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Chapter 6

The Mariāi Village Festival in Maharashtra

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I present some ethnography of the worship of the goddess Mariāi in villages in Maharashtra, including references to other goddesses associated with her, especially Mahākālī, also called Māṅgālī. This research was done as part of a project more specifically concerned with Ambedkar Buddhism and untouchability in Maharashtra.¹⁾

2. GENERALISATIONS

At a simple level the goddess is typically portrayed as being both dangerous and auspicious, bringing either harm or benefits on her devotees, and that an important element of goddess worship is pragmatic. Deities such as Mariāi are sometimes called *kaḍak* deities. Maxine Bernstein (BERNSTEIN 1988) has suggested that “*kaḍak*” worship has nothing to do with ethics, social relations, or *dharma*, but is a relationship between individuals or families based on the fear of a deity’s power (*śakti*) and the need to please the god. However, this in itself does not explain the different images of the goddess as either married or single, as either auspicious and dutiful or wild and dangerous, and the association of especially unmarried goddesses with disease, marginality, pollution and fertility. It seems to me that interpretations of deities can only be undertaken in the context of social and ideological codes.

It seems that there is a fairly fundamental difference between the married and the unmarried goddess (FULLER 1992:44–45). The goddess’s fertility and sexual energy (*śakti*) is associated with dangerous heating which, if unsatisfied in the marriage context can break out in destructive fury, for example in the form of epidemic diseases such as cholera and smallpox; barrenness of fields; and barrenness in women. On the other hand, if this divine sexual energy is propitiated correctly, then it can have a positive outcome. The dangerous village goddesses are typically unmarried.

Indeed, in the classical literature and mythology, the *śakti* of the goddess Durgā (also called simply Devī, the Goddess) which destroyed the Demon Buffalo Mahiṣāsura and saved the universe, an event celebrated in the Festival of *Navarātri*,

was created from the combination of all the gods combined (O'FLAHERTY 1975:238). In this representation the Goddess is the supreme energy of the universe, terrifyingly destructive yet the ultimate power of manifestation on which all beings depend for their existence, even the great gods Śiva and Viṣṇu. She is therefore the source of fertility, the mother of the universe.

One interesting aspect of the myth of Durgā slaying the Buffalo Demon is that the Buffalo Demon itself was born from the asceticism of his own mother. This asceticism involved sitting in the forest between five fires, four built on each side of her and the fifth being the sun above. There is thus a complicated relationship between sun/heat/forest/nature understood as the uncontrolled, and thus dangerous, power of natural fertility; and the renunciation (and thus control) of sexuality in asceticism. Asceticism itself is a form of self-sacrifice, the ultimate duty of the obedient wife who follows her husband into death. Ironically, by renouncing sexuality and procreation, the powers of both procreation and destruction are increased to heroic proportions. In one version of the myth we see the Goddess take the form of a slender, lovely young woman practising asceticism apparently in order to propitiate her beloved Śiva with the aim of persuading him to marry her. Here we have the ideal of budding fertility subdued, purified, controlled by asceticism. The resulting state of purity makes the woman ready for the *dharma* of wifely submission, of dutiful subordination to her Lord and Master. However, the Buffalo, who is seduced and weakened by this vulnerable appearance of the goddess, is then terrified when she reveals the other side of her nature, the unrestrained violent energy as it becomes unleashed in destructive fury (O'FLAHERTY 1975:249).

On the other hand where the goddess is depicted as married, as for example Sītā, Pārvatī, Lakṣmī, Rādhā or Sarasvatī, she takes the 'cooler' wifely form of the god, whether this be Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa, Rāma or Śiva. In this representation the dangerous autonomous and over-heated woman is hierarchically subordinated, sexually satisfied and subdued in her wifely duties (see FULLER 1992:29-56). The myth of Rāma and Sītā exemplifies this aspect of the relationship between the dangerous energy of fertility and dutiful submission to male authority. In this myth cycle there is an explicit identification of ascetic renunciation of dangerous female sexual autonomy. Rādhā's act of self-immolation or suttee (*satī*) is surely an extreme form of sacrifice. The practice of suttee can be taken as an ultimate form of sacrificial asceticism, whereby the obedient wife immolates herself in the fire of renunciation, that is, the fire of desire withheld. (O'FLAHERTY 1975:197-204).

Babb (1975), who gives a central symbolic role to the goddess, draws our attention to the transformations between the representations of the goddess as respectively single woman and wife by linking it directly to the importance of the social institution of marriage, including the hierarchical subordination of wife to husband, in the ideal representation of the social order:

An appetite for conflict and destruction is thus transformed into the most

fundamental of social virtues, that of wifely submission which, on the premises given in Hindu culture, makes the continuation of society possible (1975:225–226).

And Tanaka finds evidence in his ethnography of goddess worship in a Tamil village in Sri Lanka that the sacrifice of the goat before the temple of Bhadrakālī can be interpreted in part as a *marriage* (1991:119). It is at this point in the festival that the dangerous phase of the goddess's intrusion into the village comes to an end. The festival acts as a transformative process whereby the over-heated goddess is cooled and transformed into a state similar to marriage. The transformation of the goddess is simultaneously the recreation of the social order of the village.

3. MARIĀI AND SOME OTHER GODDESSES IN MAHARASHTRA

We will therefore need to consider that one of the many different symbolic elements present in the village goddess festivals is the collective attempt to bring the danger of a menstruating single woman under control as a kind of substitute for marriage. We will see from my ethnography that various sacrifices are made to Mariāi with the purpose of *cooling* her ferocious energy, and the punitive diseases which she spreads. Offerings range from coconut, raw and cooked rice, and *puranpoli* (special sweet *roṭi*) to the sacrifice of buffalo, goat and cock, and even the symbolic sacrifice of a son. They also include possession states (a kind of self-sacrifice), the eating of whole lemons, and whipping with a bull-whip.

There are temples and shrines to *devī* (the goddess) of many different sizes and kinds in Maharashtra. These range from small natural outcroppings of rocks smeared with vermilion, yoghurt and rice, and the blood of goat or cock, to crude or less crude village shrines and temples (*deūl*; *mandir*) across the whole spectrum of architectural elaboration. According to Dhere (1988:175) the four great *devī* temples are Mahālakṣmī in Kolhapur, Reṇūkā in Mahur, Saptasṛṅgī near Nasik, and Tuljā Bhavānī in Tuljapur. However, in this article I will describe the great Mahākālī temple at Chandrapur, and various smaller *devī* temples and shrines. My main focus will be the relations between Mahākālī, Māṅgkālī and Mariāi. Other goddesses which can be found in these villages include Aṣṭa Bhūjā Devī, Lakṣmī, Pochammā and Khokhalāi, Rānchīāi, Śitalādevī, Saṭvāi, all of whom have shrines either in the villages where I participated in the Mariāi festival or in the fields nearby.

These goddesses are worshipped at different times and for various reasons. Though there are connections and relationships made in the minds of villages between these various deities, or at least between some of them, one cannot speak of a widely held theological system in any strict sense. The connections and relationships which are made seem vague and tenuous, and to some extent prompted by the visitor's questions rather than by any local over-riding concern. The female deities answer practical problems, by and large, even though the observer feels almost bound to make interpretations about symbolic statements of

hierarchical separation and village togetherness. This is because the festival separates people and brings them together in distinctive patterns and locations which seem far from accidental. However, any notion that these goddesses form a distinct 'theological' system, for example that they are all manifestations of one divine reality and that they have clearly identifiable relationships expressed in widely shared myths seems untrue. Such abstractions seem absent from the minds of villagers, including the Brahman priest and the untouchable *potrāj* who serves Mariāi. Nevertheless, vague family resemblances are made, as when goddesses are described as being older or younger sisters.

Many of these village goddesses — Mariāi is the outstanding example — are harsh and punitive, and associated with fever, food poisoning, diseases such as cholera, smallpox and typhoid. Mariāi is particularly feared for causing symptoms of diarrhoea, vomiting (*paṭki*) and stomach cramps (*golā*). These often result from food poisoning and can cause death. They prefer blood offerings such as buffalo (now illegal and I was told no longer performed), cock or goat (both still performed). However, they will receive both vegetarian and non-vegetarian offerings by both clean and unclean castes. Alcohol, flagellation, and the eating of whole lemons are used as stimulants while worshipping Mariāi. She frequently induces possession states, several of which I witnessed. These heat up the devotees, thus reproducing the symptoms of the goddess's own over-heating. She is punitive and must be placated. If treated with respect she can use her power for beneficial ends.

A great goddess like Mahākālī in her ancient temple in Chandrapur, a pilgrimage centre, is associated with both the pure and the impure, in the sense that she is tended by Brahman priests in her pure form and untouchables in her impure form. Many local people believe that Mariāi is identical with Mahākālī; and it would make sense to interpret her as representing Mahākālī's impure aspect. This explains the *potrāj*, her special devotee, who is always scheduled caste, either Māng, Holār, or Mahār-Buddhist. The identification of Mariāi with Mahākālī/Māngkālī is widespread among the villagers. However, it is denied by the high caste priests and temple benefactors in the great Mahākālī temple at Chandrapur, though their denials seem a little hard to believe, for reasons I explain later.

Two women who I interviewed said that Mariāi had answered their devotions and given them a son. One *potrāj* who I interviewed was given to Mariāi as a votive offering by his mother who prayed for a son and received one. Thus the *potrāj*, who devotes his life to Mariāi (though he is also married and has his own children) might be understood as a symbolic blood sacrifice, and simultaneously Mariāi's fertility, as well as her destructiveness, is revealed. The *potrāj* in this case is quite literally believed to be the child of Mariāi.

Her shrine is in or just outside the scheduled caste section of the village. She is thus identified with boundaries, both the literal boundaries of the villages and also the symbolic boundaries between the order of the village and the wild untamed nature of the fields and rivers. This identification with boundaries is especially

striking in the case of the village of Kergaon (fictitious name), for the Mariāi shrine is actually in the Maharwada, that is, the part of the village reserved for the important Mahār (now called Buddhist) scheduled caste who themselves are traditionally associated with boundaries, for example as judges in demarcation disputes and as messengers. There is thus multiple symbolism of marginality involved in the placement of this shrine.

The association of Mariāi with the Mahār-Buddhist untouchables has become problematic recently because the vast majority of Mahārs have been converted from Hinduism to Buddhism, and have thus changed their name to Buddhist and introduced a powerful but discordant ideology into the situation. One result of this is that some traditional *balutedār* duties are no longer performed by Buddhists accept under duress and have been taken over by other scheduled castes such as Māng and Holār. The Buddhists are nevertheless still involved in the Mariāi festival.

The pragmatic elements in the worship of Mariāi seem obvious and unremarkable. Certainly the villagers worship Mariāi from fear of diarrhoea and vomiting, especially in the month of July and August which correspond with the rainy season. However, an analysis of two Mariāi festivals which occurred in two villages neighbouring Kergaon seem to reveal the close structural links between the castes who participate. That is to say, on the one hand the interdependence between the higher castes and the scheduled castes which make symbolic statements that the village is one whole; and yet within that interdependence the separation of clean from unclean, of vegetarian from non-vegetarian. This symbolic meaning is noticeable in many different ways and is hard to ignore. Consequently I take it that the Mariāi festival is an act of transformation of the goddess from a dangerous, single menstruating female deity to a benign mother; and the consequent transformation and recreation of the ideal social order of the village, purified of the dangers associated with marginality.

In Kergaon, the Mariāi shrine is a heap of stones smeared with vermilion and the scraps of food offerings which the dogs have not licked up. It is situated under the Neem tree (*margosa*) in the Buddhawada, which is the untouchable section of the village dominated by the Mahār-Buddhists, and which used to be called Maharwada. Neem leaves are strongly associated with the worship of Mariāi, and the leaves are used as a cooling offering. The shrine in Kergaon is uncovered. In most of the neighbouring villages the shrine is housed, and is located out of the village in the fields. I say housed, yet it remains true that around these crude little temples can often be found small rocks and other natural phenomena such as tree roots which have been smeared with vermilion and other substances and which are therefore clearly considered to be 'outbreakings' of the goddesses *śakti*. These shrines are close to the scheduled caste section, and one has to walk through the untouchable quarter to get to them. Always in these villages it is a pile of stones, often a natural outcropping of rocks which has broken out of the surrounding vegetation like a rash of pox smeared with vermilion, yoghurt, rice, *roṭī* of various

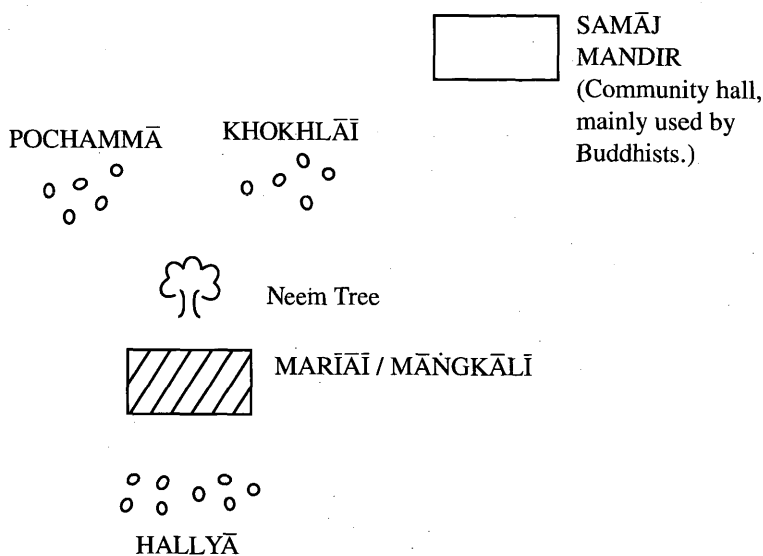


Figure 1. Mariāi Shrine in Buddhawada, Kergaon.

kinds, and the blood of sacrificed animals. It is as though divinity is a dangerous current which can break out of the ground like a disease and must then be treated with the various sacrificial substances.

In Kergaon women from all over the village bring vegetarian offerings to Mariāi, at least during the month of Ākhād (July and August). They also make offerings to two smaller piles of stones — Hallyā, and the younger sisters Pochammā and Khokhlaī. During my short stay of about six weeks I saw a constant succession of women from the high caste section of the village coming over into the untouchable quarter and making their offerings. The women face west when they do *pūjā*; therefore the shrine faces east. This seems to be always true in Parbhani. In contrast, the Māruti (Hanumān) temple, which is at the centre of every village in Parbhani, always faces west.

In the past the main sacrifice at the Mariāi festival during the month of Ākhād was *hallyā* (he-buffalo). The buffalo was offered by a wealthy, high-caste member of the village, the *mukādam*, who was responsible for organising the festival, and summoning the *potrāj*'s from the surrounding villages. *Mukādam* is a hereditary honour usually given to a member of a powerful Marāṭhā caste. The Marāṭhās are the dominant caste in Maharashtra, and though there is an indistinct borderline between Marāṭhā-Kuṇbī families, most of whom are small land-holding peasants and shepherds, some of the clans are elite and prestigious and have local power. It is significant that Mariāi thus has traditionally a high caste and an untouchable officiant. This symbolically brings the village hierarchy together, while the division of labour between them simultaneously separates them. This has a spatial analogy: the *potrāj* begins the festival in front of the Māruti temple (*mandir*), which is in the

clean caste section of the village and which is symbolic of the warrior tradition of Rāma, Hanumān, and the historical Śivājī, all part of the identity of the great Marāṭhā warrior clans. The *potrāj's* possession begins there. In contrast the high-caste *mukādam* would in the past lead the sacrificial bull into the untouchable Mahār quarter and perform his sacrifice there. However, this part of the festival is no longer held apparently, due to the government enforcement of a ban on the sacrifice of large animals. Yet the symbolic equation is still manifest, because at the time that the *potrāj* is in possession before the Māruti *mandir*, the high caste Marāṭhā and other women are walking through the untouchable sector to make their vegetarian offerings to the Mariāi shrine.

The *mukādam's* role traditionally involved various ritual privileges such as leading the parade of bulls around the village at the time of the *bailpolā*; and the obligation to organise and partly finance other festivals. The present *mukādam*, who belongs to the powerful Jādhav clan of the Marāṭhā caste, is around 90 years old, and has a good memory of the sacrifice which he used to perform up to about 20 or 30 years ago. He would slaughter the buffalo with a long sword, put his hands in the blood pumping out from the beast's throat, and smear the bloody hands on the stones of the Hallyā shrine. The animal's severed head was then buried beneath the special pile of stones. The *mukādam's* involvement was on behalf of the village as a whole, even though the buffalo itself was a private donation. Today, women smear vermilion, turmeric, and various vegetarian offerings, such as rice, yoghurt and, notably, *puranpoli*, a special sweet *roṭi* with a paste of *ḍāl* and *jagri*. During two festivals in neighbouring villages, the blood of cock (*komḍā*) and goat (*bokaḍ*) was smeared by individuals who performed their own sacrifices. The head of the sacrificed animal was left as an offering on the Mariāi stones with one foreleg placed in the mouth. In one village, the blood of the sacrificed goat was also smeared on the stones of an adjacent shrine which marked the burial mound of a Mahār lady called Rukmābāi, who had during her life developed a special relationship with Mariāi and was regularly possessed by her. The man was her grandson, and he played a prominent role in the festival.

The central figure, however, is always the *potrāj*, even though his possession trances did not seem as convincing as those of some Mahār-Buddhist men and women who participated. In the past the *potrāj* would frequently have been Mahār, though it is not clear if Mahār monopolised the role before the conversion to Buddhism. It may have differed from region to region. Symbolically, as I have mentioned, the Mahār were associated with boundaries, with carrying messages, especially messages of death, and also scavenging. It would make sense that they would be associated with Mariāi, and the position of the Kergaon shrine puts it out of doubt. There are probably some Mahār *potrāj's* in existence.²⁾ However, the *potrāj* in Kergaon was a Māng, and in the next village he was Holār. A *potrāj* who I met later in Jejuri at the great Khaṇḍobā temple was Māng.

The *potrāj* never cuts his hair; on normal non-festival days he ties it up in a knot, but lets it down both on ceremonial days and also when he is begging from

village to village, which he has a traditional right to do. This begging in the name of a god is called *bikṣāwara*. The *potrāj* has a definite schedule, going to certain houses in certain villages on particular days. He used to be responsible for some kinds of exorcisms, but not recently. He wears a skirt, anklets, and a belt of women's blouse pieces which hold a half coconut to his stomach. He also carries a bull-whip with which he beats himself when he goes into trance.

Both of the festivals which I watched began, not outside the Marīāi shrine, but at the *Mārutī* temple in the Marathawada or high-caste section of the village. In both cases there were three Māng musicians. The Kergaon *potrāj* was unable to attend the festivals due, ironically, to illness, and it was the Holār *potrāj* who performed in both cases. In addition to their normal begging rights throughout the year, he gets a special gift of grains, cooked food such as *roṭī* and rice, and some cash on these occasions. I observed Mahārs give money, about 5 rupees, to the dancing *potrāj* during these festivals.

The *potrāj* is accompanied by a devotee, in this case a Mahār Buddhist, who carries a winnowing basket containing various offerings to Marīāi such as the ones already described. There were also two and sometimes three men dancing with him, and these were also Mahār Buddhist. In Mahār homes *puranpolī* was cooked as a sign of festival celebrations, and neighbours were inviting each other into their homes to share the food.

As mentioned already, the dancing began in front of the *Mārutī* temple, and members of all castes, particularly male, gathered to watch. Clean caste men sat on the *pār* or raised platform of the temple and scheduled caste men tended to form a semi-circle round the dancers. The *potrāj* sang devotional songs to various gods and goddesses, including the main pantheon, went into trance, smeared vermilion on his face and lemon juice into his mouth, invoking Marīāi to possess him. The *potrāj* was facing *Mārutī*, moving towards the temple in dramatic pleading and offering, and yet after the initial songs to the gods including *Mārutī* it was Marīāi whom he invoked again and again. Though I never heard anyone make any conceptual or narrative connection between *Mārutī* and Marīāi, it was difficult as an observer not to assume such a connection was being visibly made by the combination of actions, gestures, words and so on. Additionally, Marīāi is identified universally in this area as Māṅkāli³) or Mahākālī (a connection which as I already mentioned is denied by the Brahman priests in the Mahākālī temple in Chandrapur.) and there is a Mahādev *piṇḍ* (the great god Śiva's symbol of the *lingam* or phallus and *yoni* or female organ) in every *Mārutī* temple. But nobody ever suggested a marriage between Mahādev and Marīāi as Mahākālī. Always the reason given for beginning the festival in front of *Mārutī* was simply "tradition."

Once in trance the *potrāj* began to whip himself with the bull whip, and then a dancing Mahār Buddhist who seemed to be more drunk than in genuine trance was also whipped and clearly was in real pain. The men rubbed vermilion on each other's faces, and squeezed raw lemon-juice into each others mouths. Though this was being watched by men (and some women) of all castes, it was scheduled caste

men (Mahār, Māṅg and Holār) who danced and went into possession trance. However, high-caste women were meanwhile walking in single file through the scheduled caste part of the village on the other side taking their vegetarian offerings to Mariāi temple. Thus, even though the *mukādhām*'s role as bull-sacrificer has become redundant, the high-caste women's presence in the untouchable quarter, at the very moment that the untouchable *potrāj* is going into trance in front of the Māruti *mandir*, makes it true to say that clean and unclean have made a temporary structural reversal.

The *potrāj* and the dancers then ran around the outside of the Māruti temple clockwise, and then proceeded down through the scheduled caste section of the village towards the Mariāi shrine, followed by the high-spirited on-lookers, pausing on the way to collect a bottle of local alcohol (*deśī dārū*) which the participants all drank from, including the *potrāj*. Probably the men had been drinking beforehand. By the time the *potrāj* and his assistants reached the Mariāi shrine, Marāṭhā and other high caste women were already crowding round the goddess's shrine making their offerings. The clean caste men sat separately in a field to the north of the shrine, and the scheduled caste women sat in a field on the other side, quite close to the shrine but set back enough to give the high caste women precedence. Since the latter were monopolising the Mariāi shrine itself, the untouchable women had constructed *portable shrines* which were placed on the ground in front of them, each with five or seven small stones as a replica of the stones of the shrine proper, and they made their offerings to these portable shrines. Men and boys were breaking coconuts on the side of the shrine and distributing them as *prasād* (food which has special charisma because it has been spiritually consumed by the goddess) to the high-caste men in the fields. The *potrāj*, encircled by his close dancers and assistants, and by the crowd who had followed from the Māruti temple, waited while the Marāṭhā women finished their offerings of *puranpolī* at the shrine. Only when they began to leave did he go into trance, whip himself, and call on Mariāi much as he had done before the Māruti temple.

The proceedings were more or less identical, including running round the shrine clockwise. But here the scheduled caste women, taking advantage of the fairly rapid retreat of the high caste women back to the village, now began to join the crowd around the dancers. Some threw themselves on the floor and kissed the *potrāj*'s feet. And there were men of all castes mingling together as the excitement grew, with an even bigger and noisier crowd here than there had been at the Māruti temple.

The second festival which took place the following weekend in a different neighbouring village was essentially the same and with the same *potrāj*, though of course the villagers participating were different, except in a few cases. I will only mention some additional facts of interest. Here the *mukādhām* was a man whose father was Brahman and whose mother was a Mahār. He owned 30 acres of land near the village but he and his family had moved to the local town several years ago. Before the festival began, people were making offerings to the shrine on a personal

basis, including two Mahār brothers sacrificing chickens and many women making vegetarian offerings. It was close to this shrine that we found the Rukmābāi *samādhī*, the grave/shrine of the devotee Rukmābāi. During her life Rukmābāi had claimed a special relationship with Mariāi and had tended her shrine on a regular basis, almost like a *pujārī*, frequently experiencing possession. However, she could never have been *potrāj*, because *potrājs* are always male, even though they take on female or bi-sexual attributes in their ritual role. Rukmābāi's shrine received offerings at the same time as Mariāi.

It seems significant that, after the start of dance, trance and possession outside Māruti *mandir*, the procession then went to the house of the Brahman/Mahār *mukādam*, and from there to the houses of Mahārs. Three women who came out of the houses on the arrival of the procession went into trance immediately they set eyes on the *potrāj*. One of these women was the grand-daughter of Rukmābāi. These possession states were by far the most dramatic I had seen, and they sent an electric current of frenzy and danger through the crowd. Whereas many people had previously been laughing and joking about the *potrāj*'s possession (at least until he had begun to whip himself, at which point it had seemed more serious) the women's possession states were treated with awe and alarm, and the women had to be helped along the path leading to the Mariāi shrine, where they sat on the ground stuffing their mouths with whole raw lemons and wailing and moaning. The lemons were chewed and spat out. Meanwhile, after the high caste women had made their offerings and then left, Mahār men offered chickens and a small goat, cutting off the heads of the creatures with a small rusty pocket knife.

This ethnographic description of two Mariāi festivals establishes, I believe, that a "*kaḍak*" event can symbolically represent, reverse, dissolve and recreate an ideal order of social relations. It is particularly striking that the worship of Mariāi, including the possession of the *potrāj* and others, should have begun in both cases in front of the Māruti temple, which is associated so strongly in a geographical and symbolic sense with the high castes; and that, at that very moment, high-caste women were walking through the scheduled caste section of the village, taking their vegetarian offerings to Mariāi's shrine. Men and women of all castes are present at both sites and also on the procession between them; yet at both sites they were also demarcated, particularly at the Mariāi site where clean-caste men, clean-caste women, and untouchable women, were all quite clearly separated physically in different spaces. This separation was only defied at the most intense moments of trance state when Mariāi seemed to be tangibly present and people of all castes (though particularly the men) gathered indiscriminately around the *potrāj*. Thus one has both interdependence and separation simultaneously.

From the perspective of the scheduled castes, Mahār-Buddhist, Māng and Holār, this is a ritual which they have been closely associated with for untold generations. This is particularly true of the Mahār and Māng, who have traditionally supplied the *potrāj*, the Holār possibly being more recent immigrants from Karnataka. Elsewhere I have argued that the Buddhist egalitarian ideology

has brought a new element into village relations. It has led to the Buddhists withdrawing from traditional service relations and from rituals which seem to uphold the dominance of the high castes. If they were following Dr. Ambedkar's teaching consistently they would also give up worshipping Mariāi. The twenty two vows which all Buddhists are sworn to abide by denounces the worship of all supernatural beings as superstitious and degrading. But the basis of this Mariāi cult is fear of disease, and people go to Mariāi for protection. As such it has a pragmatic aspect which may be a sufficient motive for continued involvement.

I have shown that clean caste men and women are very much involved in the Mariāi festival and in the worship of Mariāi generally. They make vegetarian offerings to the deity. Mariāi does seem to be strongly identified with the great Sanskrit Goddess Mahākālī in the minds of many villagers. In the small town Nalad near Kergaon there is a Mariāi shrine of some complexity and greater size than the village shrines. The story here, as far as it can be ascertained, is that a local (Kumbhār = potter) woman of 18 years of age called Devalmāi got married but almost immediately afterwards said she didn't want to be married but wanted only to serve Mariāi. The husband and parents-in-law were very angry, accused her of being mad, and decided to test her by baking her alive in a large pot which they made specially in the kiln of their pottery. They said that if Mariāi were really protecting her then she would be unhurt. So they put her in the pot in the kiln and the next morning she stepped out alive and unhurt. On the assumption that she was indeed protected by Mariāi, she was allowed to leave her husband. First she went to the Mahākālī shrine at Chandrapur and hung around the Mariāi shrine (which is located outside the temple at the rear). People came to see her because of her powerful association with Mariāi. Then one woman from Nalad came there and kissed her feet and invited her to return, which she did. From then on she spent her whole time looking after the Mariāi shrine, only eating two dates a day, fetching her own water. She died very young, and they buried her in a special *samādhi* near the Mariāi shrine, where she and Mariāi are both worshipped. There are pictures or images of pure deities such as Pārvatī and Lakṣmī on either side, and Kṛṣṇa, Rāma and others around the sides. There is now a Koḷī man looking after her shrine and living a similar ascetic life. This seems to be a clean caste temple which has grown up in Nalad. All the officiants are clean caste. Mariāi is here associated with other high caste gods and goddesses who are also worshipped. Indeed, there is a separate shrine for scheduled castes to worship Mariāi.

The association of Mariāi with Mahākālī in the minds of village people in this area is confirmed by the great pilgrimage to the Mahākālī temple in Chandrapur about 200 kilometres away which takes place every year. The villagers assume they are worshipping Mahākālī and Mariāi simultaneously. However, the Brahman *priests* who serve Mahākālī in the great temple itself denied this identity, and pointed out that the Mariāi shrine was kept separate, outside and at the back of the temple. It seems that in this case the process originally described by M.N. Srinivas as Sankritization, whereby the local deities are included in and embraced by the

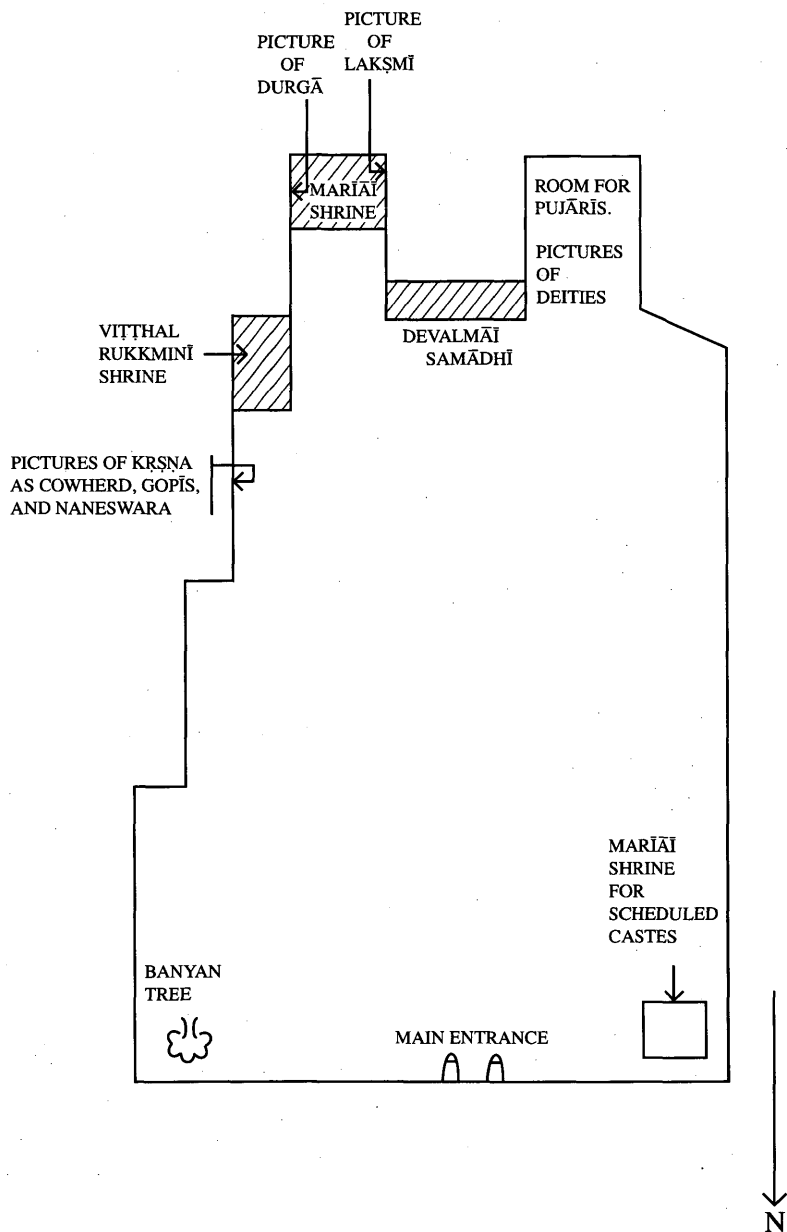


Figure 2. Mariāi Shrine at Nalad.

great tradition by being identified as manifestations of the great deities, is being discouraged by the high caste priests of the great city temple but encouraged by the local villagers.

The Mahākālī Temple at Chandrapur was founded by the Gond queen Hirāi in

1710. Gonds are tribals with a strong presence in this area. They are not considered polluting to the higher castes. One story is that Hirāi prayed to Kālī for help against an enemy whom she subsequently defeated in battle. The Gond queen built the temple to thank Kālī. There is another myth that Kālī was eating people and their animals, so one very powerful Gond man caught her and imprisoned her in the temple.

The area at that time was under Muslim rule, and the Gonds paid tribute to the Muslim Emperor Aurangzeb. The temple is built in the Islamic style of architecture. The Gonds call the goddess Māṅkāli, a name which seems to be quite widely used in the rural areas and almost interchangeable among villagers with Mahākālī and Mariāi. The Gonds do not own the temple, but they worship there in large numbers. The Gonds also have a Mariāi *mandir* in Pathan, but I do not know if the Gonds themselves identify Mahākālī and Mariāi.

The temple itself is owned by a trust controlled by a family of the Gurav caste. This caste is not Brahman, and the Brahman priests who serve in the temple and who are therefore effectively employed by the Gurav family are higher. But the Gurav's are a caste who themselves provide priests for many temples, for example the Khaṇḍobā temple at Jejuri. At Jejuri the Gurav *pujārī* (serving priest) did not claim to be vegetarian, but the Gurav family who have a controlling interest on the Mahākālī temple trust did claim to be vegetarian. Clearly the employment of vegetarian Brahman priests and the claim that Mahākālī is distinct from Mariāi reflects a tendency to emphasis the Sanskritic, great tradition aspects of Kālī and perhaps also higher social and ritual status for the local branch of the Guravs. The priests do not make blood sacrifices but make symbolic offerings of coconuts, or symbolic offerings of animals such as goats and chickens on behalf of clients (they show the animals to the goddess). They then sell these animals to other pilgrims who can make real blood sacrifices at the Mariāi shrine behind the temple in an east facing direction. However, a local historian told me that the animal sacrifices used to be made either in, or at least in front of, the Mahākālī temple. They were moved around to the back some time during the British era. This would support the thesis that some re-identification of the relationship between Mahākālī and Mariāi has been undergone.

Sunanda Patwardhan (drawing on Enthoven and Ghurye) identifies Mariāi with Māriamman in Tamilnadu (1965). She draws attention to the fact that Brahman priests serve at the Māriamman Temple at Nagapatam, describing this as 'a rare phenomenon' for a village goddess to be served by Brahmans. She also says that in Maharashtra, Mariāi is often called Tarimārī, though I never heard this.

There are several representations of Mariāi in the Chandrapur temple. Mariāi can be identified quite easily in pictorial form. However, the Gurav owners, the Brahman *pujārīs*, and all the high caste people I spoke to strenuously denied any identity between Mariāi and Mahākālī. I was forcibly struck how much the high-caste people I spoke to at the temple, including the retired school teacher previously mentioned who was a local historian, wanted to appropriate Mahākālī and cut off



Plate 1. Mariāi.

any acknowledgement of scheduled caste or tribal elements. They were not interested in the fact that people of all castes, including scheduled castes who provide the Mariāi *potrāj*'s and who come in large numbers every year to worship Mahākālī/Mariāi, make this identification. None of these high caste Hindu informants mentioned the big Gond Māṅkālī festival in nearby Pathan. My feeling was that these people are perfectly well aware of the connections but wish to redefine them.

But many blood sacrifices are made to Mariāi at her shrine immediately behind the temple during the August festival, and it is difficult not to interpret this structurally as an acknowledgement of the non-vegetarian aspect of Mahākālī herself. This seems especially true considering that the Brahman priests sell on the same animals for this purpose.

Inside the temple there are several representations of Mahādev (Śiva), and in particular a *śivaliṅgam* placed centrally and close to the inner entrance to what is perhaps the most important aspect of the temple, the *sleeping goddess*. To approach the sleeping goddess one must pass the *śivaliṅgam* and usually make an offering. There is a dark narrow flight of stone steps going down into a tiny womb-like cell and there, locked behind bars, is the representation of the sleeping goddess. Many people from the village of Kergaon spend considerable time, energy and money to get to the great temple, often to ask for some favour such as recovery from ill-health or a good marriage for a daughter. Such immediate, practical issues are more important than beliefs. I was struck by the lack of consistency in the narratives, and often the lack of narrative itself. It may seem a

trite point to make, but it should be mentioned that even *potrāj*'s and priests who have a special investment in their relationship with the deities seemed relatively unconcerned about narratives purporting to answer abstract questions such as 'why' and 'how.'

The Kergaon barber (Nhāvi caste) who shaves and cuts the hair of high caste Marāṭhās told me that somebody in his family goes every year to Chandrapur and makes a non-vegetarian offering, such as a goat or a cock. He says that during the time of the Mariāi festival, when thousands of pilgrims — many of them scheduled caste — crowd into the Mahākālī temple, the main shrine (meaning the sleeping goddess) is closed to protect her from impure people whom she sometimes strikes, sending them into convulsions.

One lady from the village, a Holār, told me she had been five times to Chandrapur because her daughter was unwell and unmarried. She had made a vow to Mariāi that if she cured her daughter she would visit five times and put 25 rupees each time in the collection box. She had travelled the long and rough journey by bus and train, paying 200 rupees, a lot of money for such a lady. She pays 5 rupees to buy a coconut which the priest will offer to the goddess (in this case Mahākālī, though for the woman it means the same) on her behalf, and she pays 50 paise to get an entrance ticket. There is usually a queue to get to see the sleeping goddess. She is allowed to touch the image through the bars very briefly before being moved on. She then goes to the separated shrine behind the temple and cooks a vegetarian offering of *puranpoli*, using ingredients she has brought with her specially. She doesn't offer non-vegetarian.

According to the Holāre woman Mariāi and Māṅgkālī are the same. There is, however, a younger sister called Ekkurī. Ekkurī has a small temple in another part of Chandrapur which she visits either first or before returning home. As a result of her pilgrimages her daughter had recovered and was now married.

The Holāre woman thought that Ekkurī was the younger sister and that Mahākālī and Mariāi were the same. However, other visitors to the nearby Ekkurī shrine gave a different story. They say there are four sisters, Mahākālī, Ekkurī, Aṣṭa Bhūjā Devī and Indra Bhavānī. Ekkurī is the older sister and is therefore senior to Mahākālī. Mariāi is completely separate. The Ekkurī shrine is also believed to have been constructed by the Gond Queen Hirāi. Ekkurī came out of the ground at this spot with the Nāga (snake) god. The Nāga is represented inside the shrine with Ekkurī, who faces east. Māruti (Hanumān) is also represented facing south. Khaṇḍobā the god is represented, also facing east but slightly separated. There is also a pile of stones representing Mariāi. Next to Mariāi is the *samādhī* (grave) of a *pujārī* who fell and died while making an offering to Ekkurī. The offering (*kapṛī*) was actually in his hand at the time, and this was considered an auspicious death.

It is interesting to mention in passing that the informants at the Ekkurī shrine referred to Khaṇḍobā as *potrāj*, which is the name given to the men who dedicate their lives to Mariāi. Of course, Khaṇḍobā is widely worshipped by all scheduled

castes in Maharashtra, including the *potrājs*. However, when the *potrājs* visit the Ekkurī shrine during the great festival they are apparently possessed by Ekkurī herself, and not Marīāī. (On the other hand, the Kergaon *potrāj* seemed not to have heard of Ekkurī!)

The Ekkurī temple trust is at present involved in a legal dispute with the Mahākālī temple trust. The Ekkurī trust claim that Ekkurī is an independent temple which is older and senior, and that it was established before the larger Mahākālī temple. Some collective memory of this may possibly be indicated by the fact that the *potrāj* of a neighbouring village and others said it is usual to go to Ekkurī first on their pilgrimage to Mahākālī temple—though admittedly not much can be established by this incidental piece of information, especially since they only explain it by “tradition.” But the Mahākālī temple, which has been expanding its influence in the area by making claims to the Charity Commission about traditional rights over the proceeds of smaller local temples, has claimed rights over the Ekkurī proceeds also. Apparently the Charity Commission has ruled that a small percentage of the Ekkurī proceedings should be paid to the Mahākālī *pujārīs*.

4. CONCLUSION

I have showed how Mahār-Buddhists are still involved in the Marīāī festival. The problem arises in trying to assess the significance of the egalitarian rhetoric and values which Ambedkar Buddhism has introduced into the system. If the Buddhists were true to their stated commitments, then they would not participate in the Marīāī festival at all. This is because the interpretation of Buddhism given by Ambedkar is based on a concept of scientific rationality which sees rituals directed towards supernatural beings as irrational superstition. Does this therefore mean that we cannot take the conversion to Buddhism seriously? I have argued elsewhere that Buddhist belief in democracy is genuine and significant, and that one of the ways that this is demonstrated is by their withdrawal from many aspects of traditional village participation (see FITZGERALD 1996, 1997). I cannot repeat these arguments here. The only way I can consistently explain their continued involvement in the Marīāī cult is on a pragmatic basis. The Mahārs have been involved in the worship of Marīāī for centuries, and there is a simple pragmatic reason of fear for placating this dangerous bringer of disease. The festival itself, however, cannot be explained in this way, since the ambivalent conception of Marīāī, and her association with unmarried fertility, only make sense in the context of a wider narrative of social disintegration and renewal.

NOTES

- 1) The ethnography is based on fieldwork undertaken in the Marathwada area of Maharashtra in 1991, and 1992. I am grateful to many people for assistance and advice,

and cannot name them all here; but I must mention my research assistants, Dr. Saleem Shah, an anthropologist from Pune, and Raju Ohval, off the Trilokya Baudha Mahasangha (TBMSG) also from Pune.

- 2) I use the name "Mahār" in this context because "Buddhist *Potrāj*" is a contradiction, since Buddhists claim to have renounced all worship of Hindu deities.
- 3) "Māṅkāli" is the word used by the tribal Gonds for Mahākālī. The Gonds originally built the Mahākālī temple in Chandrapur which is an important pilgrimage centre for *potrāj* and ordinary people from all over the Marathwada. "Māṅkāli" and "Mahākālī" are used interchangeably when referring to Mariāi. In the Mahākālī temple there are pictures of Mariāi but the Brahman priests deny the identity and sacrifices to Mariāi have to be made at a special shrine outside at the rear of the temple.

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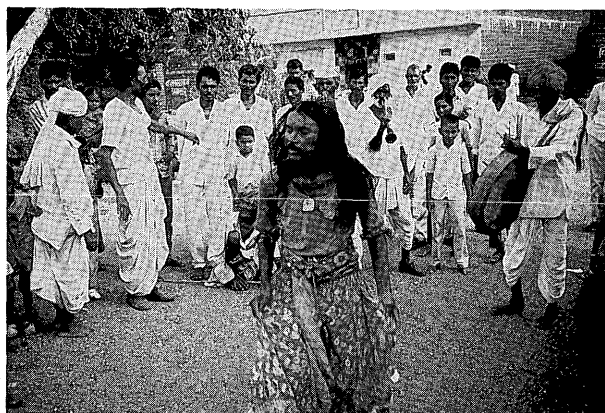


Plate 2. *Potrāj* in Trance before Māruti.



Plate 3. *Mariāi*, Winnower Basket Offering.

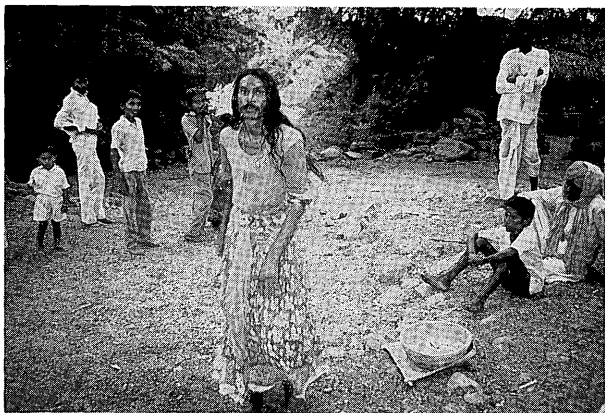


Plate 4. *Potrāj* outside Kanjalgaon.



Plate 5. Mariāi Shrine.



Plate 6. Mariāi, Cock's Head and Leg.



Plate 7. Mariāi, Cut Cock.

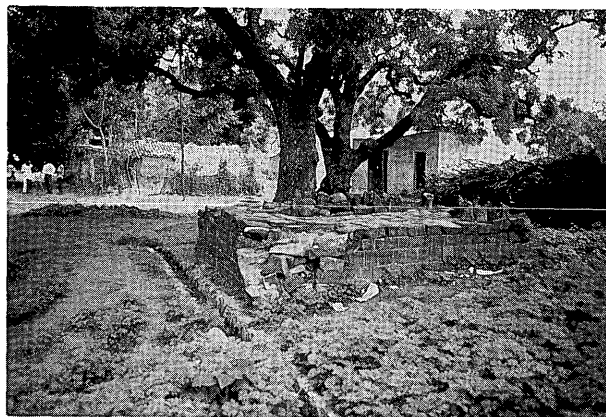


Plate 8. Kerawadi Marīāi.

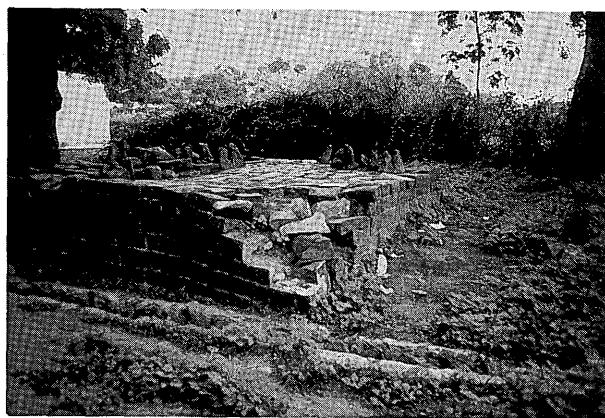


Plate 9. Kerawadi Marīāi.



Plate 10. Marīāi, Pochammā, Khokhalāi.

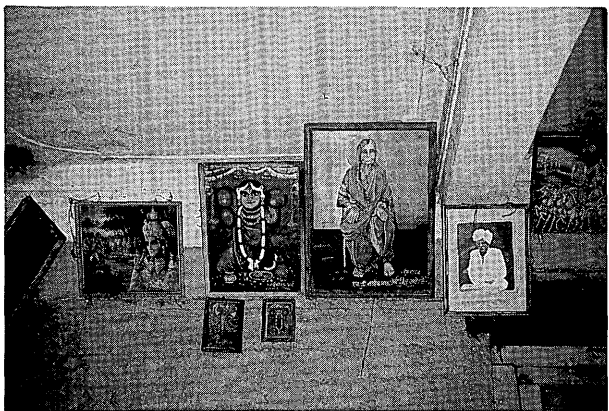


Plate 11. Marīāi, Devalmāi, Kṛṣṇa.

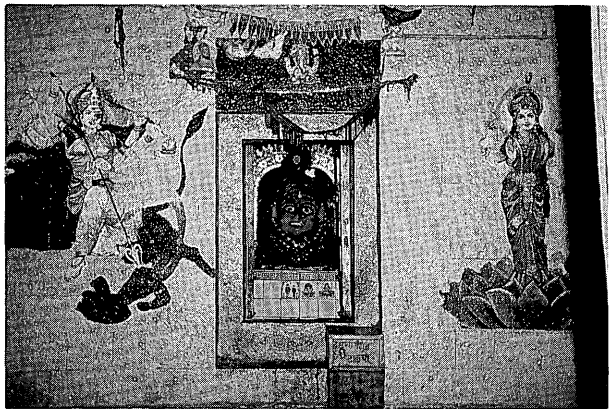


Plate 12. Marīāi with Durgā, Lakṣmī.

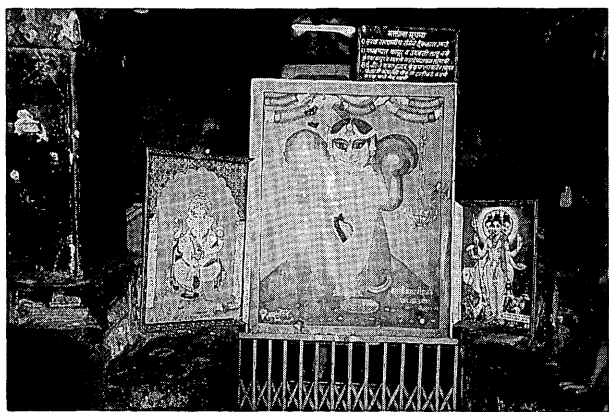


Plate 13. Chandrapur Mahākālī, Picture of Marīāi.

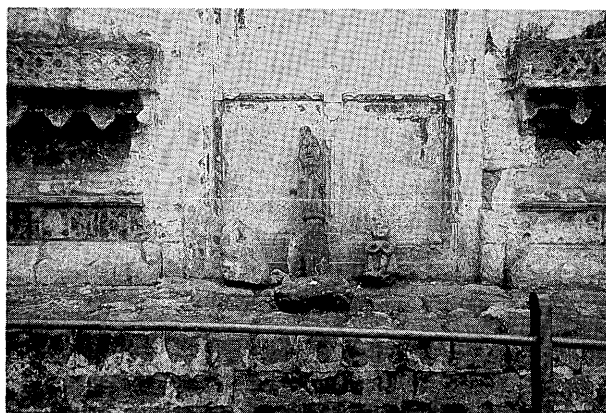


Plate 14. Chandrapur Mahākālī, rear Marīā Shrine.