

their homes less often, but when fairs are in progress, everyone attends. Country fairs are held at Kasrawad twice annually. The river bank at Navra Toli is also the site of a fair each April, on the occasion of the Shivratri holiday. Villagers buy, trade and sell livestock there, and thousands of people come from miles inland to bathe in the holy Narbada. In Central India, the sanctity of the Narbada River is unsurpassed by any of India's many holy waters. Even the serene Ganges, it is said, comes yearly in the form of a black cow to bathe in the Narbada, thence turning homeward pure white, cleansed of sin. For Hindus, an act of the highest religious merit is the performance of the Narbada *pradakshina*, i. e. to walk from the river's mouth at Broach to the source at Amarkantak on the one side, and return on the other. The whole perambulation takes nearly two years, and to accomodate pilgrims, numerous free rest-houses (*dharmshalas*) line the river banks. Navra Toli has two such *dharmshalas*.

But it is not only on the occasion of fairs or during the sojourn of pilgrims that outsiders come to Navra Toli. There is considerable traffic to and fro on the river, with peasants from the south bank going to market at Maheshwar, and Maheshwar officials travelling to Khargon in the south. While waiting for the bus to start or a boat to ferry them across the river, the passengers while away the time chatting in the tea-stalls at the river-bank. Thus, Navra Toli is truly a cross-roads and provides its residents and neighboring peasants with ample outside contacts. Yet for all this, and despite the cultural influence of Maheshwar, the atmosphere of the villages and the attitudes of the people remain entirely rustic ².

2. Social Organization

The social organization of these people is founded upon a traditional, stratified Hindu caste system. Although the more basic unit is the family, so far as social relations within the community are concerned, a main determinant of conduct is caste membership. Each caste is an endogamous body often extensive over a wide region, with autonomy in respect to social and religious activities. It imposes upon its members well-established regulations for behavior vis à vis members of other castes, and their violation is punishable by action of the caste councils whose jurisdiction may cover a number of villages. These regulations are most strongly developed in regard to the taking of food from, and intimate physical contact with, members of other castes. The basis for this discrimination arises out of considerations of ritual purity. According to the degree of ritual cleanliness a caste enjoys, it assumes a place in the locally established caste hierarchy. Generally speaking, the order of precedence is

² It was not possible to determine when these villages were founded. A local tradition has it that Navra Toli (= Boatmen's Quarter) was first settled in the time of Akbar, the king having called upon some of the Navra to leave the Ganges region and settle along the Narbada River. Some of the other tribes (Bargunra, Barur and Nahal) seem to have a more southerly origin. Settlement in the area goes back to the second millennium B. C., as recent excavations at Navra Toli have shown. Before 1947, much of the W. Nimar District, including these villages, belonged to the Holkar State.