief mediators between the peasants and the state. It is against this background that we may now examine the Bhil rising during the famine of 1899.

VI

In 1899 the monsoon started reasonably enough, with 223 mm of rain falling up until 11 July. The shahukars advanced seed-grains to the Bhils, who then sowed their fields. After this there was no rain for two months. By early August the seedlings were dying, and as soon as it became clear that the kharif crop would fail the big urban sheths started refusing to give credit to the shahukars, who in turn began sending the Bhils away from their shops empty-handed. In desperation many Bhils went to the adjoining forests to collect headloads of wood to sell in the towns. With the market soon satu-

150 ACR 1875–6.
151 Ibid.
152 Dahod Taluka Revision Settlement Report, 1904, p.5.
rated they had to dispose of the wood at throwaway prices, and to make matters worse many were arrested by forest officials as they entered the towns and accused of breaking forest regulations.  

R. D. Rendall, the Assistant Collector who was touring the countryside to see whether famine relief works should be opened, reported this: 'Hundreds of cultivators came to my camp representing that not test works but the coercion of the Banya was what they needed. They said that some of them had handed over 250 and 300 maunds of grain to the Banya, debited at his own prices, and now a maund of bajri was Rs.2-8.' By late August cases of robbery and dacoity by Bhils were becoming more frequent. The government allocated a meagre Rs 500 for relief works, but this money was exhausted within days. The Deputy Collector applied for fresh funds, but these were sanctioned only on 5 September and, due to departmental sluggishness, were not made available there and then.

What upset the Bhils in particular was the fact that there was still plenty of grain in the towns, but rather than hand this out the big grain dealers were organizing its export on a large scale so as to take advantage of the high famine prices prevailing in other parts of western India. With the coming of the railway to this region in the 1890s, such exports could be made quickly and easily. During August 1899, 47,623 maunds of foodgrains and pulses were sent out from Dahod railway station in this manner. As the Deputy Collector later reported—'The merchants first cleared large profits by exporting their surplus stocks of grain at the commencement of famine, and, later on by importing maize from Cawnpore and Bombay and rice from Calcutta and Rangoon.' In the past, movement of grain could not be organized on such a scale with such speed and the grain merchants had less to lose in acting charitably in time of famine. Now, philanthropy was outweighed by the temptations of large and quick profits. Also, no doubt, the hardening of attitude reflected the growth in the power of the shahukars during the

153 Deputy Collector to Collector, Panchmahals, 11 and 14 September 1899, BA, J.D. 1900, vol.96; Administration Reports of the Forest Department in the Bombay Presidency, including Sind, for the Year 1899-1900 (Bombay, 1901), pp.8–9.
156 Exports were at their height in August 1899, thereafter declining. Note on movement of foodgrains, BA, F.D. 1900, vol. 57, comp.41.
157 DCR 1899–1900.
nineteenth century; no longer did they feel so accountable to the surrounding peasantry.

During the first week of September the Bhils began to gather together to discuss what action to take.

They say the Banias have behaved so as to merit any revenge. The Bania has taken 5 maunds and will not now return more than one. The Bania has bought at one rupee and will not now sell at less than four rupees. The Bania has made his riches out of them; and now that they are in distress he will not lift a finger to help them.\[158\]

On the afternoon of 8 September Bhils of sixteen villages gathered outside Jhalod town armed with bows and arrows, with strings tightened and ready for firing. They then marched into the town to the government office and said that they had come to make a request for their livelihood. In addition to condemning the shahukars they complained about their harassment by forest officials and demanded that they be allowed to cut and sell wood freely during the famine. The mamlatdar tried to mollify them by promising that relief works would shortly be opened. But, in the words of this official,

they repeatedly required me to fix certain rates for grain. They said that they were not satisfied with the arrangement of cheap grain shops. I therefore called some leading merchants and gentlemen and told them to pacify the Bhils. I flatly told them that if they could not make any permanent arrangement, they must do something temporarily, but they did nothing. Afterwards, I thought it right to get the Bhils dispersed, as it was nearly six, so I persuaded them to go away, telling them that an arrangement will be made tomorrow, as it will require the opinion of each and all merchants and so it will take time. So saying I told the Bhils to go away, and they actually went. The Bhils complained against the Banias for their being obstinate in not doing anything for them, though they are always deprived of all their products in good and prosperous years, and they spoke very bitterly in the face of the merchants.\[159\]

While on their way out of town, a Bohra came out of his shop with an open sword and taunted them saying ‘did you take what was wanted?’ implying that it was shameful for them to go without fulfilling their object. The Bhils were infuriated by this insult and, turning on the shopkeepers, began to loot their shops. The looting continued for about twenty minutes, after which the police drove

\[158\] Report by the Collector of Panchmahals, C. N. Seddon, 16 September 1899, BA, J.D. 1900, vol. 96.

\[159\] Mamlatdar of Jhalod taluka to Collector, 8 September 1899, ibid.
them out of the town. About five or six merchants were injured, and one policeman. The Bhils did not return to their villages but spent the night in the fields around the town.

On 9 September the Deputy Collector hurried to Jhalod from Dahod. ‘On entering the town I found it all in an uproar, the shops being all closed, and small companies of men armed with sticks and lathies congregating at each corner.’ Meanwhile, the Bhils around the town had reassembled in a group about three thousand strong, a mile or so to the south-east. This gathering consisted of men armed with bows and arrows, swords, axes and shields, and women carrying large baskets for carrying away looted grain. They were led by their village headmen.161 There were only a dozen armed police in Jhalod, and, rather than attempt to resist, the Deputy Collector went out to negotiate. ‘On seeing us they raised a huge cry, making war-like gestures.’ He listened to their grievances and then told them that he would give each a sher (about 500 grams) of maize if they promised to go next day to Limbdi, where relief works were to be opened. He tried to organize it so that batches of Bhils, about fifty strong, each went in turn into the town to receive their dole; but matters soon got out of hand and the looting started afresh. Besides the grain shops they looted the houses of prosperous Kanbi peasants who lived in a suburb to the south of the town. ‘People were running in every direction loaded with grain; it was impossible to catch or check them, and useless to shoot them.’ Whereas the Vaniyas and Bohras made no attempt at resistance, the Kanbis fought back, killing four Bhils, wounding others and taking some prisoner. ‘No loss of life occurred among the defendants, though slight wounds from arrows, and scratches and bruises were plentifully received.’162

After leaving the town the Bhils looted a liquor shop and some houses of Malis in a village nearby. The news of the looting of Jhalod on the previous day had already spread far and wide, encouraging the Bhils of neighbouring Santrampur state to loot the shops of a large village called Sukhsar. Nearly five thousand Bhils were involved in this attack.163 On 10 September large numbers of Bhils be-

160 Deputy Collector to Collector, 11 September 1899, ibid.
161 Deputy Collector to Collector, 14 September 1899, ibid; Times of India, 16 September 1899.
162 Deputy Collector to Collector, 11 September 1899, BA, J.D. 1900, vol.96.
163 Telegram from Administrator, Santrampur state, 11 September 1899, ibid.
gan to gather to the north of Jhalod, causing the Deputy Collector to report to his superior, 'I could see at once that we had lost control over the Bhils'. That day the Bhils who had attacked Jhalod moved southwards to Varod village where they sacked the houses of ten Kanbi peasants. From there they marched to Limbdi town which they stormed firing arrows. They began to loot the shops but were fired on by the police and driven away. One Bhil woman and four Bhil men were killed and others wounded and captured. Three people of Limbdi were wounded.

Reports came in from other parts of Jhalod taluka and the adjoining areas of Santrampur state of looting by Bhils on 10 and 11 September. Huge groups of Bhil men and women—in some cases four thousand, in others five thousand strong—were involved in these attacks. Their targets were Vaniya and Bohra shops and Kanbi houses. The Political Agent for Rewa Kantha agency reported on the situation in Santrampur (or Sunth) state; 'A very large proportion of the Bhil population of the East of the Sunth State is in a state resembling that of revolt. The people visit their houses at night and in the day-time remain in the hills watching for opportunities of looting defenceless villages inhabited by Kunbis or by others who possess stores of grain or valuables'. The authorities in Santrampur believed that an attack by about 10,000 Bhils on the state capital itself was imminent, and that the state treasury and palace were in danger.

On 12 September, in response to frantic requests, two companies of troops arrived by train at Dahod, from where they marched to Limbdi and Jhalod. The Bhils made no attempt to resist and kept away from the main roads along which the troops were marching. In the mean time there had been some rain, 76 mm falling between 9 and 16 September. This encouraged many Bhils to go back to their fields and start agricultural operations. By 16 September the Collector was able to report that the situation in Jhalod taluka was quiet. In the words of the Deputy Collector, 'the Bhil rising subsided as suddenly as it began'.

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164 Deputy Collector to Collector, 11 September 1988, ibid.
165 Political Agent, Rewa Kantha Agency, no date, ibid.
166 Administrator, Santrampur state to Political Agent, Rewa Kantha Agency, 11 September 1899, ibid.
167 Deputy Collector to Collector, 14 September 1899, ibid; Times of India, 16 September 1899. In the end, this rain proved insufficient to produce any crop.
168 DCR 1899–1900.
The rising had been very much of a community affair, with thousands of Bhils taking part. When it is considered that the entire Bhil population of Jhalod taluka in 1901 was only 23,922, it can be appreciated that gatherings of between three and five thousand Bhils represented mobilization on a mass scale. They were led by their headmen and both women and men participated, the women carrying away the grain while the men intimidated the shahukars and rich peasants. Ranajit Guha has recorded a similar sexual division of labour in the Santal uprising of 1855.\(^{169}\) The attack itself was not, however, a communal one, for all hoarders of grain were looted, be they Vaniya, Bohra or Kanbi. In this respect it was an attack by the mass of the peasants on the monetized people as a class.

The cause of the rising does not appear to have been starvation as such. The available accounts (unfortunately all by officials and other outsiders and not by the Bhils themselves) indicate that the Bhils still had some grain stored in their houses. However, the amounts stored were certainly very meagre, and they clearly anticipated starvation in the near future. What tipped the balance was a feeling that the shahukars, by refusing to give them grain and instead exporting it to distant markets, were acting in a morally outrageous manner. The force of the rising stemmed from this feeling of moral outrage rather than starvation as such. This conforms to a pattern seen in famines elsewhere in India. David Arnold, in describing the Madras famine of 1876–8, shows how grain riots were common in late 1876, immediately after the failure of the monsoon. He quotes the comment of a British official on the underlying cause of these riots:

The feeling against merchants is very bitter in some parts. It is a common thing to be told by the poor that the sowcars are cheating them, by which they mean that they pretend to have no grain and are reluctant to sell even when they cannot deny they have it. The poor ryots consider that, as they have helped to enrich the sowcar, the latter should not fail them in their time of need, and that Government should step in and prohibit sowcars from selling at more than what they call a fair rate of profit.\(^{170}\)


After the initial months of famine there were fewer riots, as the deepening crisis caused the peasants to leave their villages and wander about in small groups in search of food. Isolated and weakened by hunger, they no longer had the solidarity or ability to appropriate hoarded grain in an organized or effective manner.\textsuperscript{171}

A similar feeling of moral outrage tipped the balance against the shahukars of Pune and Ahmednagar districts of Maharashtra in 1875. According to the official reports on this rising—

A combination of indebtedness would not of itself produce such a feeling [of hostility against shahukars]. The needy man might be expected to regard the person who supplies his needs rather with gratitude than dislike. It is only when indebtedness is attended with circumstances which produce in the mind of the debtor a sense of hardship, of unfair treatment, of being oppressed and having no redress, that a feeling of hostility is aroused such as led in the present instance to actual violence.\textsuperscript{172}

In this particular case the peasants were angered by the refusal of the shahukars to pay the second instalment of the land tax, after they had handed over their crops anticipating that they would.\textsuperscript{173} The outbreak was further encouraged by a rumour that the British would support the peasants in their action.\textsuperscript{174}

This mentality was found not only in peasant risings in India but also in popular outbreaks elsewhere in the world. E.P. Thompson, in discussing grain riots in eighteenth-century England, has pointed out that the rioters often justified their action by arguing that legitimate marketing practices were being violated:

This in its turn was grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, when taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor. An outrage to these moral assumptions, quite as much as actual deprivation, was the usual occasion for direct action.\textsuperscript{175}

Similarly, in eastern Gujarat in 1899, the Bhils rose not because they were then starving—though clearly they anticipated it—but because they considered that their shahukars had violated a moral code.

The Bhils, like the English poor described by Thompson, first

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., pp.90 and 97–8.
\textsuperscript{172} Report of the Committee on the Riots in Poona and Ahmednagar 1875, p.65.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., p.104.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., pp.105–6. See also I.J. Catanach, Rural Credit in Western India (Berkeley, 1970), p.20.
\textsuperscript{175} Thompson, 'Moral Economy of the English Crowd', p.79.
presented their grievances to the authorities.\textsuperscript{176} It was only when they felt that their complaint was being ignored—in this case by the mamlatdar who told them to come back tomorrow—and after they were further angered by the insults of the Bohra, that violence actually broke out. Even then the violence was confined to looting. Not one member of the dominant classes was killed by the Bhils during the rising, and only a few received minor injuries. All of the recorded fatalities—nine in all—were of Bhils killed while looting. This conformed to a general pattern of peasant uprisings in India.\textsuperscript{177} Also, like similar popular actions, the violence was not random but had a clear and unambiguous aim; in this case to take from the shahukars the grain which they were hoarding so unjustly.\textsuperscript{178}

The rising of 1899 thus appears to have been caused by a violation of what E.P. Thompson calls ‘the moral economy of the poor’. Is it helpful to apply this concept, formulated in the context of eighteenth-century England, to an adivasi rising in late-nineteenth-century India? We may here turn to the work of James C. Scott, who has tried to apply Thompson’s concept to the peasantry of colonial South-East Asia, in a book titled *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*. Scott argues that there are two moral principles of particular importance to peasants, which he calls ‘the norm of reciprocity’ and ‘the right to subsistence’. The first is a moral obligation incumbent on both peasants and dominant classes, in which the former provides agricultural produce while the latter reciprocates with services. The exchange cannot be quantified in any obvious manner, being based as it is on customary practice. Degrees of reciprocity and what is considered ‘correct behaviour’ vary considerably from culture to culture. ‘The right to subsistence’ reflects a belief that everyone in a society has a right to a basic subsistence. Exploitation which leaves a peasant hungry will be considered to violate this moral code.\textsuperscript{179}

Scott argues that the economic and political transformations brought about in peasant societies by colonial rule have systemati-

\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., pp.110–11.
\textsuperscript{177} Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, p.161. No shahukars were killed in the Deccan riots either. See *Report on the Riots*, pp.3–5.
\textsuperscript{178} In the Deccan riots the aim was to obtain and destroy the account books and bonds held by the shahukars. Ibid., p.5.
cally violated these moral codes.\textsuperscript{180} The peasants were deprived of the use of many of their basic resources, such as easy access to cultivable land and the use of forests and other natural resources. With improved communications crop prices became subject to a world market and began to register sharp and unprecedented fluctuations.\textsuperscript{181} Colonial land taxes were high and inflexible, not allowing for the possibility of crop failure in bad years.\textsuperscript{182} Tax was demanded in cash, forcing peasants to grow crops for the market. The advent of cheap mass-produced goods undermined the market for locally manufactured goods.\textsuperscript{183} Faced with this multifaceted attack on their whole way of life, many peasants were driven to revolt. Such risings were defensive movements caused by indignation at the breaking of the moral code rather than by starvation:

A peasant whose subsistence hangs in the balance faces more than a personal problem; he faces a social failure. This emphasis on rights and social failure is central. It implies that the peasant as a political actor is more than a statistical abstract of available calories and outgoing rent and tax charges—more than a mere consumer, as it were, whose politics may be deduced from his daily food intake. It confers on him; as we confer on élite political actors as a matter of course, a history, a political consciousness, and a perception of the moral structure of his society. It implies that his sense of what is just allows him to judge others as morally responsible for his predicament and allows him to act, not just to restore his subsistence but to claim his rights.\textsuperscript{184}

Scott, following Thompson, thus goes beyond the crude economic determinism of many scholars, both Marxist and non-Marxist, who have sought to explain peasant movements in terms of belly-responses. Hunger by itself was not the cause of revolts; more important was a sense of moral outrage. The timing of a revolt, the mobilization of the peasantry and the targets of attack were determined by such a consciousness.

Despite its attractions, there is a drawback to the ‘moral economy’ argument as set out by Scott. A highly problematic contrast is made between a custom-bound ‘traditional’ society, with its systems of reciprocal exchange, and the dynamic ‘modern’ society

\textsuperscript{180} Ibid., p.4.
\textsuperscript{181} Ibid., p.10.
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid., pp.29–32.
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid., p.61.
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid., p.189.
brought into being by colonial rule. This dichotomy lies at the heart of much structural-functionalist anthropology. In such writings ‘traditional’ societies are seen as self-sustaining systems (such as a village, tribe or little kingdom) which have led a static existence for centuries, if not millennia. The system is, following Durkheim, seen as an organic body, the various parts of which function to maintain the whole. There is an assumption that each member of society benefits according to his or her input through a system of ‘moral payments’. The subordinate classes provide the dominant classes with a share of the produce of their labour, the dominant classes reciprocate by providing leadership, organization, access to land and resources, protection, and, in bad years, charitable hand-outs. This equitable system was, it is believed, shattered by the advent of European colonialism, a process known in anthropological literature as ‘modernization’.

Scott explicitly bases his model on this concept. Its roots lie in the anthropological quest for static ‘laws’ of social organization, and it is perhaps strange to see a historian trying to apply it in a historical study. History is first and foremost concerned with sequence, motion and narrative, i.e. with the process of transition. From such a perspective there can hardly be so sharp a divide between pre-colonial and colonial society. We have seen in the case of the Eastern Mahals how the Bhils were already integrated into a widespread market economy before the advent of colonial rule, through the operation of shahukari. Pre-colonial commercial capitalism was by no means a static force for it was always trying, with considerable success, to enhance its power. The pre-colonial/colonial dichotomy does not provide us with an adequate means for understanding the Bhil rising of 1899. Although the discontent was to some extent directed against colonial rule (seen particularly in the grie-

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186 Ibid.

187 Scott quotes with approval Durkheim’s writings on reciprocity and moral payments on pp.167–8. Interestingly, Thompson also mentions with approval Durkheim, Weber and Malinowski, praising them for their analysis of ‘the delicate tissue of social norms and reciprocities’ which were seen to regulate the lives of the people they studied. Thompson, p.78.

188 Perlin, ‘India between History and Anthropology’, p.10.
vance against the forest laws), the event is understood best as a protest against a system of exploitation which had been tightening its hold for centuries.

It might be felt that this critique of Scott detracts from his powerful denunciation of colonial rule. This is far from being my intention. What I wish to bring out, rather, is that the colonial system rested on the complicity of powerful forces within Indian society, such as feudal landlords and merchant capitalists. These classes in many cases welcomed the advent of a system of rule which in so many novel and ingenious ways enhanced their ability to exploit the poor. The underlying cause of popular revolts such as those of the Bhils was not the colonial impact in isolation; rather, it was the development and consolidation of systems of exploitation by a colonial bureaucracy in alliance with various indigenous classes.

There are other assumptions in Scott’s argument which need to be questioned. The idea of ‘the norm of reciprocity’ can be attacked from two standpoints, those of classical political economy and of Marxism. Classical political economic theory denies that there is such a thing as a reciprocal society. Society, it is held, rests on bargains between individuals and the enterprise of individuals. Politics represent the struggle by individuals for control over resources. There can be no genuine reciprocity, for the strong and enterprising inevitably command more of the spoils. This is seen as being a fundamental and unchanging law of human society.

Scott has been challenged from this point of view by Samuel Popkin in a book called *The Rational Peasant*.\(^{189}\) Popkin views the peasant as ‘a rational problem-solver, with a sense of his own interests and of the need to bargain with others to achieve mutually acceptable outcomes.’\(^{190}\)

In Popkin’s view the moral economists have romanticized the past; patrons were not paternalistic and villages were not egalitarian. Most peasants benefited from colonial rule and the peasant revolts of South-East Asia were not backward-looking to a lost ‘moral economy’, but an expression of ‘green power’—a reflection of the peasant’s growing ability to organize and struggle for rights and privileges previously denied them. Peasant struggles were frequently

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\(^{190}\) Ibid., p.ix.
battles to tame markets and bureaucracies, not movements to restore ‘traditional’ systems.

Although Popkin is right to point out that some peasant movements are based on rising expectations, he is wrong to characterize this as the chief form of peasant discontent in colonial societies. His argument that colonial capitalism, on balance, benefited the peasantry of South-East Asia, ignores the strong evidence that French colonial taxation in fact pauperized the mass of the peasantry. He fails to give due value to some of the better findings of the moral economists, for instance the fact that most peasants are preoccupied with their security and the danger of starvation. He fails to understand the many social limitations imposed by the village community and religious beliefs which prevent peasants from being what he calls ‘rational economic calculators’. Above all he fails to grasp the role of the community in peasant risings. To view all peasants as little capitalists, divided each from the other, will never help us to understand the powerful solidarities which are forged when peasants come together to fight as a community.

Scott’s concept of reciprocity is open to attack also from a Marxist point of view. In this case, society is characterized not by struggles between individuals, as classical political economists maintain, but by struggles between classes. Such struggles determine the way in which resources are distributed within a society. The fact that peasant societies are characterized by particularly sharp class divisions rules out the possibility of any genuine reciprocity.

Which of these two critiques does the evidence from the Eastern Mahals support best? A political economist might argue that the Bhil–shahukar relationship was the product of a mass of individual agreements between moneylender–patrons and Bhil clients. This understanding would in my opinion be superficial. The evidence shows that whenever fundamental issues were at stake, as during the famine of 1899, the two groups fought out their differences along lines of class. The power of each class at any one moment was determined by the state of this ongoing class struggle; the myriad of agreements negotiated between individuals merely reflected this balance of power. In this struggle between the classes reciprocity was never an issue because it never existed. It was the balance of power,

which represented the status quo of the moment, which gave rise to certain expectations—which we may if we wish call a ‘moral code’—around which the battle was engaged.

There is another criticism to be made of Scott. Thompson in his essay dealt with only one arena of conflict, that of the eighteenth century market in which the urban poor and the merchant classes came face-to-face. In such a context a valuable contrast can be made between the backward looking ‘moral economy’ of the poor and the new laissez-faire ‘economic rationality’ of the emerging capitalist class. In applying the idea of ‘moral economy’ to peasants, Scott has to establish a far more complex model. He has to deal with several arenas of conflict; most notably those concerning land (peasants versus landlords), natural resources (peasants versus forest and excise officials), land-taxation (peasants versus tax collectors), and the market (peasants versus traders and moneylenders). He attempts to solve this problem by redefining Thompson’s concept, laying far more stress on the notion of reciprocity. In Thompson’s writing this notion is implicit, but even if we discount it his basic argument still stands and has value. In Scott’s work the notion becomes explicit and central, making the whole exercise far more problematic.

Because of this the ‘moral economy’ argument proves most convincing when applied to market conflicts similar to the ones dealt with by Thompson. David Arnold has used it with much success in analysing food riots in South India in 1918. There, an expanding and speculative grain market, a state policy of laissez-faire tempered by the paternalism of local administrators, and a popular belief in the injustice and illegality of abrupt price rises and hoarding by traders provided a basis for disturbances which can be compared to those described by Thompson.192 Similar comparisons can be made with the Bhil rising of 1899 where the conflict likewise revolved around the market. Once we move away from the market into other arenas of conflict the concept of ‘moral economy’—in the precise sense used by Thompson—has less explanatory value.

To sum up, we may say that although the idea of ‘the moral economy of the peasant’ is valuable in its stress on the need to study

192 David Arnold, ‘Looting, Grain Riots and Government Policy in South India, 1918’, Past and Present, 84, 1979. My argument here has benefited from suggestions put forward by David Arnold in a paper delivered to the Lancaster University History Seminar in 1981 titled ‘Was there a “Moral Economy” of the Poor?’
peasant mentalities, it is open to serious objections. It is based on
the idea that there is a distinct form of ‘traditional peasant society’
in which there are ‘norms of reciprocity’ and ‘rights to subsistence’.
This idea is a product of structural-functionalist anthropology
which breaks down when we try to place such a ‘peasant society’ in
a historical context in which the share of social resources is deter-
minded not by a system of ‘moral payments’ but by the ongoing
struggle between dominant and subordinate classes. These struggles
concerned a whole range of issues and had their own timetables.
Turning points in the struggles did not necessarily coincide with the
advent of colonial rule in an area. Each relationship of domination
and subordination thus had a specific history and a corresponding
set of expectations. If such expectations were denied in a particularly
blatant manner, the peasants were likely to protest, riot or revolt.
It is therefore the history of relationships of domination and sub-
ordination, and the mentalities which accompanied them, that we
need to study, rather than the unhistorical structural-functionalist
concept of ‘the moral economy of the peasant’.

VII

Although the British officials condemned the outbreak of violence
by the Bhils in 1899, they felt that the affair would have a wholesome
effect in the long term in that it would undermine the mis-
placed trust which the Bhils had in their shahukars and encourage
them to borrow from the government at low rates of interest. In the
past the Bhils had been most reluctant to borrow from the govern-
ment, hardly ever asking for takavi loans. After the uprising large
numbers of Bhils applied for such loans and lakhs of rupees were
advanced.\(^{193}\) In mid 1900 the Deputy Collector was able to report,
‘As the sowkar has abandoned the Bhil this year, the Bhil seems
only to have grown indifferent to the sowkar, specially as the sirkar
has so munificently come to his assistance.’\(^{194}\) The famine had
shaken the existing credit system from top to bottom. If on the one
hand the Bhils had lost faith in their moneylenders, the shahukars
on the other hand had seen huge numbers of debts being wiped
from their books as a result of the high mortality.\(^{195}\) In 1901 the

\(^{193}\) Dahod Taluka Revision Settlement Report, 1904, p.37.
\(^{194}\) DCR 1899-1900, BA, R.D. 1901, vol. 52, comp.137, pt 3.
\(^{195}\) As an indication, in Jhalod taluka the population fell by 35 per cent between
Collector of the Panchmahals reported that the feeling between Bhils and shahukars continued bitter, and that—

It seems almost too much to hope for that the policy of Government, in temporarily stepping into place of agricultural moneylender on a large scale, should result in the Bania finding his occupation permanently gone; nevertheless it is possible to hope for it in the Eastern Mahals.  \(^{196}\)

The Collector's hopes were to be belied for, in 1902, with the first good monsoon since the famine, the shahukars began to re-establish links with their old debtors. They acted with great accommodation, giving generous loans to the Bhils and willingly undertaking to pay their land-tax demands. They were careful not to take any debtors to court. According to a Deputy Collector, 'His [the shahukar's] game at present is by all means in his power to induce the people to renew their accounts.'\(^{197}\) Within months the situation was as before, with the Bhils once more borrowing freely from the shahukars. In 1907 a Deputy Collector, commenting on the effects of the famine on rural credit, had to report, 'Generally speaking the Bhil is as much immersed in debt as formerly. He is entirely in the clutches of the savkar.'\(^{198}\)

The famine thus provided only a temporary setback for the shahukars, David Symington, writing forty years later in 1939, was able to describe the relationship between Bhils and shahukars in almost identical terms to that used by British settlement officers in the 1870s.\(^{199}\) As late as 1970 a survey of Dahod taluka found that 64 per cent of agricultural borrowing continued to be from shahukars and merchants.\(^{200}\) Only in the last two decades has this class begun to lose its hold; a similar study for the same area in 1980 found that only 31 per cent of borrowing was from such merchant-moneylenders.\(^{201}\)

This change has come about for a number of reasons. The shahu-


\(^{201}\) Ibid., p.64.
kars as a class have increasingly lost interest in the business. This is largely because the enterprise has become less profitable. The Eastern Mahals never recovered fully from the famine of 1899. During the twentieth century the region has gained a reputation for uncertain rainfall and poor ecological conditions. It became a common saying that in this tract there was dearth or famine one year in three.\textsuperscript{202} During such bad years it became common practice for shahukars to refuse to give credit.\textsuperscript{203} Many shahukars became disgusted by an occupation which required them to extract the meagre surplus of the Bhils in a more and more ruthless manner for ever-decreasing returns. In addition, laws against land appropriation by moneylenders for debts prevented them from becoming large landlords. After independence laws were passed against usury which, though often poorly implemented, brought an end to the more unscrupulous forms of profiteering. Increasingly, the sons of shahukars have turned to more profitable new occupations in business, government service, the professions and politics.

Loans by shahukars have been replaced increasingly by credit from co-operatives, banks and government institutions. The co-operative credit movement has had considerable success in this region. The Bombay government first established co-operative credit societies in the Eastern Mahals in 1913–14, initially without much success.\textsuperscript{204} It was only when some Gandhians under the energetic leadership of Amritlal Thakkar took up this activity during the 1920s that the movement got off the ground. Village societies were established, linked to a central organization in Dahod. The system was frankly paternal, with the central body acting in the manner of a shahukar. Its officials (all caste-Hindus) went out at harvest-time to collect the crops from the Bhils, and the co-operative paid the land tax for its Bhil members. Advances were made in kind as and when the Bhils needed them. The chief difference between conventional shahukars and the co-operative was that the latter’s dealings with the Bhils were less exploitative.\textsuperscript{205} By 1934–5 there were 85 such village co-operatives with 4178 members in the Eastern Mahals.\textsuperscript{206}

\textsuperscript{202} Symington, \textit{Report on the Aboriginal and Hill Tribes}, p.61.
\textsuperscript{203} L. M. Shrikant, 'Backward Panch Mahals', \textit{Bombay Chronicle}, 8 March 1930.
\textsuperscript{204} CR 1913–14, BA, R.D. comp.511, pt 4.
\textsuperscript{205} Catanach, \textit{Rural Credit in Western India}, pp.163–4.
The co-operatives grew in importance after independence. By 1980, 29 per cent of all borrowings in Dahod taluka were from co-operative credit societies. Borrowing from other such institutional outlets, such as government agencies and banks, accounted for a further 12 per cent.\textsuperscript{207}

Lastly, lending by rich Bhils to poor Bhils has become more common. For Bhils to become successful moneylenders there had to be a considerable change in mentality. This was brought about to a large extent by religious reform movements which began from the late nineteenth century onwards. These movements sought to change existing value systems. Bhils were encouraged to give up liquor and meat, to spend less on costly celebrations, and to lead a simple, law-abiding and thrifty life. The Bhil reformer Surmaldas, who died in 1898, preached in addition devotion to Ram and renunciation of magic and witchcraft.\textsuperscript{208} The Banjara, Govindgiri (1858–1938) preached similar doctrines, but in a more militant manner, which led to a bloody clash between his Bhil followers and colonial troops on Mangadh hill in Santrampur state in 1913.\textsuperscript{209} Followers of such reformers became known as bhagats. They wore a distinct dress of saffron kurta and turban, with a necklace of rudraksh seeds. They gained a reputation for their hard work and thrift. Their fields were well maintained and often irrigated. Some of the most prosperous Bhils of the region were from such bhagat families. Over time, by adopting capitalistic business methods in their dealings with their fellows, they provided a viable alternative source of credit for the Bhil peasants. The survey of 1980 for Dahod taluka found that 21.5 per cent of borrowing was from ‘relatives and friends’ — a category which must largely have covered dealings by rich creditworthy Bhils.

Shahukari as a system of exploitation is thus on the decline in the Eastern Mahals (though not necessarily in other Bhil tracts).\textsuperscript{210} Other forms of exploitation have emerged, involving rich farmers within the region and capitalist enterprise outside. Because of the

\textsuperscript{207} ‘Tribal Development Report, Dahod’, p.64.

\textsuperscript{208} Stephen Fuchs, Rebellious Prophets: A Study of Messianic Movements in Indian Religions (Bombay, 1965), pp.240 and 250–1; Vyas, Bondage and Exploitation, p.39.

\textsuperscript{209} For details see NAI, Foreign Dept. Intl. — A, 8–67, March 1914.

\textsuperscript{210} For a harrowing account of continuing exploitation by shahukars in Banswara and Dungarpur see Shreekant Khandekar, ‘Money-lenders: Their Pound of Flesh’, India Today, 31 January 1986, pp.140–3.
growth in population, coupled with a decline in fertility of the land, the large majority of Bhils now have to earn their chief livelihood by working outside the Eastern Mahals—as seasonal migrant labourers for rich farmers in the plains or in industry. In this work they are exploited ruthlessly, probably more ruthlessly than by shahukars in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{211} The reason for this is that in the past they could defend their interests as a community, whereas today, as migrant labourers scattered all over the plains and divided, they no longer have this power. Their struggle in the future will thus have to take new forms, with new methods of organization. More than ever the proverb of the Bhils reflects the grim reality of their daily grind:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Dhul khaye jyo dhai ne khaye}

(Licking the dust we fill our bellies.)\textsuperscript{212}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{211} For a study of this system of migrant labour see Jan Breman, \textit{Of Peasants, Migrants and Paupers: Rural Labour Circulation and Capitalist Production in West India} (New Delhi, 1985).

\textsuperscript{212} F. Bhil, \textit{Rajasthani Bhilo ki Kahavate}, p.103.