

central geographic position. The main stream of cultural and political movements has always flowed from north to south in India, and it was along a route traversing Nimar that the bearers of these traditions frequently travelled. In Buddhist literature, the route to the Deccan from the Malwan capital of Avanti (modern Ujjain) is described as crossing the Narbada at Mahissati (modern Maheshwar). Much later, in Moghul, Maratha, and British times, this same way linked Agra and Delhi with Poona and other cities in the south, though the river crossing was made a few miles farther west (at Khalghat-Akbarpur). The Bombay-Agra road now follows this very same route. Yet despite its military importance, the District enjoyed relative quiet, for Nimar was until later years at least, only the highway to richer prizes in the Deccan. Whatever cultural transition Nimar underwent in earlier times came about slowly, and was not in keeping with the tempo of change experienced to the north, south, and west. And still today, Nimar is considered backward by the people of these neighboring regions.

1. Contemporary Cultural Setting

The three villages, Navra Toli, Bothu and Sayta fall within the cultural ambit of two neighboring towns. Directly across the river from Navra Toli is Maheshwar, with a population of 10 000. Maheshwar is an administrative headquarters, and also a judicial seat. It has a post office, police station, schools and a public library. The local "block" offices of the Community Development Scheme are housed there in a large, bleak fortress; there is a hospital, veterinary station and a semi-permanent cinema. In addition to a permanent market, where dry goods of all descriptions, food, household utensils, iron implements, jewellery, bicycles etc. can be bought, there is also a weekly vegetable, fruit, grain and meat market. The town has two ground-nut oil mills, a power plant, several weaving factories and numerous tea-stalls that are always busy. An excellent bus service provides convenient and inexpensive transport direct to Indore (in Malwa) and other major centers.

The other town, Kasrawad, has a population of only 1500, but as the administrative headquarters for the *tehsil* of the same name, it too has a court, post office and police station. Officers of the Community (Block) Development Scheme offer the peasants free or low-cost veterinary services and agricultural information, financial assistance in the form of loans for group and community projects, e. g. well drilling. There is also a Primary Medical Center providing health and maternity services. Kasrawad has a weekly market which attracts villagers from many miles, the residents of Navra Toli often prefer it to the one at Maheshwar. A metalled road connects Kasrawad with Navra Toli, so that the three miles separating the two places are easily travelled on foot or by bullock-cart. A bus also plies this route, which is mostly used by through passengers going from Maheshwar to Kasrawad, or farther to the district headquarters at Khargon.

There is hardly an adult male in the three villages who does not go to one or the other town at least weekly. The higher-caste women come out from