Subaltern Vegetarianism: Witchcraft, Embodiment and Sociality in Central India

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Academic writing on the practice of vegetarianism in India has proceeded on the assumption that those on the lower rungs of society—low castes—give up eating meat out of a desire to change their social position. In its baldest form, the suggestion is that in emulating high-caste Brahminical practices, those who are low attempt to improve their position in a purity/pollution-governed caste hierarchy in a process known as Sanskritisation.\(^1\) A more nuanced reading of this theory accepts that such a clear statement of intention on the part of entire caste groups is troubling and instead suggests that such marginalised people (either as individuals, households or groups) adopt vegetarianism in order to increase prestige more generally.\(^2\) Both these approaches however fail to understand the true nature of the transformation because they do not engage the subaltern’s world view. Indeed from the perspective of these approaches, the only transformation worthy of inquiry lies in the attempt to change status. This paper seeks to shift the focus back to the perspective of the social actor for whom the transformative act in this particular ethnographic situation lies not in an attempt to change status but in becoming a member of a Hindu religious sect.

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\(^1\) M.N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952); and M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966). It was Srinivas’ 1952 study of the Coorgs of South India that suggested the content of a theory of Sanskritisation. Srinivas found that the Coorgs were changing their dietary habits and aspects of their religious life. But he did not see this as necessarily a stab at increased status since the Coorgs were then the dominant caste locally. The way in which Sanskritisation was formulated in that ethnography was in fact more nuanced than the way it was subsequently developed and taken up both by others (see footnote 2) and by Srinivas himself.

which requires the practice of a vegetarian diet. In so doing one can demonstrate that the practice of vegetarianism by low-caste, low-status, otherwise-marginal groups is a practice that is not necessarily derivative of an elite world view. For the people I worked with, the adoption of a vegetarian diet as a consequence of membership of a Hindu religious sect, the Mahanubhav \textit{panth}, solves ‘being in the world’ problems: by joining the sect and living by its rules they attempt to better protect themselves from attacks of witchcraft and magic.

The misreading of the significance of vegetarianism results from a disengagement from the view of the subaltern. The social scientist often refuses to acknowledge how and why subaltern motivation for action (such as changing dietary habits) may have its roots in religious transformation because according to the terms of a particular version of modernity, this motivation appears either pre-modern or objectively non-transformative. Instead, explanations are sought which are more easily regarded as true engagements with modernity on the part of marginalised people, explanations such as the impact of anti-colonial nationalism, Hindu nationalist activity or, in the case of Sanskritisation, the desire to escape marginal status by acquiring social prestige. The experience of religion is un-coupled from both society and politics.

Religious reform movements among lower-caste groups which promoted not only changes to worship but also vegetarianism and teetotalism have been analysed by elite nationalist Indian historiography as expressions of rebellion and resistance to colonial rule. David Hardiman’s history of a religious movement called the Devi movement among Adivasi (so-called ‘tribal’) people in southern Gujarat seeks primarily to reconsider this movement from the bottom up and not necessarily expressive of anti-colonial sentiment; he also disputes the Sanskritisation model and sees the adoption of vegetarianism and alcohol abstinence as an appropriation and democratisation of Brahminical notions of purity and a way in which tribals and other low-status groups sought to deprive these notions of their power. My position is that a vegetarian diet

\footnote{See for example M. Wakankar, ‘The Anomaly of Kabir: Caste and Canonicity in Indian Modernity’, in S. Mayaram, M.S.S. Pandian and A. Skaria (eds), \textit{Muslims, Dalits and the Fabrications of History: Subaltern Studies XII} (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005), pp.99–139, for a discussion of the implications of such an approach in examining the historical figure of Kabir. In that paper, Wakankar suggests that the causes and consequences of a low-caste Hindu, Kabir, becoming a Muslim, has been erased in official nationalist historiography in favour of an emphasis on the ‘typically Indian’ syncretism of the sect Kabir founded. Thus the transformative act for the subaltern actor is not examined and a religiosity founded in low-caste experience left unexamined.}

has a power that is embraced by people not necessarily because of the Brahminical status of that value but because of its appeal to individual subaltern experience. Recent work on contemporary India has described the ways in which low-status groups (such as ‘tribals’ and Untouchables) become implicated in another nationalism, that of the Hindu nationalist project. But these studies do not adequately demonstrate or explain the power of Hindu nationalist ideology for these subaltern groups. One commentator has recently asserted that the ‘multiple spiritual and cultural meanings embodied in the practices of being [a member of a Hindu sect] now matter less [my emphasis] than its potential for recruiting Adivasis to political Hinduism’. But surely it is precisely those practices—such as vegetarianism—and their meanings that need to be interrogated in order to understand the appeal of Hindutva and make the link between the personal and the political. Suggesting that subalterns act largely in reference to elite groups and elite modes of being leads to a denial of the ability of those subalterns to make sense of their lived worlds. How would a scholar wedded to this methodology be able to grasp adequately why people give up meat, or the power or consequences of that act? Rather than assume therefore that the adoption of vegetarianism is ‘about’ Sanskritisation, Hinduisation or Hindu nationalism, one should be sensitive to the ways in which its practice may in fact be immediately irrelevant to the subaltern practitioner in terms of status or power.

A question that may occur to the reader at this point is: why do people in this paper appear as ‘subalterns’ and not simply as ‘members of low-status, low-caste groups in Indian society’? The use of subaltern signifies less a type of person and more a type of approach, and in employing the word in the context of this discussion I want to highlight that approach. As a result of recent debates over the relationship between Hindu nationalism and lower-status people, the latter have already entered the intellectual imagination and are represented in much of the literature as having been ‘duped’ (whether through education and welfare schemes or in a clamour for status and power) by Hindu

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nationalism into becoming foot-soldiers for a nascent Hindu polity. ‘Subaltern’ here then attempts to rectify the elitist bias implicit in many of these analyses. One might instead work, as Gyan Prakash has noted, with the ‘conviction that elites exercised dominance not hegemony over subalterns’. Thus, whether we are talking of Brahminical notions of purity and the link to the types of food people eat, or the role given to Hindu nationalism in academic accounts of religious and social transformation, we can recognise, through an examination of this particular dietary practice, that people can act ‘on their own, that is, independently of the elite’. So: dominance, yes; hegemony, no.

An approach to food which places theories of embodiment at the centre of its method may reveal the force of vegetarianism as a value for some of the people I worked with. The role of the body in social life has a long history in the anthropological corpus, as Hertz’s analysis of the right hand and Mauss’s famous essay on the techniques of the body amply demonstrate. Recent approaches though have emphasised the notion of the ‘mindful body’—a body which plays an important part in perception and thought—and contrary to certain Foucauldian analyses, they recognise that the body is not only the outcome of social processes but, through experience and emotion and a process of embodiment, is the site of meaningful social production itself. These theories find a natural ally in phenomenology and, taking their cue from Merleau-Ponty, attempt to explain the life worlds of social actors through a focus on experience.

These approaches seem fruitful in this ethnographic context because the body is the way in which the transformation that leads to one becoming vegetarian is experienced. As I explain in more detail below the bodily experience is twofold: first, the person becomes sick as a result of a malicious mystical attack and this sickness is experienced as bodily pain; secondly, the person is cured of his suffering by a combination of body disciplining (particular prayer, particular diet) at the religious sect temple, and a form of possession called byān in which God (Bhagwan) fights the witch or sorcerer who caused the affliction. An emphasis on the body as a site of experience and social agency corresponds well

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to the desire to return to deep ethnography in order to make sense of people’s lived worlds. Since the practice of vegetarianism—the food which one eats—is a form of body discipline, one must look at bodily experience. As Lyon and Barbalet suggest:

An adequate understanding of social agency requires a concept of embodied agency. This is because emotion, which is necessarily embodied, functions in social processes as the basis of agency. The body cannot be seen merely as subject to external forces; the emotions which move the person through bodily processes must be understood as a source of agency: social actors are embodied.¹¹

The issue is complicated, however—not least because notions of purity and sin and the link between these and a vegetarian life are important both for Hindu religious sects and in Indian society more generally. Yet I argue that in this context, these important notions are elaborations rather than full explanations. As I explain in more detail below, sect members describe their transformation as a move from pain and suffering (dukh) to happiness and contentment (sukh). But there are important inconsistencies in people’s narratives of why they visited the sect temple town and joined the sect. It is explained in some narratives in terms of a desire to move away from a life full of sin (pāp) to one where one’s soul has become pure (shuddh). Yet other narratives given as explanations by the very same people, as well as by others, describe the desperation involved in seeking a lasting solution to the suffering experienced. Since the period of suffering, as they describe it, categorically does not result from being sinful or impure but from a sustained assault by magic or witchcraft, the purity and virtue of the vegetarian diet cannot but be encompassed by (and thus understood in relation to) the greater motivation for and power of membership of the sect and the resulting change in diet.

This while I argue that the practice of vegetarianism can be a powerful subaltern way of being, what appears at first sight to be a divide between vegetarian and meat-eating villagers is less about the nature of the food being consumed than about that radical transformation in the nature of sociality that is brought about by membership of the religious sect. Ideas about what constitutes Adivasi culture and its relation to eating meat (and drinking

alcohol)\textsuperscript{12} are used by some meat-eating Adivasis in order to demonstrate that a vegetarian, teetotal Adivasi is a contradiction in terms. But this I argue is just a way of talking through the issue; the real problem is not the dilemma of Adivasi-ness and its association with certain food practices but a change in the way people relate to one another as a result of membership of the sect. Once again, therefore, the methodological focus on the transformative act for the subaltern in his particular local social setting reveals not only the power of vegetarianism as a way of being, but also that its practice is indicative of other more general processes of change. So let me begin with that local, the place where I carried out fieldwork.\textsuperscript{13}

The Setting

Markakasa\textsuperscript{14} village is located at the eastern extremities of the state of Maharashtra, some 15 kilometres from the border with the state of Chhattisgarh in a so-called ‘tribal’ or Adivasi area. The landscape consists of gently undulating terrain broken by stretches of small hills and is characterised by farmland and forest. Markakasa has approximately 630 inhabitants distributed among some 125 households and the village is rather diverse, as the villagers themselves attest.\textsuperscript{15} Three languages are spoken on a daily basis—Chhattisgarhi (the lingua franca), Gondi and Marathi\textsuperscript{16}—and there are three corresponding ‘ethnic’ groups—Chhattisgarhi people, Gond people and Marathi people. There are twelve castes, the three largest being the Gonds (Adivasi, or Scheduled Tribe—ST), the Mahars (Untouchable, or Scheduled Caste—SC) and the Telis (an Other Backward Caste—OBC). Moreover there are three broad religious communities, Hindus, Buddhists

\textsuperscript{12} James Staples in this issue makes the important observation that we cannot see vegetarianism as involving only the consumption of food in its strictest sense; in the particular social setting I examine here, teetotalism is strongly associated with abstinence from meat largely because they are both practices that sect members are required to observe, and also because meat and alcohol are generally regarded as ‘going together’: the consumption of one is associated in a given space and time with the consumption of the other.

\textsuperscript{13} Fieldwork was conducted from November 2002 to May 2004 and again in April 2005. Research was made possible by a studentship from the Economic and Social Research Council, and awards from the Royal Anthropological Institute’s Emelie Horniman Scholarship Fund, the Sutasoma Trust, and the Kale Memorial Fund. I thank Caroline Osella, Filippo Osella, Veronique Benei, Jonathan Parry, Clarinda Still, Michelle Obeid and Lucia Michelutti, and the participants of workshops and seminars held at SOAS, LSE and Sussex, for their comments on various versions of this paper.

\textsuperscript{14} I have used a pseudonym for the village and changed the names of the people that appear here.

\textsuperscript{15} It is classed as a panchrangi gaon or ‘mixed village’, a place with different types of people (principally thought of in terms of caste or ethnicity but also language and dharma [religion]).

\textsuperscript{16} Chhattisgarhi is classified as a dialect of Eastern Hindi; both it and Marathi are members of the Indo-European family of languages. Gondi, on the other hand, is a Dravidian language with affinities to Malayalam, Tamil and Telegu. Nevertheless, the Gondi spoken by people in Markakasa contained many loan words from both Marathi and Chhattisgarhi.
and Christians, though the distinctions between them are not absolute. Among those who call themselves Hindu, there are three sects (panth)—the Mahanubhav, Ramanandi and Kabir—as well as those (the majority) who have no sect affiliation.

Rice is the principal crop in this part of central India and people eat what they grow: most households operate subsistence agriculture. Although there are significant wealth disparities between villagers, there is little difference in the type of food ordinarily eaten. Meals are taken twice a day and consist of freshly-cooked boiled rice and one vegetable dish or lentils. Sometimes this is accompanied by homemade lime or mango pickle. Food is cooked on mud stoves (zula) on the floor and fed by firewood. In the summer when cooking indoors becomes unbearable most households build stoves in the open air either in their courtyards or back gardens. While women are the main cooks in the home, men may participate in the preparation of meals. If so, they will take on slicing, peeling or chopping tasks. It is always womenfolk who grind the chillies to make the masala paste. Men are expected to know how to cook and do so occasionally—especially, but not exclusively, when their wives are menstruating and there are no girls to cook for the household. Diners (both men and women) sit on the floor and are served by a female member of the family, who eats after the others have eaten. If the rains are good then gardens can supply some of the villagers’ vegetable needs: runner beans, pumpkins, bittergourd, tomatoes, aubergine. Some of the wealthier households with larger plots of land or access to water can grow spinach, fenugreek, cauliflowers, cabbage, chillies, and various types of lentils. Otherwise, vegetables are available in weekly markets held in several villages around Markakasa, and which are attended by most residents every week or fortnight.

Apart from the increased incidence of vegetarianism, there appears to have been little change in people’s eating habits over at least the past twenty years. Certainly the food choices that now exist for city-dwellers are not available to this day and most Markakasa villagers have neither tasted ice cream nor drunk Coca-Cola. There are a couple of ‘hotels’ (restaurants) in a village four kilometres down the road which serve snacks such as fried bhajia (dumplings), but for a full meal one has to travel 40 kilometres to the tahsil (sub-district) headquarters. It would be fair to say, then, that for Markakasa people, food is

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17 Given the prevalence of regular years of famine in the past (for example in the late 1950s as reported by Markakasa people), what has changed over a longer time span is the experience of serious hunger.

18 See for instance the papers by Henrike Donner and Pat Caplan in this issue.
essentially that which is eaten in one’s own home, cooked by a member of one’s family.

The majority of people in Markakasa, whether men or women, adults or children, eat meat. The most common non-veg items consumed are eggs and chicken; goat and pork (both wild and domestic) are also eaten but more rarely. And though the consumption of carrion beef is not publicly admitted to, some Chamars (those involved in the flaying of dead cattle) as well as several Mahar households (involved in the transportation of cattle to slaughterhouses) certainly do eat this otherwise locally-abhorred meat. Finally, the villagers in Markakasa sometimes augment their diet with unusual fare such as owl, snake, tortoise, rabbit, or mouse. Meat (including eggs) is generally consumed once a week. It is not meat that makes the meal, however, but rice.

Those villagers who are vegetarian for the most part belong to one of the three aforementioned Hindu religious sects. The largest and fastest-growing is the Mahanubhav sect which can count thirteen households of all castes among its adherents; the Kabir sect can claim six households, all of them of the Teli caste; and there are two Ramanandi households. Though the members of the Mahanubhav are strictly vegetarian and teetotal and are the principal focus of the paper, certain adherents of the other two sects have been known to eat meat against the teachings of their respective religious traditions. There are also a couple of individuals who do not belong to any Hindu sect and have given up meat in order to become disciples of a local sadhu (world-renouncer). In terms of their attitude to vegetarianism and meat-eating the latter are very similar to the Mahanubhav sect members. However before I proceed to the more specific discussion of the power of vegetarian practice, let me outline some of the dangers of commensality.

Witchcraft, Poisons and Eating
As Maurice Bloch has pointed out, food is often both the best conductor of sociality and of anti-sociality. The meal shared creates closeness but closeness carries with it vulnerability and the risk of the perversion of that closeness

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19 The historical and social distinctiveness of the association of the Chhattisgarhi Teli caste with the Kabir devotional sect requires further explanation and discussion, and so is beyond the concerns of the present paper. It is however perfectly possible that an analysis of their particular association may in fact support the thesis of subaltern vegetarianism proposed here.

through poisoning or witchcraft.\footnote{Ibid., p.145.} Indeed, ‘the better a food is as a conductor that creates bodily closeness, the better it is as a medium of poison’.\footnote{Ibid.} Just as with the Zafimaniary of Madagascar that Bloch describes, a fear of witchcraft (jadu-tohna) and poisoning often enters into discussions about food and eating in Markakasa. It is generally thought that one is most vulnerable to such attacks when eating. Deet for instance is a type of magic that is performed during the course of a meal often by a witch (tohni)\footnote{Witches can be either male or female but are more often women.} intentionally, but also sometimes by children unintentionally. A witch watches a person eat and as he eats she licks her lips and swallows her saliva; this casts the deet and the victim loses his appetite and may eventually die. Precautions are taken to avoid eating in such a way that one may be seen by people from outside the household: either a door is partially closed, a curtain hung, or diners move out of the line of sight of visitors. In my landlord’s household for instance, when I took my meals my landlady would whisper to me to move further into the kitchen to avoid the gaze of visitors to the house hovering outside in the courtyard. Likewise I was warned by my landlord’s eight-year-old son not to drink my morning tea too far from the house and in full view of passers-by, lest I became bewitched. In Markakasa, pān, a mildly narcotic betel-nut digestif, was most often cited as the carrier of poison or other magical concoction, and for that reason I was often reminded not to accept pān from strangers but only from people I knew or trusted. Buying one another pān is, at least among men, a highly symbolic act and a mark of closeness or intention to create closeness; the power of its potential as a conduit for dangerous substances lies, as Bloch suggests, in this strong symbolic value.

Meat has a symbolic value in Markakasa.\footnote{Bloch also notes that meat in many societies performs an ultra-social function.} It is food which is regarded as the most social and the clearest indication of sociality. Whenever guests from other places visit meat-eating households, at least one of the meals they are served during their stay contains meat. Even among Markakasa people, friends invite one another to eat on those days when their household has meat to cook. Sharing a vegetarian meal has social value too of course, but the value of meat seemed to rank higher. Meat-eating guests who came to Markakasa and stayed with vegetarian households were said not to enjoy themselves as much, and would stay fewer days on account of the lack of meat. They would prefer to spend their evenings at other people’s houses, even those of newly-struck-up acquaintances, if meat would be served. Following the logic of Bloch’s
argument then, one could argue that, since meat in Markakasa has a strong
association with the expression of sociality, it also carries with it the risk of
danger.

The fear of witchcraft and magic more generally, irrespective of its relation to
food, is highly developed in Markakasa. Most people have at one time during
the course of their lives been subject to the attentions of witches or of sorcerers
(baiga) working on behalf of laymen. I was only four months into my stay when
I was told I had been attacked by a witch in the village whose house I had
visited. Fortunately, it was judged to be a minor case of deet and I was swiftly
cured; others are not so lucky.

Healing and the Mahanubhav Sect
An increasing number of people of all castes in Markakasa and in the area
more generally have within the past ten years joined the Mahanubhav panth,
a Hindu sect founded in the thirteenth century with a strong though
marginalised presence in Maharashtra. It is a monotheistic sect, its followers
recognising only God (Bhagwan) who is without form or attribute (nirguna)—
though popular Mahanubhav tradition admits the acknowledgment of five
incarnations of Bhagwan, which include the founder of the sect, Chakradhar
Swami, and the Krishna of the Bhagavad Gita. The sect has pilgrimage sites
and temples all over the Marathi-speaking region. The closest to Markakasa
is a temple town called Dakram-Sukdi, some 100 kilometres away to the
north. In addition to unswerving devotion to Bhagwan, the sect demands
that its adherents maintain a vegetarian diet and abstain from alcohol.

Virtually all local members of the sect I spoke to appear to have joined in order
to cure an intractable illness caused by witchcraft or magic. As I discuss in more
detail elsewhere, witchcraft and magic have become progressively more difficult
to detect and combat in recent years for reasons which range from increased
surveillance by the state, and changes in village composition, to land law
reform. In the absence of other effective remedies to malicious attack, it seems
that the Mahanubhav sect has gained a reputation locally for providing

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no.3 (1976), p.585.
26 This means that Mahanubhav sect members are forbidden to worship any other gods including Ram,
Ganesh, Hanuman and so on. Mahanubhav homes, in stark contrast to non-Mahanubhav ones, are
characterised by their lack of any posters or prints of deities.
27 A.A. Desai, ‘Witchcraft, Religious Transformation, and Hindu Nationalism in Rural Central India’,
definitive solutions; all that is required is devotion to God and strict adherence to the sect rules regarding prayer and diet. But visiting the temples at Dakram-Sukdi in search of healing is not a step that is taken lightly: often it is the last resort for people desperate for a cure to their affliction and anxious to know the source of their pain. Not only is the stay at the temple costly (in terms of lost potential earnings) but also one effect of joining the sect is to transform the convert’s relations with his kin, friends and caste-fellows and neighbours—for sect members are seen as a different kind of people. Nor can membership of the sect be cast off lightly once entered into: if one stops observing the tenets of the sect’s practice (such as vegetarianism, teetotalism), it is said one will eventually go mad. Though the Bhagwan of the Mahanubhav is formless, each devotee is given a small stone called a vishesh imbued with power and possession of which protects the devotee from attacks by witches. If the devotee begins to eat meat or drink alcohol in contravention of sect teachings, then the vishesh will disappear and protection from magic will be withdrawn. The power of such a sanction cannot be overstated: for people who have experienced intense pain, illness and suffering and then been cured, the threat of a renewed vulnerability to attack is exceptionally potent. This is what makes the practice of a vegetarian diet so powerful for Mahanubhav sect members in Markakasa.

Take the example of Gariba, a middle-aged man of the Teli caste. Gariba and his wife are adherents of the Mahanubhav sect and have given up eating meat and drinking alcohol as a result. As do many Mahanubhav devotees, he traces a biography of his life which describes a movement from a time of sadness and pain (dukh) to one of joy (sukh). The first painful episode in Gariba’s life occurred in the 1970s when he and several children in the household fell seriously ill, and crops failed during the course of a long-running land dispute with an agnatic kinsman; the latter’s wife was believed to be a saudin, a particularly powerful kind of witch, and Gariba knew that she was behind the illness. Though he tried various remedies, he ultimately decided to leave his home village and along with his mother, brother and sons, moved to Markakasa where he hoped he might escape the witch’s attention. But it was not to be. After several years he became embroiled in yet another dispute, this time with a non-kinsman fellow village resident over land Gariba had acquired on his arrival in the village. This man, who has since died, had a terrible reputation in the area for being a sorcerer (jadu-khor) and at some point during the dispute with Gariba he employed magic (jadu-tohna) to attack him. Gariba duly fell ill with constant headaches and pain in his legs and arms and was bedridden for days at a time; he described to me how he would suddenly recover for a few weeks and then suffer a relapse. Unable to work, he tried various remedies (doctors, local healers) but none of them work, he tried various remedies (doctors, local healers) but none of them...
proved effective. Eventually, at the suggestion of a local Mahanubhav sect member he, along with his wife, decided to go to the sect’s temple town, Sukdi, to seek relief.

The healing process at Sukdi is experienced primarily through the body in the form of possession called byān (lit. ‘statement’) and occurs during the three-times-daily worship at the temple during which the objects of worship known as ote (dais) are greeted with light (aarti) and the singing of hymns. Byān is usually received by a female relative of the afflicted person, often a wife or daughter, and takes the form of a conversation between the witch and God, during which much is revealed as to the identity of the tormentor and his or her reasons for attacking the victim. Through the body of the woman, God attempts to dispel the magic. Thus during byān, women are thrown around the temple grounds, crashing into walls or repeatedly smacking their heads on the marble dais which form the focus of worship. Sometimes they attempt to scale the temple buildings and hurl themselves from the roof. What occurs during these intensely physical experiences is not usually remembered by the sufferer herself. Indeed I am told that practitioners of byān feel no pain. But witnesses speak of it eloquently. If the witch’s magic is especially potent, the woman will be instructed by God to take herself to a lake and, at an appointed time, submerge herself until the witch is defeated. Since there is a risk of drowning, attendants from the temple accompany her and ensure that after the fifth submerging the byān receiver surfaces. This is the final stage in the long process of healing the afflicted person and is not only physically exhausting for the woman receiving the byān but also somewhat terrifying for the people watching. Though Gariba’s wife did not herself go down to the lake, he and others who had been to Sukdi vividly described seeing other women violently throwing themselves under the water with a total loss of control.

Whilst the actions of the body in the process of healing are striking for those who go to Sukdi, no less striking are the bodily disciplines imposed on them while they are in residence at the temple. Former meat-eaters and alcohol-drinkers have to change their diets and have to learn how to pray at the temple and participate in the worship there. But Sukdi is not a place that one can visit, be healed and then leave. Everyone I spoke to described their stay there as transformative, as marking the point when their lives moved from pain to happiness; and to my knowledge, all the people in Markakasa and the surrounding area who visited Sukdi to seek relief joined the sect following their recovery. Moreover when they did return, they brought the practices adopted while in residence at the temple back to the village with them—for
they are believed by sect members to be part of the package that protects them from harm.

In short, the practice of vegetarianism is seen as essential to living a life free from pain and hardship. Here then, we find ourselves far from the position where vegetarianism is seen as a marker of social prestige; rather it is a practice that is a fundamental component of the life lived safely and one which has power because it is practiced by people who have experienced the worst of times. The intense bodily experiences involved in both suffering and healing create dominant motifs in the biographies of people who have become vegetarian; the power of the latter is found in the remembrance of that set of experiences, and the desire never to suffer in the same way again.28 Thus the emotion and bodily experience of pain and healing produce an attitude which makes certain practices such as vegetarianism powerful. The mark of protection is the vishesh; its disappearance suggests that the devotee has somehow strayed from the path of the sect and protection is thus withdrawn. To eat meat is to err and one risks returning to that time of pain and suffering before one joined the sect.

Since they are required to give up meat and alcohol on joining the sect, new Mahanubhav adherents come to see these two forbidden substances differently. Not only is abstention from meat and alcohol seen as contributing to a virtuous life characterised by the principle of non-violence (ahimsa)—an idea that would have had little currency for them as meat-eaters before joining the sect—but these foods are seen as dangerous. My landlord, Dhansai, commented that since joining the sect even to smell alcohol makes his head spin now, a sensation he never used to feel before; this comment was made after he had told me that if Mahanubhav panthis (sect members) ever eat meat and drink alcohol again they will go mad. Once again, then, what is emphasised is the bodily sensation of contact with the forbidden substance and the effect that has on the status of one’s vulnerability to attacks of magic and witchcraft. Not only is the body instrumental in one’s experience of forbidden substances through the remembrance of the pain and process of healing, but it engages the entirety of one’s senses and reminds us of the nature of the sensual power through which food is experienced.29

29 M. Jackson, Paths Toward a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); P. Stoller, The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The Senses in Anthropology
As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, there is also a complementary notion of purity: membership of the sect and observance of its practices have effected a change from the impure and sinful to the pure and virtuous. One sect member from another village offered this typical explanation: ‘My life was full of pain (dukh) and sin (pap). I wanted to change my life and become a better person. Before I joined the sect I ate meat and drank alcohol and told lies. Now I am a better person and I’m happy. My soul is pure (shuddh); I’m pure on the inside’. Does this desire to remain pure motivate the practice of vegetarianism? And in expressing this desire, do not vegetarian Mahanubhav devotees claim some sort of prestige that has a Brahminical referent? Does this undermine the proposition that it is the power of subaltern experience which motivates a vegetarian diet? The connection appears clear: purity is associated with a vegetarian diet throughout much of India, and as scholars have observed, this combination of purity and vegetarianism reaches its apogee in the figure of the Brahmin.

Here we can take up Hardiman’s argument outlined above that religious reform movements such as the Devi in Western India were an attempt to democratise Brahminical notions of purity: by making everyone pure (not just Brahmans), purity lost its social power. This seems to have some affinity to what we know about the history of the Mahanubhav sect. Like many other religious sects which began in medieval India, the Mahanubhav positioned itself against Brahmin ritual hegemony. Unusually, the Mahanubhav was the subject of intense Brahminical persecution up until the late nineteenth century when it was recognised as a Hindu sect and, perhaps as a result, the sect writings are vehemently anti-Brahmin. Similarly, the nuns and monks of the sect whom I met both on their visits to Markakasa and on my visit to Sukdi would often define one of the chief characteristics of their sect as being against both Brahminical authority and privilege and the figure of the Brahmin more generally. At this point in the discussion, Hardiman’s contention of an attempt to deprive purity of its specific Brahminical power, by making it a value available to all, appears entirely applicable.

However, one can distinguish purity as a value for the sect and as a value for its adherents. The practice of vegetarianism and teetotalism from the view of the sect may indeed be an expression of purity in relation to Brahminical power. But purity as a principle from the sect’s point of view is not the same


thing as purity from a subaltern perspective. There are two possible explanations why the desire to be pure might be attractive to subalterns in Markakasa. There is, firstly, the explanation which derives from the well-established argument which runs throughout the anthropological literature that purity as a value in India is important in terms of social prestige whether in terms of caste hierarchy or status more generally; and, that in being members of a Hindu devotional sect and thus being vegetarian, people attempt to emulate the purity of Brahmins, a caste and status position denied them by the fact of their birth. A second possible explanation, however, and the one advanced in this paper, is that Markakasa people maintain purity in order to better protect themselves from attacks of witchcraft. The motivation explained in terms of prestige may indeed be valid but it cannot exist without the corresponding motivation to have continuous protection; if the latter is untrue then both the decision to go to Sukdi to be cured and the consequent bodily experiences lose meaning. This latter explanation can however exist without the former, while the former is incomprehensible without the latter: thus the values of purity and holiness which the sect doubtlessly promotes and is associated with are encompassed by the requirements of protection.

That purity is a value defined by and encompassed by the needs of protection against malicious spiritual attack is demonstrated by an episode involving my landlord Dhansai. As well as being a Mahanubhav sect adherent, Dhansai is active in the local Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), one of two major national political parties of India. Though he does not hold any official post within the local party organisation, he is nevertheless regarded as the BJP’s man in Markakasa. In this part of India, as in many other areas of the country, it is customary for the major political parties (most notably the Congress and the BJP) to distribute alcohol to voters during elections. The purpose though in Markakasa, at least, was not to ‘buy votes’ as it is often represented in the media—for the alcohol is distributed after the polls have closed. But a link is established and generally, though not necessarily, BJP supporters drank the BJP alcohol and Congress supporters drank Congress-supplied liquor. As the main BJP worker (karyakarta) in the village, Dhansai duly took delivery of the party’s consignment when the party jeep visited Markakasa. Yet he refused to receive it into his house. Instead he made use of a room in the adjoining house of his brother-in-law,31 whose household are not members of the sect. And while Dhansai also organised the consumption of the gift later in the day, he insisted that

31 His sister’s husband.
no alcohol be consumed in his courtyard, which he took to be ‘inside the house’. Nor would he permit any of his own cups to be used. His sister was prevailed upon to supply some, rather unwillingly, from her own kitchen. Thus Dhansai was clearly concerned with purity. But I doubt whether it was a matter of prestige. Prestige, after all, is a value in relation to others in society and yet Dhansai was not concerned about appearing to lose prestige by publicly serving alcohol in front of his house. It was his purity and that of his household that he was anxious about and the fear that by receiving the alcohol, a forbidden substance, into his home he would be breaking a key Mahanubhav tenet. Would the *vishesh* have disappeared if he had stored and served it within the walls of his home? It would be reasonable to conclude that he had to maintain purity in order to maintain protection. The Brahminical referent falls away.

A vegetarian diet can be subaltern, its practice the consequence of powerful needs rooted in the latter’s sense of self. The concerns with purity which might have suggested an ultimate link with high-caste ways of being are shown to be subordinate to the superior demands of protection from malicious spiritual attack. What then are the consequences of this change in diet for relations between vegetarians and meat-eaters? Indeed, is this latter distinction between the consumers of different types of food one that subalterns see as ultimately meaningful in structuring relations among themselves? Bringing notions of embodiment back into the analysis one may be able to observe how ‘the body is not only an outcome of social processes but [is] a transformer of social processes itself’. 32

**Vegetarians and Meat-Eaters: Gonds, Sociality and Commensality**

Though Markakasa has a mixture of castes with no caste group having an absolute majority, an overwhelming proportion of the population in the area as a whole are members of the Gond caste. Gonds belong to a category of people that many Indians, especially in the cities, in government and in the media, call ‘tribal’. Of course this is just one of the ways in which they are classified. The Indian State refers to them as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) and as such they are entitled to benefits such as the reservation of government jobs and places at universities, grants for agricultural equipment, and allowances for schooling among other things. Locally though the term ST is used infrequently. Adivasi, a term which means ‘original inhabitant’, is how Gond villagers usually describe

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32 Lyon and Barbalet, ‘Society’s Body: Emotion and the “Somatisation” of Social Theory’, p.49.
themselves and in most cases it is used synonymously with the label Gond. Thus all Gonds are Adivasi and all Adivasi are Gonds.

The image of the ‘tribal’ or the ‘Adivasi’ in Indian society is exceedingly complex. To many middle-class city dwellers, tribals or Adivasis are exceptionally poor, unclothed, undernourished and illiterate, hunt in the forests, are habitually drunk and eat animals. Indeed, so ingrained is this image that, when confronted with Adivasi people who do not confirm to the stereotype, a usual response is to deny their Adivasi-ness completely. On her first visit to the village, my aunt who lives in a city 200 kilometres away declared: ‘Oh, but these people aren’t Adivasis at all. I could pass them on the street in Nagpur and not think twice’. What she meant was that these people were not ‘real Adivasis’. But to say that this attitude was limited to outsiders would be a misrepresentation. The villagers of Markakasa themselves had a way of talking that indicated that they thought some Adivasis were ‘more’ Adivasi than others. One question I was persistently asked was why, if I wanted to study Adivasi culture, did I not go to a region called Bastar, some 200 kilometres away to the south, which was well-known for being an ‘Adivasi area’. There, I was told, I would find real Adivasi culture (sanskruti) and real Adivasis: people who went about wearing nothing but loincloths and wiped their bottoms with leaves instead of cleaning them with water. I was assured by the Markakasa villagers that if I travelled to Bastar I would not hear or see any monkeys in the forest, for the Gonds who lived there hunted and ate them.33 What is evident here is an evolutionist way of thinking about the nature of people and how they change: the Gonds of Bastar are at the bottom of the scale, the Markakasa Gonds somewhat higher up. Interestingly this scale of reference seems to be shared by people in Markakasa and city folk alike. What people ate and drank appears to play an important role in that formulation.

Gond-ness was often unsurprisingly expressed in the idiom of difference: their language, their life-cycle rituals, their gods and their liking for meat and alcohol. So, roasted fish curry was an essential part of a naming ceremony (satti), as were copious amounts of daru (alcohol) for both women and men. At the other end of life, during the Gond death ceremonies known as karsad, often performed several years after the actual death when tombs for the dead would be built and the spirits of the ancestors given a room in the house (kuratandi), huge expense is incurred on the slaughter of animals both for sacrificial purposes and for the needs of the guests. Indeed, this is the main

33 This practice seemed utterly repellant to people in Markakasa.
reason why the *karsad* takes place several years after a death and is performed for several deceased agnatic kin at one time. Daughters of the family who have since married and become members of other households return at this time and make offerings of juvenile chickens to their dead ancestors which are then sacrificed by the officiating *baiga* and cooked. Likewise, alcohol flows freely: an important role is played by the deceased’s affines (*sorye*) in the preparation of the tombs, and in the transportation of a pot said to hold the deceased’s life force or soul (*jiv*), and every now and again at various points during the ritual the *sorye* all sit down and refuse to take any further part until they are given alcohol to drink. As for meat-eating, it is so bound up with Gond identity that it was said that even Gonds that were vegetarian in their lifetimes would ask for meat on their death-beds. One day a Gond man, Dayal, narrated to me an apocryphal story of Dhansai’s father, a vegetarian who, as he was dying, called Dayal over and asked him to get hold of a small chicken for him, cook it and feed it to him. ‘Why’, I asked Dayal, ‘would a vegetarian do this?’ ‘He was a Gond’, he replied, ‘and Gonds need meat’.

The Gond-ness of eating meat and drinking alcohol appears to be so intuitive that even children are aware of it. I take my meals with my vegetarian landlord’s family. The adjoining household, separated only by a courtyard, is that of my landlord’s sister and brother-in-law who are not members of the sect. While my landlord’s two-year-old son, Anil, and I were eating lunch one afternoon, his uncle (the aforementioned brother-in-law), pottering around in the courtyard outside, asked us what we were eating. We answered. Then Anil, prompted by his mother who was serving us, asked his uncle what he had eaten that day. ‘Fish curry’, came back the teasing reply. ‘You lot are Gonds’, said Anil. His mother and I both laughed. ‘What are we then?’ she asked her son rhetorically.

Despite this, the association of Gond-ness and meat and alcohol made by some people cannot really be sustained; in conceptual terms a vegetarian Gond would cease to exist as a Gond, something which clearly does not take place since vegetarian Gonds are regarded as full members of their caste group. What is at the root of these anxieties over Gond-ness, expressed principally by meat-eating Gonds, is not dietary difference but conflicting notions of sociality resulting from membership of the sect. Consider *karsad*, outlined above. Mahanubhav sect adherents would not require *karsad* for themselves but are quite willing to organise it for their non-sectarian parents. One man told me that the structure of the ritual stayed precisely the same: the affines (*sorye*) would periodically refuse to take part in the
procession and would be given lemon sherbet to persuade them to continue. Likewise the sacrifice of chickens and goats was replaced by lemons and coconuts and vegetarian food was served at the various feasts. Yet the *karsad* as a ritual was valid and successful: tombs were built and the ancestors (*hanal*) housed. That the *karsad*, a distinctive local marker of Gond-ness, could still be performed suggests that a vegetarian Gond is not really a contradiction in terms at all.

As we have seen, the practice of a vegetarian diet and abstention from alcohol in Markakasa are part of a package of measures which Mahanubhav devotees embrace in order to better protect themselves from spiritual attack now and in the future. This transformation distinguishes them from their kin and neighbours who are not members of the sect and do eat meat and drink alcohol. Vegetarianism though needs to be seen in the context of a range of other changes in local notions of sociality; to do otherwise would be to hold up the practice of vegetarianism in and of itself *contra* meat-eating as the key opposing tropes in society, and the contrasting dietary practices themselves as the distinguishing point of analytical departure. Approaches to embodiment which base themselves solely in experience and emotion are susceptible to the criticism that society and sociality (or how one relates to others) drop out of the analysis. I want to show instead how individual subaltern experience and practice (such as that of vegetarianism) can be *socially* as well as individually transformative.

On joining the sect, new Mahanubhav adherents return to their villages from Sukdi as changed people and it is in their practices that they appear changed to those on the outside. In order to affirm their status as *atal bhakt* (unswerving devotees) to God (Bhagwan) alone, they take down the ‘photos of the gods’ which previously adorned their homes. For Gonds who join the sect, the household gods (*lonchtun*) and ancestors (*hanal*) must also be removed from their land; members of the Mahar caste, who in this area at least are all Buddhists, remove pictures of the Buddha and B.R. Ambedkar and cease to worship them; and sect members (of any caste) no longer worship village deities (such as Thakurdeo or Bhimalpen). Sociality with divinity has been radically transformed.

There is a marked change too in the practice and attitude to commensal dining. As discussed above, there is a general fear of magical attack while eating and one is most vulnerable at someone else’s house, eating someone else’s food. Sect members often expressed their reluctance to eat at the
homes of others who were not Mahanubhav panthis. Indeed my landlord Dhansai would often say to me that since joining the sect he now very rarely ate at other people’s houses. This ‘sealing off’ is taken to its extreme during the festival of Navratri (Nine Nights) when Mahanubhav sect adherents are not only prohibited from eating food prepared outside their own homes but cannot offer their food to anyone else not a part of the sect. For those who follow the teaching to the letter this has caused considerable conflict with close kin: there were several instances where sect members refused to feed their non-sect parents during the festival claiming that the sect’s strictures forbade it. This denial of food was shocking for non-sectarian Markakasa people since it struck at the very heart of what many considered the essence of filial obligation. Exclusivity during Navratri goes beyond eating and commensality, however, and the teachings demand that sect members must spend each of the nights at home in their own beds. Here we can discern a link between exclusivity—sealing-off—and the desire for protection from malicious spiritual attack. At Sukdi, the afflicted perform a three-day observance during which they are instructed by their guru not to allow anyone else to touch their sleeping mat. These two sites, the meal and the bed, are prime spaces of both intimacy and danger. As we have seen, one is particularly vulnerable while eating, but vulnerability to magical attack is also strong while sleeping, for this is when witches (tohni) attack victims and suck their blood.

To return to commensality, consider the following example. My landlady Janaki, a Mahanubhav Gond, returned home from a baby’s naming ceremony (satti) which she had attended in a neighbouring village along with several other Markakasa Gond women, and was not at all happy. ‘I tell you, Desai, it was awful’, she complained, ‘our Gonds are really filthy; I couldn’t eat a thing’. ‘Didn’t they have anything vegetarian?’ I asked. ‘Yes, they’d made potato and aubergine curry’, she replied, ‘but all I could taste was fish, they were probably using the same spoons and pans’. Janaki felt her purity had been compromised and left early. The following day I went to visit another Gond woman, Sunderbai, who had also attended the naming ceremony. She had been irritated by Janaki’s behaviour—particularly by her desire to be separate from the rest of the guests and her refusal to eat the vegetarian food she was served. ‘This is our sanskruti (culture)’, she said,

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34 Navratri is observed during the first nine nights of the bright fortnight (shuklapaksh) of the month of Ashwin (September/October).
35 These observances are all the more striking because non-sectarian Hindus in the village do not mark Navratri in any way.
‘and it’s because of people like her [members of a sect] that we’re losing it’. Sunderbai’s notion of sociality consisted of people eating together, happily, without too much fuss. In her view, Janaki had unproblematically been provided vegetarian food and so ought to have been satisfied. Instead, Janaki’s reluctance to partake in commensality was proof to Sunderbai that membership of the sect had fundamentally changed her. It was this, and not the practice of vegetarianism, that constituted the nub of Sunderbai’s concern.

What is troubling then for non-sect members is not differences in dietary habits but that, in several spheres of social life, sociality and commensality seem to be disappearing. The real dilemma of Gond-ness for Gonds is not vegetarianism which is capable of accommodation, but that Mahanubhav sect members no longer worship household gods or ancestors or share a common view of sociality.

That vegetarians refuse or are reluctant to eat with others cannot be seen as an emulation of Brahminical practice but as part of a wider transformation in sociality. The Mahanubhav’s exclusivity, though it may be expressed in the language of purity and pollution, does not have a Brahminical referent; instead, in their interactions with others, sect members are keen to avoid coming into contact with forbidden substances because of the risk these pose to their level of protection against witchery and magic. Similarly, as a result of the remembrance of the painful embodied experience which led to them joining the sect in the first place, sect members with a heightened sense of danger are cautious about commensality in general, fearful of a relapse into suffering. An interrogation of the causes for the adoption of vegetarianism and its continuing power as discussed in the previous section leads to a better interpretation of subaltern sociality and the place of dietary practice in it.

Conclusion
This paper has considered vegetarian practice in terms of the experience of subalterns. Not only does this approach provide an explanation of why people give up eating meat in the first place but it also helps us understand why people continue to remain vegetarian. The focus on the fact of membership of the religious sect also reminds us that the divide between vegetarians and meat-eaters cannot be analysed in isolation but needs to be done with reference to related transformations in local sociality and commensality. These practices should not be understood as cultural markers or badges of identity, reified and
disembodied into meaninglessness, but rather as part and parcel of everyday social life.

Recent studies of religious movements in Western India in the early twentieth century (and of the Devi movement in particular, referred to above) suggest that the appeal of that movement (which also promoted vegetarianism) was linked to the control of witches. Skaria for instance notes that on entering a village, the Goddess (the Devi) would first call out to all the women to come and be tested for witchery.36 He demonstrates how other forms of witch detection had either been suppressed or fallen into abeyance due to the attentions of the colonial authorities and how the Devi filled a void.37 Framing and interpreting his findings in relation to the subject of this essay, one could suggest that the power of the vegetarian practice demanded by the Devi had its source in the desire among people to successfully protect themselves against attacks of witchcraft and that we can see something similar happening in Markakasa.

Nationalist movements in India both in the colonial period and more recently with the growth in salience of Hindu nationalist ideology have emphasised the importance of vegetarianism and teetotalism as a way in which to integrate those on the margins of society into full membership of the nation. Through the disciplining of diet, both these nationalisms seek to unite people around common practices culturally expressive either of ‘proper’ Indian-ness or Hindu-ness. An examination of the subaltern nature of a practice such as vegetarianism is important in contemporary India since it serves as a beginning; from here we start to understand why nationalist ideology which emphasises reform of diet, among other things, may in fact be appealing to those already convinced of the power of the practice. Rather than being ‘duped’ by the supposedly hegemonic ideology of Hindu nationalism, subalterns can be shown to determine somewhat the terms of engagement.

37 Ibid., p.141.