

MYTH AND IDENTITY: THE NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF SELF IN THE ORAL TRADITION OF *VADĀR* COMMUNITIES

A context of socio-cultural strategy

This essay pleads for the theoretical and practical pertinence, even today, of the process of cultural appropriation¹ of ancient myths transmitted orally, that is, *dantakathā*.² One reason is that though they have largely fallen into disuse in the current cultural practices of many communities, they have not altogether lost their function of self-identification. The argument of my essay is based upon a corpus of forty-two myths collected during the last few years from *Vadār* communities scattered across Maharashtra. The *Vadārs* are by tradition stone workers. Their caste has the inferior and servile status of *śūdra*. Their occupation involves digging out, breaking, cutting and carving stones for patrons and clients³. The narratives that I use here as reference have survived, buried in the memories of some caste elders. The *Vadārs* form one of the twelve castes of a collective termed *gota* (the Marathi term *gota* usually applies to castes, relations and relatives once considered collectively), which identifies itself as the 'group of the donkey' or the 'family of the donkey'—*gadav gota*. These twelve castes are the Beldar, Ghisadi, Ghongadivale *Vadār*, Kaikadi, Kanjarbhat, Kathevadi, Kolhati, Kumbhar, Parit, Telangi, *Vadār* and Vaidu. The reason for the conscious association of this cluster of castes or *jāti samīha* with the donkey is that all of them raise and use donkeys not only as a means of transport but in their work, and therefore as a means of subsistence. Their similar dependence on the donkey explains the fraternal relation between these castes. It is a sort of phratry, bhauki, bhavband, or bhavbandki. The corpus of orally transmitted *Vadār* myths that I take as reference here originated as part of a series of ethnographic monographies on *Vadārs* and five other lower castes, the Kolhati, Mang, Kanjarbhat, Parit and Vaidu. Several features explain the methodology of this essay.

The material was gathered by young men who themselves belong to communities with an inferior status in the social hierarchy: Datta Shinde, a secondary school teacher, is a Cambhar, Sanjay Jogdanda, a student in sociology, a Mang, and Suresh Kokate, a social worker, a Parit. They identify themselves as social animators. They have no academic qualification or

formal methodological training in anthropology. They occasionally trained themselves for social and cultural action in grassroots action-groups, especially in the self-learning workshops organized for rural groups of young social actors⁴ in Maharashtra. Naturally, their experience of critical reflection as social actors dictates their viewpoint as apprentice ethnologists⁵.

The study of the evolution of lower castes and the critical analysis of their plight, as well as the task of writing which seeks to account for and keep a memory of this history, focuses upon figures of self-awareness, forms of expression and idioms which articulate these figures, the capacity or otherwise to own one's past with full knowledge, the status given to one's elders' heritage in the construction of the present and the search for a future. It is precisely in trying to safeguard the words and memories of the elders about the past history of *Vadār* communities—apparently meant to meet the need for self-identification—that a heritage of orally transmitted narratives was remembered and collected. These narratives were documented word for word.

I want to study these myths from the inside, in their own logic. That is to say, not only their systems of representation and the structural semantics of their discourse on Self, but also the perceptions that individuals—human subjects—entertain collectively about their origin, history and identity in their present conditions. In short, understanding from within means to see through the narrators' eyes and grasp their viewpoint. Their cognitive universe is witness to a singular, imaginative dynamics, which, consciously or implicitly, has its own particular way of truly and ideally constructing a place and a time for oneself. As we shall see, it is not without groping along, without approximations, amalgams and conflicts over several generations, that this dynamics has developed its operations. It follows its course today, no less stretched and torn apart, pulled between heritages received from tradition, contemporary opportunities which prompt a renewed self-awareness, and the prescriptions of the dominant culture that impose unavoidable references. This strain is quite striking in our corpus of *Vadār* mythical narratives. Therefore, in this essay, I will focus on the links that memory and imagination weave between the past and future to construct an identity of the Self.

Remembering and articulating oral traditions by members of the *Vadār* community even during the retelling of the stories for the purpose of collection significantly reinforces the collective identification of the narratives. The exercise is witness to the stress that the community is subject to. At any rate, the 'cooperative'⁶ practice of the collectors of these stories consciously aims at reactivating their significance so that their validity in today's context

can be reinforced. Some notable, common aspects of the collectors' experiences underline this effect of cultural action through enlivening mythical narratives of yesteryear.

- *Vadārs* are happy to remember and tell their myths or *kathā*. They want to talk about what they have heard, seen and suffered. An old man gave me this reason one day: 'Today, our community has a difficult life. But our ancestors lived a life of abundance and prosperity.' The *Vadār* measures his past through his myths. He relives through imagination the exploits of those he worships and remembers as glorious ancestors.
- The narration of the story is an event and a testimony. The listeners are there to attest that the expressed emotions are really theirs and that the story is truly authentic.
- When the speaker begins his style of narration, he speaks emphatically with a loud voice. The stories awaken the power of imagination of the listeners. They support the courage of the community.
- The *Vadār* storytellers delve deep into themselves, and put all of their heart into speaking. They borrow their words from no one; their words are their own.
- The stories act as a symbolic foundation of the group. They establish communication within the community. The spoken word is an absolute guarantee of truth and justifies confidence—no need for any legally authenticated written document. Financial exchanges within the *Vadār* community rest upon the oral word. Similarly, the word of the myth is received on the sole basis of its being spoken out, with full confidence, without question.
- I must respond to my professor friends who ask ironically if 'I want to stay attached to these old traditions by collecting these legends'. Someone in my family thought that I was crazy at first. 'People fly to the moon now. Who has asked you to dig up these old corpses?' Young people of my community went against me at first and asked me: 'What are you going to do with the information about vagabonds who are no longer of our time?'
- In certain villages, the collection of myths serves as a pretext to unite the youth. I tell them "Are we not exploited? I write with only that in mind." The young people begin to approach me themselves.
- The *Vadārs* use their myths to tell us: "We are superior to others", or "How society needs us".
- The myths help to understand the system of social relations that weaves the whole social fabric, the status of various communities within the

society, first of all, the status of the *Vadārs*: “For us *Vadārs*, to pull the chariot at Pandharpur is a traditional right.” “For us Mang, to beg on the day of the new moon is a traditional honour.”

- In the beginning, people do not always want to reveal their oral traditions. The main reason is that they know that they are exploited and cheated if they give information. To remain silent is to protect oneself. It is better to keep one’s knowledge to oneself than to give it to thieves. “In the beginning, when I asked questions to people of my Mang community, they avoided saying anything. In several villages, they asked me: “What are you going to do with that?” They told me that many had come before me. They added: “You are young and educated, and yet you come to ask us about this old stuff and collect it! Oh, you people today! You always tell us that we must forget such old-fashioned things. And now you are coming to ask us about them!”

This raises two epistemological questions. The first is that of the method and theoretical status of the cultural reappropriation of a discourse constructed in a qualitatively different time. This question of cognition concerns the process of intercultural confrontation brought about by an overlapping of distant, loosely related or possibly totally alien historical contexts. Second, there is the question of the form and manner of articulation of an interpretive discourse addressed to fresh listeners or remade by former listeners for a currently different context. This is a question of language and communication. My intention here is not, however, to deal with theoretical issues of hermeneutical reappropriation⁷, but rather with methods and practices of interpretation and recontextualisation. My objective is to evaluate a capital of traditions. A practical design of socio-cultural action directs my analysis. To that effect, I focus on the internal strategies of the narratives. Right away, this raises several controversial issues that I would like to clarify at the beginning to avoid confusion and misunderstanding.

Some community development associations and social action groups in India feel privileged to be able to use indigenous forms of communication as well as their traditional content in order to transmit more efficiently messages of social or material development⁸. On the other hand, other people resent tradition being used in this manner. They are sometimes quite right in considering this use unjustified or self-deceptive. My conviction too is that traditional cultural objects cannot be used inconsiderately, at will, without risks or abuses, just because they are ‘traditional’ or ‘popular’ and thus would be able to convey modern messages more easily. Before using these traditions, it is necessary to appreciate and respect their inner semantics.

The mistake consists in reducing them to the status of simple communication tools with a quasi-mechanical efficiency, without first taking the pain of reaching a scientific comprehension and enunciating an interpretation methodologically justified. One must be able to draw upon the specific rationality of oral traditions, own and use them without anachronic distortion or backward looking aggrandisement.

A tradition deserves to be wholly respected and understood for itself and not turned into a pretext or a means. Its reappropriation in another context and another time is legitimate when it happens in continuation with the intentions that originally carried it. One must be fair to the past—make neither a fetish nor a scarecrow of it. The worst things seem to happen nowadays in this sphere. Without hermeneutically valid work of semantic re-evaluation, the re-utilisation of ‘indigenous’ or ‘ethnic’ cultural objects falls necessarily into one state of perversion or another: fundamentalist manipulation to mediate power games, commercial usage to serve economic interests, self-complacent essentialism for want of historical perspective, modernist dismissal prompted by blind anthropological stances, academic utilisation with aims of pure theoretical or aesthetic construction deprived of concern for the history, purpose and personality of carriers and heirs.

These are cultural hijackings, and happen because of the difference in context and time period that prevent a spontaneous consonance. A methodological middle path is required to ensure a faithful translation of the mythical code of expression into our modern codes of thinking. We can no longer have a direct access or immediate rapport to the past. A face-to-face dialogue can no longer be established. There is no use dreaming of possible involvement through symbolic affinities, or of intuitive decoding through sentiment and empathy. Scientific treatment, methods, and procedures of analysis are essential to avoid the pitfalls and dead ends denounced above. A few concepts will suffice to define my approach. Re-appropriation is the recontextualisation of the internal sense of a text by a speaker, listener, reader and audience of another time. The original intention of the text emerges through the interpretation of a new author who reads the narrative with reference to issues raised differently in a different context. The narrative’s original meaning as discourse and active speech in a particular context is stretched towards new implications. This extension is a process of interpretation, a re-reading of the narrative, its rejuvenation. Liberated from the constraints binding a singular original speaker to a particular discursive context, the narrative opens up a new dialogue in reference to new horizons and contexts of our own being-in-the-world. It offers itself to everyone everywhere, to the extent that the interpretation allows for a studious reading

commanded by new references. Ultimately, the intelligence of the text culminates in a renewed intelligence of Self. (Ricoeur 1986:452).

The practice of interpretation: an example

An overwhelming will to assert one's identity is the intention of the following narrative, which proclaims the absolute excellence of the *Vadār's*. *Vdr-10*⁹ vividly inaugurates a basic theme that runs through the whole corpus of *Vadār* narratives, the implications of which will be discussed further. It will also illustrate my method of interpretation, which starts with an analytical reading of the structural sense of the text, then develops into another—dramatic—form of dialogical practice with other audiences in the present time. This makes the narrative a constant work of re-interpretation, thus submitting it to an open-ended process of appropriation.

Vdr-10 Text: Proclamation of the *Vadār's* absolute excellence

King Sasaravad had a daughter. She was so beautiful that there was no need for a lamp or candle in the whole palace. The king was concerned and wondered in whose hands he should give such a girl in the full bloom of her youth. But the girl said: "I shall put the garland around the neck of whoever is the best one in the whole world." The announcement was made in heaven and on earth. People from heaven and earth appeared in the royal hall of audience. The court was full. God Agni stood up first. The king's minister pointed out the shortcomings of Agni. Water can extinguish fire. Then God *Vāyu* stood up. A simple man can swallow the wind god too. Then Megharāj stood up. A simple breeze can push away a cloud. This is how all the gods came forward but none of them could be declared the best. Eventually, God Ralold, the rock, appeared. Fire, wind, rain, absolutely nobody can move a rock. He stays immortal in its place. The princess resolved to put the garland around the neck of God Ralold.

At that very moment, from among the people on earth, a *Vadār* entered the hall of audience. He said: "The rock is not immortal. Wherever he may stand, a *Vadār* can remove it from that place." Ultimately, the *Vadār* was declared the best one, superior to all the gods. The princess put the garland around the neck of the *Vadār* and went to live happily in his house. It was decided that among all beings, the *Vadār* was the best. The *Vadār* was granted seven lives and fallow land on seven boundaries (*Śiva*) by *Sūrya*, the Sun God.

Internal analysis: the sense of the text

Two sequences construct the story, which looks like a play with two acts. I shall identify, in each sequence, the main lexemes and semantemes, then the semantic structures or sets of binary oppositions, and finally the processes of production of meaning with their “signified effects”. (C. S. Peirce 1978:129-30).

The first sequence builds itself with the following semantemes:

- the throne room with its characteristic lexemes of secular power: king, minister, council, deliberation, call of subjects to appear, hearing, decision, princess with *svayamvar* attributes.
- the four fundamental elements of the physical world qualified by the attribute ‘god’—fire, wind, cloud, rock.

The sequence is structurally composed of pairs of binary opposites:

- kings/gods: the political opposition of two spheres of power—*kṣatriya* and *deva*;
- pubescent girl/male suitors: the gender divide;
- rightful suitors/defective candidates: opposition of values by inversion;
- the world of human beings/the world of gods: the cosmological and ontological opposition of the two spheres which constitute the world. Even though human beings do not appear, they have been called and their inferior status is stressed all the more by their absence;
- the four fundamental elements/their deification: ambivalent relationship through conjunction of attributes, spheres, and values ontologically opposite;
- the opposition of mortal/immortal.

The narrative reveals an action: the elimination by disqualification of the first three rightful suitors, the first three gods. This is the foreground. The elimination is carried out by the reciprocal annihilation of the first three ‘actants’ (the narrative agents). The test reveals their nature of weak natural elements only. In that, an indirect second process takes place: the ambiguity of the deified cosmological attributes that characterise the so-called gods is lifted. Gods are stripped of their falsely divine attributes and reduced to mere fire, wind and cloud. The dynamics of the process operates according to a logic of inversion. The alleged initial right to absolute excellence claimed by the suitors, apparently evident in the beginning, is found false and declared unacceptable by a royal court ruling sanctioned with the authority of its function. What are rejected at the end of the test are the claim to excellence

and, consequently, the right to possess the princess. What is moreover denied is the claim by the godly suitors to a state of divine superiority. Only the fourth suitor, the rock god, escapes from the process of annihilation by natural disqualification for the reason that no other earthly element is capable of eliminating him. His immortality and excellence are due to this. This is why he likely deserves to marry the princess. The second sequence starts suddenly: “At the same time”, by an instant reversal of situation by the entry of someone who comes from the people on earth. The semantemes and lexemes are as follows:

- *Vadār*, a stone breaker, a *śūdra*, of servile function;
- Seven lives and seven fallow lands — long life and land in plenty are graciously conceded as reward for a deed, signs of status and a form of royal patronage;
- A princess, as wife of a *śūdra*.

The pairs of significant oppositions are the following:

- subordinate, subject/king: a political opposition;
- mortal, human/immortal, god: an opposition of value;
- marriage of a *kṣatriya*, a princess and of a *śūdra*, a worker: overcoming social discrimination;
- the Sun God and other gods telluric elements.

The first process here is anthropological. The actant, a human, a manual labourer of low social status, annihilates a false god who proves to be nothing but deified nature. By demystifying the rock-god, the labourer, a man of servile condition, succeeds in doing what the forces of nature could not perform. The excellence of the *Vadār* lies in the superior strength of the human labour force and its culture over nature. But man is not only superior to all the gods; he also renders them redundant and vain. The only thing left is human dominion on earth. In completing here the significant demystifying process of the first sequence, the story builds the *Vadār*'s ascendancy on the basis of the traditional human and earthly competence of a worker. The second process is more socio-political. By acquiring the princess, the *Vadār* gets closer to the king. He allies himself to the *kṣatriya*. He lifts himself a bit to the height of what ‘counts’ on earth: power and possessions, attributes of the royal *kṣatriya* order. It is also the Sun God, *Sūrya*, solar ascendancy¹⁰ of the *kṣatriya*, who assures the *Vadār* that he will be given those possessions which secure strength and guarantee status—long life and fields in plenty.

The concern of the story is the status of the *Vadār* as a stone-worker among all the beings of both the worlds. The intention of the text is to show the very occupation of the *Vadār* as his asset of absolute excellence.

The dynamics of the story marvellously succeed in transforming a collective consciousness of strength and competence as stone-workers into an argument for claiming a right to ascendancy. This is not without serious anthropological implications of which the narrative has no hint (we shall find them later at the center of *Vdr-24*). The explicit logic of the narrative here is of another nature. It is the conscious construction of a social image of oneself meant to impress everybody. The intention of the narrative is to get the ‘signified effect’ by which the *Vadār*’s precedence can be revealed, shown, proclaimed, and acknowledged in both the spheres of the universe. The narrative is not directed at a king who seeks to get his daughter married. It aims at constructing for the *Vadār* an immortal identity. Towards that end, the discourse of the *Vadār*s judiciously relies on the traditional *kṣatriya* semantemes (the king and his council, the princess and her *svayamvar*, the concession of land and privileges by *Sūrya*, the very eponym of the royal order). This gives the story a ternary and not a binary structure. The *kṣatriya* semantemes are only middle terms, attributes staged as pivots of the narrative. Their function is only to validate the truth of the narrative’s statements. The narrative utterance is a self-proclamation with apodictic value. A comparison with *Vdr-41* allows one to measure the strength of its inventive genius as discursive production of self-knowledge.

Vdr-41 Text: Vadār’s eminence over King, Megharāja and Parvatarāja

A *Vadār* was busy breaking stones in the forest. Lamenting over his life, he started to bang his head on a stone. God Indra, passing by, saw this, and asked the *Vadār* why he was so upset. The *Vadār* told Indra: “What kind of birth is this! My whole life is spent breaking stones. Make me the king of some kingdom.” God Indra made the *Vadār* a king. One year, there is famine in the kingdom. An year passes, then another, but there is no sign of the famine disappearing. People start dying of hunger and thirst. Again, the *Vadār* King starts banging his head on the stone. The *Vadār* says to God Indra: “I am such a great king yet the ordinary King Cloud deprives my kingdom of water and kills people.” God Indra then makes the *Vadār* a Megharāja, the Cloud King. Megharāja then spreads water everywhere. There is a big mountain on which Megharāja keeps on showering rain. But nothing happens to the mountain. Again Megharāja calls Indra and tells him: “I am raining on this mountain for so many days but nothing is happening to it.” God Indra makes the *Vadār* Parvatarāja, the Mountain King. Sun, wind, rain, nothing affects Parvatarāja. One day, a *Vadār* comes along and starts breaking the mountain with his axe.

Parvatarāja calls God Indra and tells him: “I am such a great Parvatarāja and one *Vadār* is breaking me into pieces.” God Indra turns Parvatarāja back into a *Vadār*. A *Vadār* remains a *Vadār*.

This story came to the mind of the narrator¹¹ when questioned about the present situation of the *Vadārs* and their evolution in contemporary society. The intention of the text that he received as part of the cultural heritage of his community is to justify the *Vadārs*’ pursuance of their function for the welfare of mankind on the grounds of their unquestionably superior occupational competence. Hardness and bitterness are unwarranted feelings to be eschewed. They are moreover unbecoming. We are to find further in *Vdr-14* a similar hearty testimony of self-respect cultivated by a self-reliant *Vadār* proud of the autonomy that he secures with his hard work. But whereas *Vdr-10* makes stonework the grounds of the *Vadār*’s distinguished identity and superiority, the intention of *Vdr-41* is ultimately to show how a *Vadār* with such a temper will never make any progress. The interpretation of the ‘modern’ narrator results from a recontextualisation of the narrative. The discourse of *Vdr-41* becomes a doublespeak performance, ambivalent and complicated. This raises the question of modes and conditions of recontextualisation.

Recontextualisation by means of a dramatic interpretation

The second step deals with reactivating the power of the myth in a particular situation. *Vdr-10* was re-edited for the stage on January 5, 1998 at Pune, for the participants of an international seminar on “Popular Culture and Cultural Action”. The dramatic re-edition was meant to reactivate the text and create a discourse, within the play, between the actors impersonating *Vadār* workers in a contemporary context, then between these actors and the audience, the participants of the seminar, and among the latter themselves. Actors were school children enacting the narrative under the direction of their teacher, Datta Shinde, the very collector of the myth. The performance was an experiment to address issues raised by the reappropriation of oral traditions by different narrators, for different audiences and in different contexts. The performance helped understand how dramatic dialogue allows the initial meaning of the text to emerge in an indefinite series of interpretive retellings, each extracting new significance from the first text, thanks to its availability for unending recontextualisation. The reinsertion of the text into a new situation inevitably leads to several new discursive inventions. The latter yields a number of renewed insights. This ultimately prompts semantic reconstructions, which affect the initial intention of the narrative.

Such an attempt could confirm what Ricoeur defines as the act of interpreting, which is like “taking the path of thought opened by the text”. This is not subjective as would be an individual’s act of thought upon the text, but an objective discursive performance in that it is an act of the text accomplishing itself through the dialogue between partners involved in a new situation. Dramatic staging is just one among others of going towards a process of never-ending dialogue ‘where the game of questions and answers allows for a verification of the interpretation in a given situation during its own progression’ (Ricoeur 1986:165). The transmission becomes the movement of a living tradition because the narration of a story again turns into the speech of someone to someone else. Here is the essential scenario with the main logical articulations and their new “signified effects”. The new scenario is itself bound to bounce back to suggest other questions and open new perspectives. This is what happened when the play was created in January 1998. I will not comment upon the moments where the new narrative tends to significantly break off with the internal sense of the original text and open up critical perspectives. The reader will easily spot them and identify the semantic cleavages. Other effects of meaning are possible. My purpose here is only to indicate a method by reporting a practice.

Dramatic Reenactment: Summary of the Dialogue

Scene I — A Family of *Vadārs* Breaking Stone on the Road Side

YANKOBA: Durgababa, it is getting very hot now. Come, let’s sit in the shade and drink a glass of water.

DURGA: Listen, you are all young and hearty, I am old. But I work because I cannot sit quiet at home. Come, let’s sit under that tree.

YANKOBA: Rama, Shiva, Bayada, come on, keep your tools down over there and come here.

(They all keep their tools down and sit together.)

YANKOBA (drinking water): Durgababa, breaking stones like this with black bodies, digging the earth, what kind of work have our ancestors given us? Were they living like this, our *Vadārs* of former times?

DURGA: Yankoba, our ancestors were very famous, our community had progressed a lot. It had earned fame for itself in the world.

BAYADA: My grandfather told me a story of our ancestors. I don’t remember it now. But the King of Atpadi had built a *samādhi*, a memorial, in honour of Madanya *Vadār*, and he had himself looked after his children!

RAMA: A *samādhi*, for one of us, a *Vadār*!

DURGA: Yes. What Bayada says is true. Our community was really renowned. Let me tell you a whole story about our community and then you will understand.

ALL TOGETHER: Please, Durgababa, please tell us!

DURGA: Listen, everybody! Listen carefully. A King was reigning in the City of Sasaravad. The King had a daughter. She was so beautiful that there was no need to light the lamps in the palace. So much light! She would radiate like the sun. The King was worried as to whom he could give such a beautiful girl in marriage.

Scene II — The King's Court, Council of Ministers

KING: Prime Minister!

P.M.: Yes, Your Highness!

KING: I do not know what to do about the princess's marriage. Let us ask the Princess herself. Call the Princess here, in the Court.

P.M.: Yes, Your Highness! (Turning around) Her Royal Highness is requested to come to the Court.

PRINCESS (enters): I offer you my respects, Father.

KING: Dear daughter, I am worried about your marriage.

PRINCESS: Your Highness, I am ready to get married but I have a condition.

KING: Go ahead. Tell me what your condition is.

PRINCESS: I will marry the one who is the most superior in this world.

P.M.: How to decide who is the most superior in this world?

KING: This condition is very difficult.

PRINCESS: Your Highness, if you don't agree to this condition, I will not marry.

KING: I agree to your condition. Prime Minister, proclaim on the earth and the heaven, declare that whoever proves his superiority in the whole world; the Princess of Sasaravad will marry him.

P.M.: Yes, Your Highness. (The Clown makes the proclamation.)

CLOWN: Listen, Listen, listen! Everybody on earth is informed that the Princess of Sasaravad will marry whoever will prove his superiority in the whole world. Come on, I have to go and proclaim it in the land of the gods as well.

Scene III — Reactions of the Vadārs to the Princess's Demand

BAYADA: Durgababa, does it mean that in those times women themselves decided what type of a husband they wanted?

CHANDI: This means that the Princess was lucky. She had the right to choose her life partner.

BAYADA: Was it really like this in those days?

YANKOBA: Why are you praising the Princess? That Princess was arrogantly talking back to her father.

RAMA: Fortunately, our girls are under our control today. So, at least they are disciplined.

BAYADA: Do men ever ask a girl what she thinks when they decide about her marriage? Whether she wants a fair husband, an educated husband? They tie her to anybody, whoever he may be. The poor girl then has to spend her married life with him.

CHANDI: But if the girl is dark, the boy deserts her and marries a second time. The poor girl has to suffer her whole life alone.

DURGA: You, ladies, why are you fighting? It is like this in the story of our community. I am not telling you anything from my mind. A girl can also think about her likes and dislikes. She can also make her decision. You may think what you feel.

YANKOBA: The Princess's condition is proclaimed in the world!

DURGA: You know, when once a proclamation is given, everybody was allowed to be present in the King's court—he may be poor, a rich *sardār*, a labourer. All had equal opportunity.

CHANDI: Durgababa, what happened in the King's court?

BAYADA: Who proved to be superior?

DURGA: Wait, I will tell you. Listen to what happened next. The King's Court assembled. The thirty-three crore gods and princes from several countries came to the Court. Each one of them began to prove his superiority.

Scene IV — Gods Fail to Prove their Superiority in the King's Court

KING: Prime Minister, start the proceedings.

P.M. (to the Fire God): Oh God, please introduce yourself.

FIRE GOD: I am the Fire God. I can burn the whole world in a second. Do you want me to show it? Do you? Nobody is superior to me.

P.M.: Oh Supreme God, there is a mistake in what you said.

FIRE GOD: Mistake? A mistake in what I said?

P.M.: Yes, ordinary water can finish the fire. King! The Fire God has failed in the test. Now, who is next?

P.M. (to the Wind God): Please introduce yourself, Oh God, to the people in the Court.

WIND GOD: I am the Wind God. If it comes to my mind, I can stall the whole world where it is. I will not let it move. And fire and water cannot finish me.

P.M.: What you say is worthless. Doesn't wind mean air? Even an ordinary human being can swallow you.

CLOWN: Wind God, shall I swallow you? I will swallow if it is good, anyway there was no air pollution at that time. (Swallows air.)

KING: How sad! Even the Wind God has failed. Who is next, Prime Minister?

P.M. (to the Cloud God): Gently, gently, I beg of you to introduce yourself in a gentle voice. (The Cloud laughs) Gently, gently.

CLOUD GOD (laughs): I am the Cloud God. If I thunder, the whole world will be inundated. I shall turn the world into water, water everywhere. Nobody can finish me. Nobody dare do it!

P.M.: Easy, easy, take it a little easy! Empty vessels make more noise. Oh, Cloud God, an ordinary wind blowing harasses you. How can you be superior?

KING: The Cloud God has fallen with a bang.

P.M.: Your Highness, now the last God remains. (To the Mountain God) Please introduce yourself!

MOUNTAIN (with a firm voice): I am Mountain God, firm like a mountain ridge. Nobody can move me. Wind, rain, sunshine, none can offend me. If they try to do it, they will bang against me and be finished. Now tell me who is superior to me?

KING: Prime Minister, why are you keeping quiet?

P.M.: Your Highness, think twice before giving your decision!

KING: Okay. Please take your seats. I will give the decision after some time.

(King and P.M. deliberate. The Mountain God laughs arrogantly.)

Scene V — Vadārs Comment on the Gods' Trial in King's Court

YANKOBA: This means that the Mountain God will be proved superior.

RAMA: The Mountain God will take the Princess away.

DURGA: Wait, wait! The King and the Prime Minister are still to think about it. No decision is given yet.

YANKOBA: Durgababa, you said that this story is about our community. But it does not appear so at all!

DURGA: All the Gods have lost. Only the Mountain God is remaining. The Mountain God also loses. All the Gods have been defeated.

BAYADA: Then who proves to be the most superior?

YANKOBA: Bayada, they are all gods over there. There is no one from our earth. Then how can the decision be taken? Who will go among the gods?

(The Clown goes again around the worlds to proclaim the king's call)

CLOWN: I had proclaimed everywhere. But nobody from earth came. So His Highness has sent me again. Listen, listen, listen... Everybody on earth is informed that the Princess of Sasaravad will marry the person who will prove his superiority in the whole world. (Exit)

DURGA: Now see what happens in the story next. One of our *Vadārs* hears the proclamation and does something very interesting.

RAMA (surprised): A *Vadār!* and in a King's Court!

Scene VI — The King in the Court Declares a *Vadār* the Best

MOUNTAIN: I am immortal. The whole world is standing on me. If I become angry and move slightly, everything will be destroyed. I have destroyed so many kingdoms so far. Not even their name is remaining.

P.M.: This God is bulky, like a stone. Your Highness, I think the superiority of the Mountain God is proved. (A *Vadār* enters.)

VADĀR: Wait, Your Highness!

MOUNTAIN: Who is this dirty man?

KING: Mountain God, do not use words that would offend anybody. This Court is for all. Gentleman, introduce yourself to the Court.

VADĀR: Your Highness, I am an ordinary *Vadār*. A *Vadār* is one who breaks stones. This palace of yours, it is we who have built it. We also shape gods from stones. However big a stone may be, we can break it into pieces.

P.M.: Your Highness, the Mountain God can be broken into pieces. A *Vadār* has proved to be the most superior. Your Highness should make his decision.

KING: The *Vadār* has fulfilled the Princess's condition. The *Vadār* has proved himself superior on earth and in heaven. Hence, the *Vadār* should be married to the Princess. What do you have to say, Princess?

PRINCESS: Your Highness, your decision is just and I accept it.

P.M.: Princess, come, the person who fulfilled your condition was found only on earth. (The Princess garlands the *Vadār*)

Scene VII — *Vadārs*, Amazed, Comment upon the Event

ALL: The *Vadār* has won! The *Vadār* has won!

DURGA: The *Vadār* won and the thirty-three crore gods were defeated.

RAMA: Durgababa, tell me one thing. Thirty-three crore gods had come to win the hand of the Princess. Then why was our man also called?

DURGA: Our King is clever. The King thinks about each individual. He thinks about all the subjects—gods and men alike. The King sees the quality of a person. He does not go by the talk.

YANKOBA: The King must have given a lot of wealth to the *Vadār*. May be a kingdom or at least a job in the Court?

DURGA: The King didn't give anything. But the Sun God did.

BAYADA: What things did the Sun God give?

Scene VIII — King's final Proclamation in Court

SUN GOD: The *Vadār* has been proved the most superior on earth and in heaven. That is why *Vadārs* are thereby being given fields in seven villages for seven births.

VADĀR: My seven generations and me will break stones in this field. We will dig the earth and work very hard. I will build wells, lakes for the people in our city. I will build houses for them. I will take more care of this field than my own self and I will keep the Princess happy.

(Shouts of "Long Live the King!")

Scene IX — The Family of *Vadārs* Resumes Work on the Road Side

YANKOBA: Sun God has given this field for us as our livelihood for seven births.

DURGA: This stone and earth is our life. Our hard work with this stone and earth will never go waste. Some day, some time, we will also get our place in the Court of today's democracy.

BAYADA: When we will get it, we will see. But right now, we have to work for our immediate living.

YANKOBA: Sun God has given us this field for our livelihood. We must work hard on it. Otherwise, how will our community improve?

DURGA: Come, come, get back to work! The sun has gone down.

(All pick up the tools and get back to work.)

Three imaginative cognitive forms

Three processes of narrative construction of collective identity can be identified in our corpus of *Vadār* narratives¹². Three cognitive forms—three imaginative figures—materialise them, at three distinct levels of awareness. The first form, at the level of daily life and conduct, is the portrait of an unparalleled personality defined in terms of outstanding professional competence as stone-worker and personal uprightness. The second form, at the level of power that makes the quality and the differential worth of all beings on earth and heaven, is that of the *kṣatriya*, which the *Vadārs* strive to approximate, prove equal to, and eventually identify themselves with.

The third form, at the level of the intimate identity of the Self-proper, is nothing less than a godly entity, dreamed of as revealing the *Vadār's* true profound identity.

Professional expertise: title of recognition and human distinction

The first cognitive figure supports a process of self-identification through the imaginative projection of a psychosocial flawless self-portrait. References to the *Vadār's* professional competence and personal qualities contribute to its materialisation. Narratives take the caste occupation as theme and ground of their argument of *Vadār* prominence in diverse ways.

Vdr-01 Summary: Story of Madanya, the outstanding Vadār of Atpadi

The kings of Atpadi and Satara covet adjoining pastures. The first sends Madanya, his *Vadār*, to extract some stones in the fields. The second releases his bull into the field. The bull kills the *Vadār*. War breaks out between the two kings. The first is defeated. He flees his kingdom and roams from town to town seeking refuge. Before he dies much later at Velapur, he constructs a memorial, a *samādhi*, in the honour of Madanya, and raises his children. The argument of the narrative consists in insisting on the characteristics of unparalleled competence, outstanding courage, unequalled faithfulness, and royal confidence rightly deserved by Madanya. "He was a *Vadār* known throughout the land for his ease in detecting the underground deposits of quality stones." "Loyal to his king," he followed him into exile. "We are his descendants", said the author of the narrative. "The king proved to be extremely considerate to Madanya. He built him a memorial. This shows the *Vadār's* status in the king's eyes. The king raised the *Vadār's* two sons. They both became as worthy and reputed as Madanya for their ability in predicting the location of deposits of good stones in the soil."

A critical reading could expose Madanya as a mere tool of power games, and his loyalty as that of a slave who has entirely internalised his status of subordination: a perfect model of alienation, devoid of human identity: a non-human figure. This is not the viewpoint of the narrator¹³ who appropriates the values of the feudal era in a different manner. The system of social relations is not his concern. What is important to him is the affective "signified effect": the sentiment of pride that generates in him the faultless valour of the *Vadār*. This valour is defined in terms of uncommon professional expertise and eminent physical and moral qualities.

The narration deploys two cognitive processes of significant importance. We may consider the statement or the wording of the narrative enunciation

as *noeme*: the narration at this level invents a meaningful life-story raised as an exemplary figure for all to see. As for the act of knowledge or *noesis*: the construction of the life-story as a creation of meaning carried out by a trope becomes an assertion of identity. Then comes the discourse, an act of speech, which proclaims and transmits the meaning in order to forge a community through the sharing of the same sense of pride. At all levels, the form and the content are inseparable. Narrative, identity and collective self-identification go together. At these three levels, the significance is in the sign and the sign would be nothing without its significance. The *Vadārs* are affectionately grateful to God *Māruti*, their *guru* and protector, for this remarkable identity.

Vdr-33 Text: The *Vadārs*' unparalleled occupational expertise is a gift of *Māruti*

There were stone mines in the forest. We therefore used to go into the forest. Once, a 100 *Vadārs* were trying to break a single stone. They worked for 14 days. Still the stone did not split. *Mārutirāya* was passing through the jungle, and saw the *Vadārs* looking worried. *Mārutirāya* asked the *Vadār* is about the reason for their worry. The *Vadārs* then told him the whole story.

Mārutirāya, with a single stroke of his mace, given without fail at the proper place, split the rock into a number of fragments. That stone which a 100 *Vadārs* were unable to break, *Mārutirāya* destroyed in a single stroke. There is no one else in the whole world as powerful and strong as Hanumanta. Whatever be the difficulty in which we may get caught up, we have recourse to *Mārutirāya*. Since that time, when we have decided to break a rock, we strike at the proper spot. This is a gift of *Mārutirāya*.

The narrator¹⁴, a Gadi *Vadār*, is the *pūjāri* or the priest, officiating in the temple that he has himself built 50 years ago for *Māruti*. *Māruti*, in his opinion, is “the most powerful of all the gods.” His story is a response to the question: “Why do you hold *Māruti* in such high respect?” More than a god, *Māruti* should, according to his *pūjāri*, be considered the *guru* of the community. “He gave us a helping hand in our work. We therefore consider him our *guru*.” Even so, the story does not explain the amount of affection and confidence that all *Vadārs* have for *Māruti*. The narrator's interpretation, a *pūjāri*'s reading, is for the benefit of the faithful followers who come to pray in his temple—a priest's mental state and belief.

But the intention of the story, its inherent sense, is different. The narrative means to justify the *Vadārs*' confidence by introducing the privileged relationship that the *Vadārs* entertain with *Māruti* according to the logic of a

commonly shared cognitive pattern and system of symbolic communication. In this cognitive frame, a particular god or *guru* is for the community a reference of identity, a principle of distinction, a right to respect and recognition. *Vdr-33* establishes how *Māruti* is the secure foundation of the *Vadārs'* status, the seal and guarantee of their existence among gods and men¹⁵. Further, this existence is defined here by the predicate of an unparalleled ability as stone-worker. This is the reference the story establishes and founds in truth, and of which *Māruti*, the familiar guardian protector, is the sure guarantor. The psychosocial self-image is defined and validated. *Vdr-14* proposes in ethical terms a similar self-image of incomparable and reputable stone-worker. The narrative attests the high level of morality of a worker so totally devoted to his family that the pain of hard labour does not affect him.

Vdr-14 Summary: The *Vadārs* are the most remarkable hard workers

God Indra came down from heaven and approached the *Vadār* who was in the process of breaking stones. The latter said that he was quite content doing such gruelling work and was satisfied in earning his four annas a day because that sufficed him (1) for his daily family expenditures, (2) to pay off the debt owed to his parents (ritual duties), (3) to provide instruction and training to his son who will succeed him, and (4) for the marriage dowry of his daughter. Indra was quite impressed with the *Vadār* and declared the *Vadārs* to be the best workers.

The narrative¹⁶ describes the stone-worker “built like an athlete, tall and robust”. The god took the form or *avatāra* of a king descending from heaven to find out how the toiling worker feeds and supports his family. The god returns to heaven no longer surprised but enchanted by the replies he obtained. He satisfies himself with the find that the “*Vadār* is really in need of nothing.”

The story contributes exactly towards defining and enforcing the fundamental values that define the virtues and duties of every householder in daily life. We could even recognise here the identity prescribed and imposed by the dominant culture. But for the *Vadār*, much more than an internalised injunction telling him the elementary norms that guide the conduct of a head of family, it is a process of assertion of identity, a claim of social recognition and right to respect. The intention of the author and his text is to project the story as an argument of moral distinction, a reason of esteem, the asset that gives the *Vadār* the right to respect and honour among men and gods. The referent is always the excellence of the *Vadār* as stoneworker, and the discourse sui-referential.

The noematic statement proves its own truth through a godly intervention. The argumentative relationships which prevail between the two spatial realms and spheres of authority of the narrative can be read either from top to bottom as a process of prescription or from bottom to top as a process of self-legitimacy:

<i>Sky</i>	<i>Indra moves in heaven from where he looks down upon the earth</i>		
<i>Movements and interactions in the intermediary space</i>	<i>Indra notices the robust Vadār</i>	<i>Indra takes the form of a king to descend and meet the Vadār</i>	<i>Indra returns satisfied after having given his blessings</i>
<i>Earth/Forest</i>	<i>The Vadārs are gratified with their status of hard workers.</i>		

The meaning of the text is clear. However, today's narrator does not share the same intention or perspective. He will even add an additional statement that did not appear in the original in order to seriously influence the direction of his tradition in the years to come. "Since that time, our community has been slaving away towards death. We go on breaking stones. No progress. People are happy with what they have". The narrator went to school for two years as a child. The mayor of his village is a *Vadār*. "Why is our community backward?" he wonders. The reason is simple: "*Vadārs* consider their condition to be determined by God Indra. We must then surrender to our destiny!" According to *Vdr-22*, the narrative tradition of yesteryear perceives the ability and status of the *Vadār* quite differently.

Vdr-22 Text: At the call of gods, each community selects its distinctive occupational tool

The gods once convoked all the human beings in heaven. They displayed in heaven all sorts of objects. They displayed the tools of the potter, the cobbler, the rope-maker, the blacksmith - all of them. The one who picked up the wheel became a Kumbhar. The one who picked up an awl became a Cambhar. The one who picked up a razor became a Nhavi. The one who picked up sisal became a Mang. There was there a sledge-hammer made of gold. This sledge-hammer was one of the 14 jewels. The one who picked up the sledge-hammer became a *Vadār*. The narrative¹⁷ is clear and apodictic. The *Vadārs'* labour is described as a divine dispensation that accounts for its differential particularity. A decision of the gods determines their condition. This decision not only sanctions their state of life as manual workers together with that of

the others; their distinction among other castes of labourers is also recognised and founded. Their tool, emblem of their identity, is made of gold, which differentiates them from other manual workers. It is even more than a tool—it is one of the rare jewels of the world.

Right from the beginning, the ability of the *Vadār* cannot be mistaken as anything other than an argument for excellence. By being pointed out and differentiated from the other artisans at the divine court, their supremacy is sealed. By its form, the narrative is a self-founded statement of truth. A tool of identity construction at the disposition of subordinates, the myth transforms a state of servility into an indisputable argument for superior position among peers, namely, the other castes that share a similar socio-economic condition. The narrative produces the anthropological difference by framing its story after a cognitive pattern of graded inequality¹⁸ Another significant and distinctive feature of the *Vadār*s' psychosocial identity is the conviction of the crucial function of their work for the maintenance of life on earth, as testified to with self-assurance and aplomb by the narrator¹⁹ of *Vdr-23*.

Vdr-23 Text: *Vadār* Sidva strikes water for all in plenty from a rock

There was a king. Drought fell upon his entire kingdom. Human beings and animals were perishing. The drought lasted for 12 years. The drought spread all over, but in the palace of the king a living spring of water continued to flow. The king and the people of the court were therefore happy. The spring in the palace eventually dried up. Wells were dug everywhere. But there was no water in them. Sidva, the *Vadār*, was digging for stones in a grazing land located on the border of the kingdom. Digging and digging, he reached down tremendously deep. He charged the land with dynamite and streams of water started gushing out. The news of the event spread in the whole kingdom. People and animals got water. The streams of water flew into rivers. Water ran from one town to another. People sang the praises of Sidva the *Vadār*. The king called Sidva the *Vadār* to the palace. He honoured him with the grant of seven acres of grazing land. Since then our people are covered with honours.

Warden of kings, the will to be' Kṣatriya

The construction of a status among men and gods constitutes the second process of self-identification through a second cognitive form. Here, this construction materialises itself with reference to the orders that systematise the existing beings according to their power attribute. In this regard, the narratives are replete with kings and kingdoms with tragic destinies. Narrators

know of *Vadār* kingdoms that were once prosperous. In matter of fact, they are more in the nature of imaginary fiction than actual historical records preserved in memory. Still, narratives unfold tales of which the characters are most often *ṣatriya*. They delight in staging kings, power contests, wars, downfalls and setbacks²⁰. This is the background that the *Vadār* selects to situate himself and enter as servant of kings, saviour of royal lineages in peril, chief of war near the throne, pillar of the kingdom (*Vdr*-³⁷), builder of palaces and fortresses—unless he stages himself as king or queen. For instance *Vdr*-34²¹ avails of the anthropological motive displayed by *Vdr*-09 (see *Vdr*-09 Text below) of a *Vadār* woman who saves ‘twelve lineages’ (a metaphor of mankind) by voluntarily sacrificing her status as a married woman, but transforms the sacrificial motive into that of a *Vadār* queen who saves the ‘twelve lineages’ of her kingdom without becoming a widow as in *Vdr*-09²². The figure is always soteriological, feminine, and the *Vadār* remains the saviour hero, but the motive loses its sacrificial dimension for the benefit of a figure of the regal power of the *ṣatriya* order.

Vdr-34 Text: At the time of *pralaya*, a *Vadār* queen saves the twelve lineages

In that kingdom, the king and the queen were from the *Vadārs*. There were twelve lineages in the kingdom. Once a man had come to the kingdom to tell us of our lineages and descent. He also used to tell us what will happen further. This great man, this *mahātma*, who used to tell our lineages, went to meet the queen. He told the queen: “There will be the destruction of the world, *pralaya*. Everything will be drowned, even the sun and the moon.” The *mahātma* said that “if you want to save the twelve lineages of the kingdom, then, gather all your wealth and appliances, sit in a boat, and go upstream this instant.” The *Vadār* queen gathered the twelve lineages and went in the direction that she had been told. She saved the twelve lineages.

An irresistible impulse draws the narrative towards the imaginary construction of the *Vadār* identity within the *ṣatriya* horizon. Following are several enlightening visions of that *ṣatriya*-like identity. First vision: the *Vadār* sees himself as an attentive warden of the royal order²³.

Vdr-07 Summary: A *Vadār* rescues the king’s twins from the refuse heap and brings them up

According to the plan of a Gosavi murderer, the queen’s eyes are blindfolded when, after many long years, she gives birth to twins. The king’s two sisters replace the newborn twins with kittens and bury the newborns in a pile of

garbage at the palace exit. The furious king kills the queen. A *Vadār* finds the twins when they are uncovered by his donkey's hooves. He adopts them and raises them. The *Vadār* informs the king about this, and the king recognises the children and realises the deceitfulness of his sisters. He sentences them to death, takes back his children, and rewards the *Vadār* with land. Let us follow in closer detail the scene in which the *Vadār* is staged.

Vdr-07 Section

One day, a *Vadār's* donkey went to the garbage heap for grazing. As his donkey scratched the garbage with its hooves, the *Vadār* found two children. The *Vadār* had no children, and brought up the children as his own. Once the *Vadār* was doing earthwork in the palace of the King Dharvesila, and his two children accompanied him. Both of them looked just like the king. The king saw the children, and wondered: 'How do these children look like me?' He asked them about their mother and father, and the children gave the name of the *Vadār*. The king conceived a great desire to meet their parents, and they were called to the palace. When the king went on praising the *Vadār* and their children, the *Vadār* could not keep the secret anymore. He revealed the whole true story. When the king had understood the whole incident, he called both his sisters. He cut their hair off, smeared their head with lime and burnt them at the stake. The king took both the children to the palace and gave the *Vadār* fallow lands of 28 villages as reward. Two remarks can be made regarding this section. First, the *Vadār's* donkey plays a decisive role that cannot be dissociated from that of his master. Narratively, he intervenes as his master's alter ego in saving the king's descent. Second, the *Vadār* finds himself in a position which is the reverse of that of the king. The king loses his offspring at the time of their birth. This sets him off into a great depression similar to what he experienced long before when the queen could not conceive. The *Vadār* is childless. Raising the king's orphan children as his own, he releases himself from the crisis of sterility that affects his own family. By returning the children to their true father, the king, the *Vadār* secures his position as saviour of royal lineages.

The story builds up the role of the *Vadār* as subordinate to that of the king, in the king's shadow. The latter must have heirs in order to ensure the continuity of his lineage and the kingdom. The *Vadār* becomes intimately associated with the king, the hero of the story, through his *kṣatriya*-like actions. In the end, thanks to the *Vadār*, the normal order of things, which should have never been lost in the first place, is recovered. The evil sisters of royal blood are put to death. Or in other words, they are placed out of the scope of

harming the kingdom while the good servant is insured a life with land in plenty, and placed in a position to serve the kingdom. Each retrieves his role and rank with their true attributes: the king his children, the *Vadār* his land. The function of saviour of the kṣatriya lineage might only implicitly be considered the predicate of the *Vadār* in *Vdr-07*. It is by luck and thanks to his donkey that he discovers the twins without realising their royal blood. He adopts them in order to conceal his own sterility. The king, while at the palace, meets the children by chance. It is because of the king's initiatives that the *Vadār* reveals his secret. The king discovers the story. Thus, the *Vadār*, unintentionally, saves the royal lineage. Actually, the theme in *Vdr-07* is that of the antagonism opposing the sisters to the brothers. But it is no less significant in that within the frame of that dominant theme, the narrative logic consists of showing that it is the *Vadār* alone, and no one else, who is instrumental in setting the situation straight. For a kṣatriya to be and remain so, a *Vadār* is presumably indispensable. Second vision: *Vdr-21* works out explicitly the same message²⁴. In fact, the story may not have even included the *Vadār* character originally. The *Vadār* may have been added and the narrative appropriated by the *Vadārs* for their own purpose.

Vdr-21 Summary: A *Vadār* rescues the heir of king Śāntanu

The king Śāntanu falls in love with Satyavati, a Koli girl, whom he sees bathing in the river. He marries her with her accord, but warns her that none of her children will live. She consents. Śāntanu throws his first six sons into the river and refuses to let the seventh child survive. Pregnant again, Satyavati flees into the forest for 12 years and leads a life of austerity. She becomes transformed into a rock. A *Vadār* breaks the rock and discovers the heir of Satyavati and Śāntanu: thus he saves the descendance of the kṣatriya.

The initial dominant theme might have been only a tension between tribal populations and royal morals. This opposition is put into the background. It receives the discursive status of an instrumental mediation. With the king killing his own children, the stage is set for the intervention of a 'saviour'. The story is then re-edited to show that without the *Vadār*, the kṣatriya would no longer exist. When the king attempts to put an end to his lineage, it is the *Vadār* who feels it his duty to keep it alive as if it were his "raison d'être", the specific attribute of his being, an identity predicate. The text leaves no doubt:

Vdr-21 Section

This is the request of Satyavati to the king: "Ultimately, let live the seventh boy.

Let our lineage grow". But the king did not listen to her. Satyavati left the house when she became pregnant. She went to the jungle and for twelve years and twelve months she practised penances on the shore of a river. The water of the river heaped up moss and shells on her. She became a rock. A *Vadār* came along to break stone. He split the rock into two, and found the queen. He raised the lineage of Satyavati and king Śantanu. This is a Khetari (*Kṣatriya*) lineage. Third vision: another form of argumentation goes even so far as to focus very significantly, no longer on the 'saviour attribute', but on the desire of the *Vadār* to lift himself ontologically to the rank of a *kṣatriya*. The wish is granted by the illustrious descendant of the solar lineage of the *kṣatriya* Rāma himself, in *Vdr-11*. The narrator²⁵ tells the myth to illustrate the community's belief of belonging to the solar lineage.

Vdr-11 Text: *Vadārs* rewarded with solar lineage for sharing Rāma's grief

Once mother *Sītā* was sitting in the cottage. Brother Lakṣmaṇa was sitting just in front of her. Mother *Sītā* saw a beautiful golden doe. Mother *Sītā* stubbornly told Lakṣmaṇa that she wanted a blouse made out of the skin of that doe. To comply with *Sītā*'s insistence, Lakṣmaṇa took bow and arrow and followed the doe, and went far away. Here in the cottage, Rāvaṇa came in the form of a Gosavi and carried *Sītā* away. When Rāma-Lakṣmaṇa came back to the cottage and looked around, they did not see *Sītā*. Rāma-Lakṣmaṇa searched for *Sītā*, with Rāma desperately crying: "*Sītā* ! *Sītā*!" Rāma was so aggrieved that he started embracing the trees, embracing the creepers, embracing the rocks. At that moment, a *Vadār* was somewhere in the forest breaking a huge rock. When the noise of the strikes on the rock reached Rāma, he requested the *Vadār* to stop striking that rock with his sledgehammer because "My *Sītā* is in it". Rāma narrated to the *Vadār* the whole story. The *Vadār* was very saddened. Since the sorry plight of Rāma was due to *Sītā*'s wish to have a blouse made of the skin of the doe, the *Vadār* decided that "our women too would not put on a blouse as long as the search for *Sītā* is on". In the whole society, only our community made and kept this pledge. This is the reason why Rāma himself agreed upon the *Vadār* descending from the Sun (*sūryavaṃśī*: solar lineage). Several levels of interpretation give this discourse various meanings that link up together. The narrator builds and composes them with a clear intelligence of the ultimate goal of his argument, namely, to justify the *Vadārs*' belief in their solar descent. This favour, ultimately obtained as recompense for their profound affection for Rāma, fulfills the identity aspiration that pervades the narratives.

Vdr-11 permits a seemingly clear reading. Still, for a thorough appreciation of its argumentative—mythical symbolic—logic, one should first know that other stories give different explanations of the custom forbidding *Vadār* women to wear blouses. Generally, this malediction is related to *Sītā*'s curse upon the community, but this curse happens to be differently justified.

Vdr-20 reveals the most common reason: *Sītā* condemns the community to this degrading custom because a *Vadār* who was breaking rocks along the river cast his eyes upon her while she was bathing naked in the river. *Vdr-08* gives another reason. *Sītā*, kidnapped by *Rāvaṇa*, hides in the *Aśoka* forest. *Rāvaṇa*'s soldiers, because of the lack of saris to envelop *Māruti*'s ever-extending tail in order to burn it, enter the forest to snatch *Sītā*'s sari, the only piece of material left available on all the island. A *Vadār*, breaking rocks in the forest, fails to see that *Sītā* is hiding behind the very same rock. He does not hear her cries telling him to stop his unbearable noise, which attracts the attention of the soldiers. They find *Sītā*, and take her away to strip her of her sari. *Sītā* is furious. As a vengeance, she condemns the *Vadār* women “to nudity” just as the *Vadār* had inadvertently exposed *Sītā* to the peril of being stripped naked by the soldiers. In fact, *Māruti* figures out a strategy to save *Sītā* from the outrage of nudity. But this myth did not benefit the *Vadār* women, who have remained subject to *Sītā*'s punishment.

Vdr-29 and *Vdr-09* provide still different explanations. The semantic context of *Vdr-29* is the opposition of the two orders: human and animal. “The signified effect” of the story is therefore a sort of indirect excuse for the *Vadār* women, and the community is exculpated of an otherwise degrading practice. The story helps to ease the guilt burden of the community²⁶.

Vdr- 29 Text: *Vadār* woman cursed by a female monkey

A female monkey is going towards the river with her little ones. A *Vadār* woman does her washing in the river. The *Vadār* woman says: “What is this, monkey? You are breast-feeding your four-five kids exposing your breasts.” Then the female monkey says: “After all, I am a monkey. But you will also breast-feed your children exposing your breasts. You will not be allowed to wear a blouse.” The semantic context of *Vdr-09* is soteriological²⁷. The custom is connected to a myth where the community builds a highly recommendable sacrificial image of itself. The nude breasts become the image of moral and human superiority of the *Vadār*.

Vdr-09 Text: A *Vadār* woman sacrifices her honour and status of married woman

Many years ago, a steamship had set sail on the sea. In that boat, families from twelve lineages, *kuli*, had set sail for another country to fill their stomachs. There were *Vadār* families in that ship. As the boat was sailing on the sea, all of a sudden a storm broke out. Torrential rains poured down. Waves rose up. Caught up in the middle of the waves, the ship was about to capsize. People were frightened. Were the ship to sink, everyone would perish. All twelve clans, the twelve castes, would sink. People started to shout that to appease the ocean one should throw to him those “things (blouse, bracelets, red powder, etc.) that mark a spouse with a living husband.” No woman was willing to throw to the sea these things. But a *Vadār* woman came forward and threw off the blouse she was wearing, her bracelets, wiped off the red powder on her forehead. She offered everything to the sea. The sea became peaceful. The twelve clans, the twelve castes were saved. Since then *Vadār* women do not use a blouse or smear red powder. The ocean god made her a widow. These differences point to ways typical of a mythical logic composing the text of its narratives and constructing the meaning of its discourses. *Vdr-11*, following in the examples of *Vdr-08* and *Vdr-20*, grabs mythemes that belong to the epic and hegemonic tradition in order to transform them for its own purpose. The significance of the myth as discursive process of self-identification essentially lies in the logic ruling over these transformations that we can now focus upon. *Vdr-08* refers to the cycle of *Māruti/Hanumān*, a god with whom *Vadārs* enjoy a close relationship (this we have witnessed in *Vdr-33*), and with whose deeds²⁸ they delight in identifying themselves. The soldiers of *Rāvaṇa* capture *Māruti*, who came to *Laṅkā* to find *Sītā*. These soldiers cannot find enough material to wrap up *Māruti*’s tail, set it aflame, and thus annihilate his powers. The usual tradition reads differently: the monkey god escapes from the soldiers and foils their plans by jumping into the sea, extinguishing the fire just lit by the soldiers. This is not the mytheme retained by the narrator of *Vdr-08* because there is no way that he could utilise it for his purposes. He does not even suggest that the fire had started and thus does not mention the jump into the sea. He uses *Māruti* in another way. *Māruti*’s tail gets longer and longer, indefinitely, in proportion to the material with which it is covered. All of the material and all the saris in *Laṅkā* are used up, except the clothing worn by *Sītā*, which *Rāvaṇa* orders to be snatched.

Let us realize that the narrator sought by all means to find a way to introduce in his story a *Sītā* with a reason to curse the *Vadār*. He accomplishes this task thoughtfully by modifying the information commonly available and at his disposal. On the one hand, he transforms the role of the ‘actant’

(narrative agent) ‘tail of Māruti’ to accommodate the element ‘nudity of Sītā’. On the other hand, he transforms the basic elements of mythemes familiar to his *Vadār* community [such as given in *Vdr-20* where Sītā is seen bathing naked behind a rock that a *Vadār* is breaking, then Sītā curses the *Vadār* women to nudity (uncovered breasts) as a revenge and punishment]. The rock no longer hides Sītā during her bath. As Sītā attempts to flee from the coming soldiers, the *Vadār*’s noisy blows upon the rock attract the soldiers, who then find her and take her away to rid her of her clothing. The *Vadār* had to be at fault: he is ordered to stop the distressing noise, but cannot hear Sītā’s call because of the noise. The curse becomes logical as the revenge of the angry Sītā against the *Vadār* community.

As a matter of fact, it is again the *Vadār* women who will suffer the consequences of this revenge though they never had any role in the event. In *Vdr-08* as in *Vdr-20*, the transformation of mythemes leads to the same curse and the same explanation of the questionable custom. Herein lies the only meaning for today’s narrator. But, sure enough, these stories are neither solely nor mainly aetiological. The narrative scenario of the curse is itself a sign of another much more important intent: a will to self-identification. By linking the prescription of the custom of bare breasts to the curse imposed by Sītā, the *Vadār*s inscribe themselves in the hegemonic system of symbolic communication of the epic tradition. The story turns the punishment, symbol of indignity, into an asset of social and cultural integration. The idiom is appropriated for another semantic investment. By becoming the object of a discourse directly addressed to them by Sītā, and by the bare breasts turning them into a living image of Sītā, the *Vadār* women become the link that binds their community to the Great Tradition. This link allows the community to enter modestly with lowered head, as it were through a side entrance, into the dominant system of symbolic communication. Such is the “signified effect” of the sign of the missing blouse.

Let us go back to compare again with *Vdr-11*. Here, with head held high, the *Vadār*s enter proudly through the main gate, as a result of another form of appropriation, however audacious, of the same mythemes. This time, the narrator sets the stage with Rāma himself. His hysterical cries cause him to embrace the rock the *Vadār* is breaking. The same displeasure caused by the hammer blows affects Rāma. But here, by a strike of genius, the author of the narrative inverts the values of the logical operators. Rāma does not complain and does not curse the *sūdra*. The pain and suffering of Rāma breaks the *Vadār*’s heart. In feeling such compassion, he effectively identifies himself with Rāma and symbolically configures his community to Sītā. Sītā’s desire of a deerskin blouse, which triggered everything, provides him

with the argumentative link required to that effect. Finally, the naked breasts have the same integrative function though their logical value is reversed. They achieve what the *Vadār* desires and cherishes above all, namely, to prove to be of solar descent. No one else could better grant them this favour than *Rāma*, the hero *par excellence* of the solar lineage, in exchange for the compassion of a *Vadār* sharing in his pain, and moreover in the whole society, the only community to make and keep his pledge. *Vdr-11* brilliantly constructs and definitely offers that towards which the *Vadār* aspires in so many ways and often in a hesitating and groping manner—his identification as a *kṣatriya*.

Founding one's inmost identity, dreaming of being god

The third cognitive form of self-identification lies in the quest for an intimate identity with a firm and secure foundation. This quest is generally achieved through signs of 'discovery' or 'invention' of a god of one's own, leading then towards legitimating his distinctive worship. The community recognizes itself in the figure of its god who, in return, identifies the community and guarantees its autonomous existence. This process is not specific to the *Vadār*, no more than the conflictual dimension that it enters upon when *śūdras* too claim the right to find, install and venerate the god of their choice. To claim the right to symbolically found the legitimacy of one's distinct existential identity as a collective can happen amongst *śūdras* through an act of insurrection only. *Śūdras* cannot build for themselves an identity of their own without inventing a process of self-foundation, and there is no such stable foundation without ultimately the authorisation by a figure of god. It is, therefore, naturally in terms of legitimacy of the community gods that the question of founding a collective identity ultimately arises. Four narratives, *Vdr-05*, *Vdr-06*, *Vdr-28*, and *Vdr-38*, attest this conflictual process. They display the same basic argumentative structure of which *Vdr-28* allows for a clear apprehension²⁹.

Vdr-28 Text: Mati *Vadārs* find their community god while levelling a pool

There was a big pool of water. It had dried up because of summer. The field in which this pool was found belonged to a farmer. He employed a *Vadār* to level the ground. A *Vadār* couple was doing this work. Their little child was playing in the pool. While playing, the child found an idol, *mūrti*, in the pool. The *Vadār* couple cleaned the idol. Just then, the Lingayat farmer arrived and began to throw the *Vadār* out. But the *Vadār* would not go. He kept saying that the idol is theirs, that is to say, the

god of the Mati *Vadārs*: “Why has he otherwise left all the world alone and buried himself in the mud? He is our god.” The *mūrti* would not budge from the mud. Finally, a temple had to be built on that very spot.

I shall not elaborate further on this process of ‘invention’. Not because I consider it of moot significance. On the contrary, I deem it to be of an essential importance as its many occurrences in my *Vadār* corpus show. But my readers are surely acquainted with it. And I would prefer, in the very perspective of that ‘invention’ process, to reflect on the enigmatic, however impressive, “signified effects” of *Vdr-24*. Ostensibly a fantastic dream, *Vdr-24* is a symphonic resumption in a compact and logically tight construction, of the major symbolic elements mentioned throughout this essay. It gives the most profound though unexpectedly mystical answer to the *Vadārs*’ quest of inmost identity through the following mysterious fiction.

Vdr-24 Text: The donkey every night rides a heavenly horse

There was a Kumbhar, a potter. He had a donkey. This donkey kept insisting that it wanted the King’s daughter as its wife. The Kumbhar thought that if the King came to know about the donkey’s obstinacy, “the King will kill me”. The Kumbhar decided to leave the town. However, there was only one Kumbhar in that town, and it was therefore ordered by royal decree that he should not leave. The Kumbhar was called to the palace. The King asked him the reason for his leaving the town. The Kumbhar told him the whole story. The King told the Kumbhar: “If your donkey builds a city of brass and copper in one night, I will give my daughter to the donkey.” The Kumbhar told the donkey what the King had said. The donkey erected a city of brass and copper in one night. The King gave his daughter in marriage to the donkey and built a palace for them in the forest. Every day, in the middle of the night, a horse would descend from heaven. The donkey would then become a prince, ride the horse and go around the whole world. One night, the queen woke up and saw this happening. The queen asked the donkey to tell her the true story. Then she came to know that the donkey was a form (*rūpa*) of god.

The sense of the text, the structural logic of the narrative

The identity of the donkey is a puzzling enigma. A fundamental binary opposition opposes empirical appearance of true reality. A logic of revelation lifts the veil and finds the true nature of the donkey, which remains nevertheless hidden and unproclaimed, and therefore unknown. The result of the narrative process is a radical reversal of status: a state of utter

subordination is turned into a position of absolute supremacy with qualities of regal divine authority. The dynamic of the narrative is that of a claim of supreme power for the donkey. Progressively, the argument substantiates the validity of the claim. The narrative construction articulates a series of successive reversals which link up one with another, each marking the introduction of a new semantic level and a new set of oppositions. We can organize these sequences of significant oppositions developing as a dramatic discourse in three acts.

Act 1: Uncontested dominance: within a double set of unequal relations: the opposition (1) of a donkey, totally enslaved beast of burden, whose request is rejected without appeal, and of his master, a man; and the opposition (2) of a potter, enslaved artisan, whose decision was cancelled without appeal, and of his master, the king. The state of subordination of the donkey to the artisan and of the artisan to the king denies all possibilities of autonomous existence. The situation of subjection of the donkey is a duplicate of his master's surrender. With a difference: the donkey does not have an inferior counterpart whom he can enslave in turn. The donkey is a pure figure of alienation under someone else's dominion, kept moreover in a state of enforced silence.

Act 2: Unrecognised supremacy: The opposition of the donkey to the king is activated by a reversal: the donkey defies the king by appearing as his equal. The king, in turn, makes the donkey prove his right to claiming the princess. As it goes, the opposition between the king and the donkey intensifies. The donkey proves himself incomparably superior to the king. He rightly obtains the princess, but the king exiles the couple from the city. The donkey, the actor in a position of greatest weakness, proves to be greater than the king, the actor in a position of greatest power. The donkey proves with works that are incumbent on the royal function, that his power is of an unheard-of amplitude, divine. The carrier of mud and stone proves to be a builder of cities of metal that defy time. The king, caught in his own trap, must admit that the donkey is of his same royal order. He hands over the princess to the donkey. But the king turns the tables two times against the donkey. First, by ordering that the feat, if any, be accomplished at night so that no other person may know of it and identify its author; second, by exiling the donkey and the princess to a palace in the jungle, a purely vegetal and animal realm, where no human being exists to recognize their power. A king, to whom subjects and territory inhabited by human beings are denied, is a repudiated one. An unrecognized king is a derided one. The donkey's identity is hidden to men and imperceptible to wild animals.

Act 3: Identity unveiled: The opposition of (1) the donkey, run-down animal of the *śūdras*, riding the horse, the mount of kings, accomplishes a first reversal of power. The opposition (2) of the donkey, beast of burden, becoming a form of god, accomplishes the second reversal of identity. The reversal of values and qualities is complete: the donkey, emblem of a condition of pure servitude, bound to the ground, obtains from heaven the attributes of power in the form of a horse, which transports him throughout the world to carry out his undivided reign. The slave *par excellence* becomes the uncontested master. A limitless empire is bestowed upon him by heaven. Moreover, the attributes of boundless power vested upon him reveal his true form, what he is in reality, namely, more than a *kṣatriya*, a godly figure. However, the ultimate opposition between night and day structures the last and ultimate reversal. The revelation is only carried out in the middle of the night, in a dark, mysterious, and other worldly time, where there are no human eyes to watch and understand the manifestation. The glory of the donkey shines in the middle of the jungle devoid of humans. The time of the unveiling is not that of men and its space, if not that of their territory. No one sees the queen declare the news, and after all, whom can she tell, as there is nobody around to hear her words.

The discourse of the myth speaks only to the *Vadārs*, whose faith it nourishes. They are the only ones who can own the mystical vision. Who, in the city and kingdom that they serve with their donkey, is ready to share their vision? The discourse of the myth ended, the luminous night of the revelation makes room for the gloomy light of the days of a world in which the true identity of the donkey remains out of reach of men's insight. The daylight keeps men in the dark. But what does the *Vadār's* faith envision in the radiant night?

The intent of the discourse: identity, a matter of faith

Our interpretation may start with two figures commonly retained by the *Vadārs* all through the corpus as emblems of identity: the donkey and Hanumān or Māruti. In the course of a discussion while collecting narratives, an elderly *Vadār* stated that the donkey is an *avatāra* of Hanumān, adding that he was unable to remember the corresponding story. Then, right away, a narrator³⁰ recalled *Vdr-24*, which he recounted with the explicitly stated intention of showing that the donkey is indeed a form of god. These remarks reveal how three representations play a key role: (1) the donkey as a beast of burden, (2) Hanumān as a rebellious hero coveting the strength and power of the gods, and (3) a godly *rūpa* or form as a keystone representation holding

them — the donkey and Hanumān — semantically associated. These three signs blend to compose a unique self-image. *Vdr-24* draws upon the three of them to narratively construct an argument that opens three cognitive operations, which are three symbolic processes answering the question: “We, *Vadārs*, who are we?”

The first cognitive operation is the victorious claim of kṣatriya status. This is achieved by the marriage of the donkey with the princess. The animality of the donkey is the opposite of humanity, especially of its supreme expression in the form of a prince. To ask the princess as spouse is a claim of excellence that a *śūdra* cannot dare to make without risking his life. The Kumbhar is well advised to leave the town and save his life. But the donkey dares with complete self-confidence: in *Vdr-10*, he dares in the name of his excellence as *śūdra*, stone-breaker; whereas in *Vdr-24*, he dares in the name of his competence as a builder. The *Vadār* knows no one greater than himself. The king has to recognize this by giving him his daughter, the princess.

The second cognitive operation is the victorious claim of a wondrous power transcending that of the kṣatriya himself. *Vdr-10* did not envisage this at all. The claim is articulated by the astounding construction of an imperishable city. It is no longer a matter of conflict between equals. The king recognizes his inferiority but sends the donkey into exile to maintain his own status as king of the land. The *Vadār* narratively states the consciousness he entertains of his unparalleled capacity as builder as an argument of his right to unrivalled power in the kingdom. The claim is amazing, the self-confidence staggering. We knew that the *Vadār* used to perceive himself as an outstanding worker loyal to his king, with even a crucial role in securing the survival of kings, kingdoms, and kṣatriya lineages³¹. However, the role was always that of a dutiful servant, devoted to the point of forgetting himself and keeping silent even in death. He glorified his unequalled expertise, but never claimed powers superior to those of his master. He accepted land in plenty as a title of honour and a right to recognition, but always as a faithful subject. Here, the servant identifies himself as overpowering his master and claims a right to absolute dominion.

The third cognitive operation is the claim to divine identity. This is patently articulated by the figure of a kṣatriya mounting a horse in the exercise of an infinite, divine, imperial power over the Earth. But what is most significant in the figure of the celestial steed descending from heaven to invest the donkey with universal royalty is that this makes a wish expressed in other narratives—but always sternly repressed—come true: the wish to snatch and avail of the strength of the celestial powers and reign without rivals on Earth.

This becomes manifest once we do not lose sight of the mix of overhanging symbols which we already noticed while browsing through various myths. To be precise, when we know that for the *Vadārs*, the donkey, their alter-ego, is an *avatāra* of Hanumān, himself the emblematic god³² of the *Vadārs*, benevolent and familiar to their communities; there is no doubt that the jump of Hanumān to heaven (*Vdr-02, 18*) and his fights against the gods mentioned in several myths (*Vdr-02, 18, 26*) as attempts to grab godly power, is the overshadowed figure of that *Vadārs*' inmost urge to become equal to god which finds its consummated articulation only in *Vdr-24* through the figure of the donkey, Hanumān's *avatāra*.

Still, *Vdr-24* realises that this urge should be understood in the wider and qualitatively distinct context of a quest for intimate identity, and not essentially of a power contest on earth. *Vadārs* never challenged their kings on earth; they emulated them. The design in *Vdr-02*³³, *18, 26*³⁴ was to identify oneself as god by bringing the gods under one's control in order to avail of their hold over the earth. But none of these myths—even by a discursive feat of symbolic imagination—ever dared to grab and secure that hold for Hanumān and his *Vadārs*, as does *Vdr-24* for the donkey.

Vdr-18 Section: Jump of Hanumān, enmity of Hanumān and gods

Hanumān is the eleventh manifestation of Śaṅkara. Once, in his childhood, Hanumān felt hungry. Hanumān's mother went and fetched fruits. Hanumān saw in the sky a red, round thing (the sun). Thinking this was a fruit, he jumped to the Sun. Rāhu, known for being a troublemaker for the Sun, was frightened. He wondered: "Who is this Rāhu-with-a-tail who arrives here? If this fellow also starts to harass Sūrya, then what about me? I will have to go down among the people on earth and live there on alms.." Prompted by this fear, Rāhu went and met Indra, the king of the 33 crore gods, to whom he narrated the whole story. Indra realised that no one but Śaṅkara could have had enough daring to harass Sūrya. This could be a deed of Śaṅkara only. Therefore, Indra sent an army to wage a war against Hanumān. But Hanumān exterminated the soldiers with his tail.

Vdr-26 Text: Fierce enmity of Śani (Brāhmaṇs) and Hanumān (*Vadārs*, *sūryavaṃśī*)

Śani and *Vadārs* are great enemies. In the village, where there is Śani, there is no *Vadār*. We are *sūryavaṃśī*, descendants of the Sun. Once, Śani gave a lot of trouble to the Sun. So, our *mahābali*, Hanumān, caught Śani with his tail, struck him against the ground and then threw him far away.

Śani belongs to Brāhmaṇas and Hanumān to *Vadārs*. Their antagonism is a permanent feature. I will let the reader appreciate the tremendous contrast—between triumphant assertion and submissive subordination or momentary leverage—which significantly differentiates *Vdr-24* from *Vdr-02*. The extent and aspects of the contrast—at the levels of metaphoric construction, logical articulation as well as conceptual insight—give a measure of the intense and inventive quest for identity that took place among *Vadār* communities in the course of time through and beyond the kṣatriya figure.

Vdr-02 Text: Jump of Hanumān, rebellion of Vāyu against gods, and surrender

When Hanumān, son of Vāyu, the Wind God, was born, he jumped up immediately after his birth to swallow Sūrya, the Sun. All the gods were frightened. Indra somehow managed to strike him down to the earth with his club. All the gods started to blame Vāyu. Vāyu got angry, and lost his temper. He went into hiding. Vāyu decided to keep hiding in a tree, even though people were dying without air. Below the tree, a donkey was grazing. Vāyu decided to tell the donkey alone of his intention of hiding in the tree. Vāyu told the donkey: “I am going to hide in this tree. I shall keep you alone alive. But, look, whosoever comes searching for me, do not tell him anything.” The donkey agreed. Then Vāyu hid in the tree. On earth, all life and animals were suffocating and perishing. All the gods were frightened. Śaṅkara set out in search of Vāyu. Looking around, Śaṅkara’s glance came to rest on the donkey. As the donkey was getting a breeze, he was comfortably grazing under the tree. Śaṅkara guessed that the donkey was likely to know Vāyu’s whereabouts. Śaṅkara came close to the donkey. He requested it to tell him the place where Vāyu was staying. But the donkey paid no heed to the request. Śaṅkara bowed down at the feet of the donkey and said: “My *piṇḍa* will remain forever in your hoof. Tell me where is Vāyu.” With these words, the donkey puffed up. Seeing Śaṅkara holding his feet and making a request, the donkey burst with pride. He was so elated that he broke the promise made to Vāyu. He revealed to Śaṅkara that Vāyu was hiding in the tree. On behalf of all the gods, Śaṅkara begged Vāyu’s pardon and requested him to save life on earth. Vāyu was appeased, and agreed to Śaṅkara’s request. But his rage against the donkey did not cool down. As the donkey had not kept his word, Vāyu cursed him: “There shall always be a burden on your back. You will die toiling for ever.”

In the *Vadārs’* mental universe, these narratives compose something similar to a symphony of fugue-like figures. Intertwined polyphonies, they

support one another, and converse with one another. The theme of the *kṣatriya* solar lineage is allied with that of Hanumān, the hero of the *Vadārs*, driven by a resolve to argue with the gods about their control over the earth. His inmost motive is to wrench this control from their grasp after subjecting them to his will. *Vdr-24* definitely realizes this through the figure of the donkey, alter ego of the *Vadārs* and *avatāra* of Hanumān, whom the royal horse from heaven endows with absolute sovereignty over the world. When the narrator identifies the donkey as a form of god, it is, therefore, with reference to this wish for sovereign power that this must be understood. The *Vadārs* identify themselves too much as *kṣatriya* for us to forget all that we said in this respect. But this will to power articulated by the *kṣatriya* figure becomes in *Vdr-24* a sign of something else to the extent that it is vested in the donkey, the *Vadārs*' toiling beast of burden and their alter ego as stoneworker. As we have observed, the narratives do not stage power contests between *Vadārs* and kings in the way they display kings warring against one another for the control of territories. The "signified effects" of *Vdr-24* do not refer to power on earth as such but to power on earth as sign of an identity issue. Sure, the identification of the donkey mounting the celestial horse as a form of god offers a definitive response to what the "narratives of invention" were seeking to achieve, namely, to lay the foundation of the identity—and autonomous existence—of the community in a safe and distinctive way. This was achieved by identifying the community with a god 'found' and installed as one's own. *Vdr-24* fulfils the same quest of identity, but differently. By 'revealing' a god who is no longer an idol 'found' on earth—the alien *mūrti* of a god other than oneself—but the figure of the donkey, the *Vadārs*' alter ego, the narrative 'discovers' that the god of the *Vadārs* is none other than their own community elevated to the status of absolute power through celestial intervention on the ground based on their competence as stoneworkers and builders of the world. The community 'invents' and identifies itself metaphorically in such a way that it has no longer to search for its foundations outside of itself. Henceforth, it does not have to identify itself with some outward godly form alien to itself.

The *Vadār* community discovers itself through its faith in its own worth as *Vadār*, that is to say, stoneworker transformed into a figure of god. The narrative *Vdr-24* is not a political theology for kings. It is a dream of toiling workers, an enigmatic workers' Utopia. Idols found in the earth they dig, *mūrtis* made of the stone they carve, are no longer needed to legitimise their right to existence and claim to social recognition of a status of excellence. In revealing the substance of the *Vadār* identity, the quest culminates in *Vdr-24*, in a pure act of collective faith in Self.

The social and practical reach of the process of identity construction through the figure of the donkey is immense. In the process, the *Vadār* community and the 12 castes associated with the donkey, the *gadav gota*, are entitled to recognize their dignity and excellence on the ground of their daily working condition. They are not to wait for recognition to be granted by an external authority. The discourse is apodictic and self-founding. The assent is an act of faith. The truth-value of the statement is self-asserting. The narrative construction of self is an act of self-attestation. (Ricoeur 1990: 33-4). The narrative is *sui-referential*. The process of narration is self-authorising. Still, *Vdr-24* remains a discursive strategy. It radically reverses value systems and orders of authority. But it is a pure act of faith, and of the *Vadār* alone. The latter is not seen transcending the narrative process and trying to enter with his discourse into history to actually subvert it accordingly. The servant has reconstructed and asserted his identity only in imagination. This is not an insignificant theoretical and practical attainment. The narrative remodelling stems indeed from impulses buried deep down. They are wishes of another history to possibly take shape through a recontextualised appropriation, which remains to be accomplished.

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Notes

1. The present essay is epistemologically similar to the study of the reappropriation of the figure of *Sītā* in the feminine tradition of the grindmill songs. See “L’Appropriation de la figure de *Sītā* dans les chants des paysannes du Maharashtra” in Francois Mallison (1998) and “*Sītā*’s exile” in Centre for Cooperative Research in Social Sciences (CCRSS): <<http://iias.leidenuniv.nl/host/ccrss>>. In both the cases, it is a matter of oral traditions enjoying a suspended existence before they definitely disappear with the passing away of their present narrators, a few elders, their last carriers and enthusiastic spokesmen.

2. In translating, I have employed the word ‘myth’ to translate the Marathi term of Sanskrit origin *dantakathā* as the latter’s semanticism suffers from the same *a priori* as the word ‘myth’, *mutos* as opposed to *logos* (Vernant 1988: 195-217, 1975: 10-11). *Dantakathā* is defined as: (i) “A popular story; an inauthentic tradition; a legend,” (Molesworth, 1975: 400). This corresponds to “*lokkathā*”, a popular narrative; an imaginary *kālpānik* story

or *gosta*, a story deprived of scientific standard *śāstrapramāṇavirahit* or circulated by word of mouth *tondatondi calat aleli gostā*” (Date-Karve, 1988: 1609). The word is composed of *danta* “Tooth; an elephant’s tusk; the peak of a mountain; a projecting portion on the side, a knee (Molesworth, 1975: 400); and *kathā* or “a feigned story; a tale, fable, apologue. (ii). A legend of the exploits of some god related with music and singing, and with embellishing marvels invented at the moment—forming a public entertainment. (iii). Used in the sense of importance, weight, significance. (iv). Speech, saying, telling.” (Molesworth, 1986: 132). The Sanskrit verbal root √ *kath* signifies: “to converse with anyone, to tell, relate, narrate, report, inform, speak about, declare, explain, describe; to announce, show, exhibit, bespeak, betoken; to order, command; to suppose, state,” (Monier-Williams, 1899: 247). The Sanskrit substantive (noun) *kathā* has all the following connotations: “conversation, speech, talking together, talk, story, tale, fable, story-telling, disputation, fiction, feigned story, narrative, discourse, relation, narration.” This proves to be perfectly homologous to *muthos*, which originally stems from *legein*, to speak, to say, to articulate (Vernant, 1988: 196).

3. The *Vadārs* form a group of three endogamous communities, each distinguishing itself by the specificity of the task in which it specialises and excels. The *Mati-Vadārs* extract and break stones. The *Gadi-Vadārs* cut stones to size and transport them in handcarts. The *Patharvats* cut crushing stones and grindmills to be used by housewives. The *Vadār* families and communities in Maharashtra originate from Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, from where they migrated in search of work. If one finds strong *Vadār* communities in those states, their families are found scattered here and there in Maharashtra. In order to survive, the *Vadārs* must often find work as agricultural workers or resort to all sorts of manual tasks, unless they succeed in obtaining land and settling as farmers, or if can take advantage of modern urban facilities such as education and try to raise their social status. More about their condition in the 19th century can be found in the Kolhapur Gazetteer. See Poitevin (1996: 17-8).

4. This is a programme of collective self-training in self-managed study groups organized since 1990 by the Village Community Development Association (VCDA). The theoretical and pedagogical perspectives of that initiation to practices of social action are presented by Lachaier and Pacquement, (1996: 336-346).

5. About the nature of this form of action see *Grassroot socio-cultural action and development* CCRSS: <<http://iias.leidenuniv.nl/host/ccrss>>.

6. “Experimenting with cooperative research” thoughtfully considers this practical experience of ‘cooperative’ research, in the same CCRSS website: <<http://iiias.leidenuniv.nl/host/ccrss>>.

7. I would like only to mention that I am indebted in this respect to the works of Emile Benveniste (1974), Claude Levi-Strauss (1958), Charles Sanders Peirce (1978), and Paul Ricoeur (1971, 1986, 1990).

8. Two examples among others are: the utilisation of *Kattaikkuttu* as form and content in Tamil Nadu, see Hanne de Bruin (1994, 1998a:2:98-130; 1998b:1:12-38, 1999), and the valorization of grindmill songs in Maharashtra, see *Grindmill songs and animation and a performance capacity reactivated*, CCRSS <<http://iiias.leidenuniv.nl/host/ccrss>>.

9. *Vdr-10* (reference to the classification of the myth in the corpus *kathā*, Marathi Narratives of the CCRSS, Pune) was collected on December 12, 1996 from Sukhadev Ram Dhotre, 55, a Gadi-Vadar residing at Tembhurni, (tal. Indapur, Pune district, Maharashtra) by Datta Shinde, secondary school teacher *Karmavir Mahavidyalaya*, Redni (tal. Indapur).

10. *Iḷṣvāku*, grandson of *Sūrya*, the Sun, establishes the “solar lineage,” that of the *kṣatriya*, to which *Rāma* belongs.

11. Datta Shinde collected *Vdr-41* on 9/5/1998 at Gadave Naka, Bidar (Karnataka) from a 40-year-old man, Kauram Gatku of the Dev Vadar community, family of Vadar bards who circulate in the Vadar communities to maintain the living heritage of their traditions.

12. This essay does not consider specifically social processes of articulation of identity through roles, rights, privileged ritual practices called ‘honours’, etc., though they cannot be dissociated from the narrative processes, the only ones to be considered in this essay. But this would require a distinct study.

13. Datta Shinde collected *Vdr-01* on 13/7/1996 from *Kisanā Vadārī*, at *Velāpūr*, tal. *Mālsīras* (*Solāpūr*)

14. Datta Shinde collected *Vdr-33* on 22/10/1997, from *Dulgappā Pujārī* at *Gangvadi*, tal. *Belgāv* (*Belgāv*, Karnataka)

15. I shall come back at the end to this point and the myths *Vdr-02*, *17*, *18*, *26* which state this privileged relationship of the *Vadārs* with *Māruti* in the context of a conflict between *Māruti* and other gods, as this bears very significantly upon the process of identity construction. I consider for the time being only the mode of construction of a self-representation associated with the *Vadārs*’ specific occupation, of which *Māruti* is the *guru*.

16. Datta Shinde collected *Vdr-14* on 2/5/1996 from *Sandipan Somnath Bhosle*, at *Sonari*, tal. *Paranda* (*Usmanabad*).

17. Datta Shinde collected *Vdr-22* on 14/11/1996 from Suryabhan Bala Cavhan, at Jamkhed, tal. Jamkhed, (Ahmednagar). The narrator is a manual worker, he digs wells, can work all day long in the hot sun, but has no regular employment.

18. Central notion of B.R. Ambedkar as a theorist of Indian society. (Herrenschmidt 1996).

19. Datta Shinde collected *Vdr-23* on 16/11/1996 from Ramchandra Dagadu Pavar, at Akola, tal. Akola (Ahmednagar)

20. The reader may have an idea of the importance of this theme once he knows that in addition to the narratives quoted here, eight others stage kings, their enemies, and their wars: *Vdr-03, 13, 16, 31, 35, 36, 39, 42*.

21. Datta Shinde collected *Vdr-34* on 26/10/1997, from Timmana Caugula, at Sankesvar, tal. Cikodi (Belgāv).

22. In *Vdr-09*, the soteriological mytheme serves to justify the interdiction to *Vadār* women for covering their breasts.

23. Datta Shinde collected *Vdr-07* on 13/5/1996 from a *Vadār* woman Sonabaî Rama Dhekule, at Wadsinge, tal. Madha (Solapūr).

24. *Vdr-21* was collected by Datta Shinde on 7/11/1996 from Ramchandra Bapu Cavha, at Loni, tal. Srirampur (Ahmednagar)

25. Datta Shinde collected *Vdr-11* on May 15/5/1996 from Ramchandra Setti Kale at Medad, tal. Malsiras (Solapur)

26. Jitendra Maid collected *Vdr-29* on 17/1/1996 from a *Vadār* woman Lakshmi Motiram Pavar, at Pimpalgav Rotha, tal. Parner (Ahmednagar)

27. Datta Shinde collected *Vdr-09* on 13/5/1996 from Chimma Yallappa Dhotre at Kurde, tal. Kurdu (Solapur).

28. See *Vdr-02, Vdr-18, and Vdr-26*.

29. Datta Shinde collected *Vdr-28* on May 5/5/1997 from Keraba Derage at Vadasinge, tal. Madha (Solapūr).

30. Datta Shinde collected *Vdr-24* on 26/1/1996, from Namdev Baburav Ghungare at Loni, tal. Srirampur (Ahmednagar).

31. See *Vdr-01, Vdr-07, Vdr-09, Vdr-21, Vdr-23, Vdr-33*

32. See *Vdr-08, Vdr-33*

33. Jayraj Rajput collected *Vdr-02* on 5/10/1992 from two elders of the *Vadār* community of Khed Sivapur, tal. Haveli (Pune).

34. Datta Shinde collected *Vdr-18* on 28/6/1996 from Gondappa Dyappa Chavan at Tāmbwewadi (Solapur), and *Vdr-26* on 5/5/1997 from Setiba Jadhav at Barsi, (Solapūr)

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