CHAPTER VII

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

I

Before I proceed to analyse interpersonal relationships among the Mers, I should like to give some idea of Mer domestic economy.

The source of livelihood of most Mers is millets such as jawār, bājaro, wheat, gram, rice, ground-nuts, etc. They also keep such domestic animals as cows, buffaloes, bulls, horses, dogs, etc. The milch animals give them milk, butter and ghee (clarified butter) which they generally sell after satisfying their wants. Horses are an important mode of transport and dogs guard the farm-land, while bullocks are employed in ploughing and drawing water from the well. Vegetables and

fruits are also grown on the farm.

Every Mer family has big storage pots called kothi madeof clay. They accumulate annual quota of grains in these pots. In olden days this storage was recognized as the real wealth of a family. They used to exchange goods by the method of barter. But now, with the introduction of currency, their economy is urbanized.

They have an advanced material culture with iron and wooden agricultural tools. Their household utensils formerly consisted more of earthan ware and bell-metal bowls called tānsali, but now-a-days the utensils of brass, german-silver, tin and glass are in great vogue. Weapons such as battle-axe, sword, shield, and guns are considered indispensable possessions by Mers. Their houses are of earth, stone and cement. Now-a-days they are roofed with factory (mângalore) tiles instead of the potter-made tiles. A traditional Mer house (see map 3) includes an apartment which is used as a cattle-byre and another, kitchen. The outer varandah of a Mer house is provided with platforms (otlā) on both the sides of the passage leading to the entrance of the central hall. The platform is a centre of gossip for the members of a joint family. The outer walls attached to the platforms are decorated with colourful designs and paintings.

The inner kitchen of a Mer house is noted for artistic clay-work in basrelief. It has an arch made of clay

plastered on a framework of bamboo laths and chips. The arch is known as tāk and its main function is to prevent the smoke entering the main (central) hall of the house. The arch of the kitchen and the adjoining inner walls are inlaid with equisite clay-work in basφ-relief, and the walls are also provided with clay shelves (kāndhi-todā) which project from the walls. The big granary pots (kothi) are kept in front of the entrance in the central hall; these pots are in many shapes and sizes. Besides this, a big or a small chest of clay-work called saranjio may also be found in an old-fashioned Mer house.

The stone-work, wood-work and clay-work, wherever they are made use of, are very artistic. A house is furnished with a large number of hand-made quilts, richly carved wooden cots, low-chairs called sāhgāmāchi and carved wooden chests called majus. Every daughter-in-law brings with her a wooden cot, a low chair, some utensils and quilts. These are given as gift to her by her parents. Women bring artistic products into a Mer house while the men farm the land, and formerly, fought as soldiers.

A Mer house is generally decorated with drawings and clay-work; a new house is considered unfit for living till these are there. On auspicious occasions such as the marriage of a son or a daughter every Mer house is redecorated. In the absence of a skilled woman in a Mer house it is customary to send for a relative who does this. An art expert who gives her services is never expected to be paid. She is however, well

looked after by her hosts. She volunteers her services whenever she finds that someone needs her skill. A woman skilled in these arts and crafts is respected among the Mers. She is welcome everywhere. She provides one of the numerous links between her natal and conjugal kin and villages.

While generally women specialise in these arts the men are not well at it. However, we find some boys as well as a few aged men doing the work of painting and relief-work in clay. The work of stone-engraving is done by men exclusively. Some boys paint but they give it up as they grow old.

II

The outer verandah of a Mer house is generally reserved for men. In the absence of men, women sit there to gossip, and during summer when cotton is spun into yarn, women occupy it continuously for a month or two. During the day-time the men sleep and rest on the outer platform. They also pass their leisure in a meeting or dāyaro where they gossip and smoke bidi, dhaturi (pipe), hukkā (hubble-bubble) and drink tea or cāvā (a drink made from coffee berries). The meeting (dayaro) held on auspicious occasions like betrothal, marriage, and bard's 'name recording' ceremonies and sometimes those held at death take place on the outer platform. During night they hear bhajanas sung by the men of their own caste or by professional singers of Bava-Sadhu or Charan castes. During winter or monsoon

they assemble to hear bhajanas inside the house and the women sit in a corner to listen them. Normally, both the sexes dine together, but on special occasions the men dine first and the women afterwards. The meal is generally cooked and served by women but at the caste dinners the men take an active part in cooking as well as in serving food. Both men as well as women act as mediums of some deities, but men medium predominate over women medium in strength and power.

On ceremonial occasions male guests sit outside the house while the women guests sit in the central hall. Similarly, when people assemble at the village chorā during Holi or other festival, men sit on the platform of the chorā and women sit on one side on the ground. Men dance a group-dance called dāndiā -rās while women watch from a distance. But when women sing and dance the rāsadā and hitch elderly men seldom watch them for any length of time. On the other hand, in the mass gatherings, such as local fairs and other festivies, both men and women take active interest; they form their small companies, and watch each other's activities with romantic interest. The young men and women jostle each other in crowd, and when possible indulge in joking and teasing. It is at this time that brawls occur resulting occasionally in axe-fight and shooting.

Arrack (dāru of molasses) and non-vegetarian food are generally taken by men, but women refrain from them. There are many men who are strictly vegetarian; and women dislike non-vegetarianism in men so much so that they will not allow their husbands

to use the kitchen utensils for cooking meat or drinking liquor. The habit of smoking is associated with men but quite a fair number of women in the low-land and a few in the high-land smoke. Gambling (now-a-days condemned and prohibited by the Government of Saurashtra) is also a favourite pastime of the Mers. Gambling for small stakes like a pice or an anna is considered to be an innocent pastime worth indulging in at some festivals. Generally the men and the women do not combine in gambling-dens, but in some villages where it has become a daily occurrence, both sexes are reported to take part in it. The Mers of the low-land take much more interest in gambling than those of the high-land, the former get more leisure in summer as well as during monsoon.

Women are expected to remain faithful to their husbands, but when a husband is unfaithful the wife commonly seeks divorce. It may also induce a woman to indulge in extramarital relationship. Sex relations with a member of the same lineage are considered serious, and the guilty parties may be beaten or even killed by their kin. A woman suspicious of her husband's character never allows him to take his meal in silence. Such a woman makes sarcastic remarks on his illicit activities and even showers abuses upon him in the presence of elders. And a man abuses, beats, and even kills an adulterous wife.

Now-a-days a seat is reserved for a woman member in the village panchāyat, and women in some villages have taken an active part in the assembly of the village elders. The position of women has remained almost equal to men in daily life and

it is found that the women considerably control economic activities. In daily course of life, women go with men to the market and freely express their views in choosing or rejecting things while making purchases of household goods.

III

The joint family is usually the residential unit among Mers. The members of a joint family work under the authority of the father, the head of the family. The married sons and others may live in one or more homesteads in the same village, or a few of them may live at times in temporary huts built on the farm-land. All the members may or may not share common food but they cooperate in domestic and field-labour till the sons are not partitioned. Children begin to do miscellaneous work from their early life and they are a greater asset after they reach the age of fifteen. A boy goes to the field with his father in the early morning, looks after the bullocks, ploughs, sows, draws water from the well for irrigation and helps in weeding and reaping the crops. A girl may also do the work of weeding or reaping but her special duties are milking, fetching noon-dinner (bhāt) of butter-milk (chhāsh) and millet bread for her father and brothers working in the field. It is also the duty of a girl to cook food, to fetch water to the house, to churn the butter-milk and to wash clothes.

A married girl leaves the natal family for her

husband's house which is usually in a different village. There she lives with her conjugal family for some years but if her husband's kin do not treat her well, she may induce her husband to break away from the joint family. In the beginning she may be able only to obtain separate cooking accommodation and for a few years she has to work jointly with the members of her husband's family. Till the land and other property are not partitioned between her husband and his brothers, she cannot be economically independent from the joint family.

A young girl may live with her step-father in order to remain in the company of her mother. But when she grows up, she may like to go to her genitor living in a different village or she may go to her mother's brother's family and live there. If the step-father is kind enough, he may assume responsibility for marrying her and supporting her in the case she is divorced or becomes a widow. A girl living with her step-father may also receive invitation from her genitor's family and her mother's brother's family. In case she chooses to live with her genitor, she has to obey the dictates of her step-mother (the second wife of her father). She calls her step-mother as <u>mosi</u> or mother's sister as stated earlier; but she is not certain of getting affectionate behaviour from her step-mother. So the best place for such a girl is to live with the natal family of her mother; her position there is of a potential daughter-in-law, and this is an additional reason for being welcome there.

Plage XI

(a) A grand-mother with the grand-children: Children are fond of their grand-mothers who fondle them and tell them stories. On the wall in the back-ground is seen the decoration executed by the women of the house. Sodhana, April, 1950.

(b) A mother with her son: A young mother, the daughter of the Patel of Kansabad seen with her son. December, 1953.

Married girls become, sometimes, members of either the mother's brother's family or of the father's sister's family, both situated in different villages. Normally a daughter with or without children pays occasional visits to the natal family, lives there for a few weeks and helps in domestic and field duties. She receives gifts from the father, or from her full- or half-brother. The gift that a woman carries from her natal family to her conjugal family is known as khāndanu and it primarily consists of a quantity of grains, vegetables, etc. If her parents are poor and cannot give her any gifts, it is likely that the members of her conjugal family will taunt her.

Married sons in a poor joint family which has only one house, find it difficult to remain in one and the same village. They, therefore, migrate to neighbouring villages and establish independent families and earn their living by working as farm-labourers or sāthis on somebody's field. If a boy's mother's brother is well-to-do having a large amount of cultivable land, the latter may invite him to his village and employ him as a farm-labourer.

Mers are polygynous, but no one has more than three wives. In such a case, the co-wives live in different houses situated in a compound, and cooperate with the head of the family. Till the sons of the co-wives do not marry, the property and the farm-land are not divided.

We come across some individuals who have taken concubines from their own caste. Not much odium seems to attach to them and their children are treated as ordinary children for all purposes. I have found a man's daughter by a concubine treated like a half-sibling by the children of his legally married wives. The concubine's daughter was eventually married to a respectable Mer family with all due ceremony. The woman of some other caste may also come as a concubine to a Mer; but her children are absorbed into the Mer caste only after a good deal of argument on the part of the caste elders.

A Mer family consists of the members of more than one lineage, only the wives belong to other lineages. A farm-labourer (sāthi) in a Mer family is also an outsider; he may be of the same caste, or of the Rabari or Koli caste. These sāthis pass most of their time in fields and farm-lands, and sleep in the huts temporarily erected for them on the farm. A sāthi is looked upon as a family member and shares food and clothing with the family of his master. But a sāthi is not the permanent member of a Mer family (as the daughters-in-law are) because he may leave the family after his period being over. The contract of a sāthi has normally to be renewed from Holi to Holi every year, but in some cases the contract may cover more than one year.

IV

Property generally goes to agnatic relatives, failing which it goes to the women (especially daughters) born in the lineage and to their children. When a man leaves behind brothers but no sons, the surviving brothers (real or classificatory) inherit his property. During the lifetime a man or a woman having only a daughter invites the son-in-law (the daughter's husband) to live in his or her house. The son-in-law prefers to migrate to the mother-in-law's house or the father-in-law's house with a view to see that the latter's property is given to him or to his children. The man who lives in the parents-in-law's house is popularly known as ghar jamāi and he is looked down upon for the fact that he sought the shelter of the parents-in-law. A ghar jamāi is not generally in good terms with the agnatic relatives of his parents-in-law whose property he inherits. The position of such a man, however, does not alter in his lineage; he is also entitled to inherit property from his agnatic lineage.

A man rarely adopts a step-son, i.e.,wife's first husband's son. If the wife is the widow of his elder brother, i.e., if he has sought a leviratic union, he adopts the step-son who in fact is his brother's son. However, a clear distinction is made between the step-son and one's own son, whether the wife is the elder brother's widow or one who has been divorced

from a man of different lineage from one's own. The following instances show how a man behaves when the question of inheritance and adoption arises in different situations.

A woman took divorce from her husband, A, when she was three months advanced in pregnancy and married another man, B, soon after. It was agreed that she would give the child to A when the child grew up. A message was sent to A when she gave birth to a son, X. Thereupon members of A's family publicly expressed joy by distributing molasses (gol-dhānā) among their relatives for the birth of a son in the family. In the meantime, A married a woman, C, who had been divorced from her husband D, and who brought with her D's son Y, three years old. Time went by and the mother waited for someone from A's family to take charge of the son X, but nobody turned up. After some years she learnt that A refused to accept X as his son. On the contrary, A took Y as his legitimate son and got his name recorded in the book (chopadā) of his lineage bard. (It appears strange here, why Y's real (sociological) father did not object to this; it is likely that Y might have been begotten by A).

This created a very perplexing situation for X. His name was neither recorded in the lineage of A (where it should have been recorded) nor in the lineage of B (where his status was that of a step-son only). He was, therefore denied share either in the property of A or in that of B. He filed a suit against A for a share in the latter's property. In order to strengthen his case he tried to get his name recorded in A's

genealogical book, but he could not succeed eventhough his paternal uncles (A's brothers) tried to help him in establishing his rights. This boy who is a youth now, has become a mendicant as his position in his genitor's lineage is not recognized. He can, however, marry a Mer woman if he wants to, but he has given up the idea. Here the point to be emphasised is that the genealogical books of the lineage bards are recognized as reliable source to prove a man's claim of inheritance on the ancestral property even through several generations. But when and where forgery takes place these books give unreliable data.

A murder case from a Mer family also throws light on the subject of inheritance. A childless widow adopted her sister's son who belonged to a different lineage than that of her husband. But her deceased husband's brother wanted that his own son may be adopted instead. This man was under the impression that his brother's widow had not yet registered the adoption of her sister's son. To stop any such development he once attacked the widow and killed her while she was preparing cow-dung cakes. But it was in vain as the registration had already taken place. All that we learn from this incident is that there is a conflict between a woman's loyalty to her conjugal lineage and her natal one; and that the members of a lineage try to see that the property of any one of them does not go to a member of a different lineage.

It is also interesting to note that a widow with children can claim a share in the property of her husband's

father if she does not remarry. I was present when a man in the village Kansabad (low-land) was forced by the court to give an equal share in his father's property to the widow and the children of his deceased brother.

A Mer named Giga Sala, from the same village, married in the village Mayari. His father-in-law had no son, so the latter adopted his (Giga's) son named Ebho. After some time Giga's father-in-law died sonless, and later on his son Ebho also died unmarried. Ebho had, naturally, no son. So Giga claimed the property of his father-in-law on the ground that it was given to his deceased son. But another daughter of his father-in-law, i.e., his wife's sister, demanded that the property may be given to her son. She filed a suit against Giga who was in possession of his father-in-law's property. The dispute was not settled while I was in the field. This throws light on the fact that the daughters (of a sonless father) claim equal right to the property of their father.

V

The sons are the permanent members of a family while the daughters migrate to the family of their husbands. A man acquires full rights over his wife's life and labour. He has exclusive sexual rights over her and the resultant children are generally the members of his family. An adulterous woman may be punished and given divorce as soon as her illicit activities

are detected. If she has committed adultery with a man living in the same village and of the same lineage as her husband, a condition is made to the effect that she may not marry the man with whom she has committed adultery.

A marriage is marked by a series of customary visits and payments by the groom's party to the bride's. The bride-price known as dēj, about Rs. 200-250, paid by the groom's party, marks the final bond between the bride and the groom. In case of divorce, the authority over the couple's children goes usually to the husband's family. But if the husband abandons his wife without the latter's consent, and if he does not obtain divorce according to the rules and regulations of the Mer caste, and if the wife is not going to remarry someone else, she is allowed to keep the children with her. Such a divorced woman may establish a new house of her own, or may remain as a member of her natal family. The children of divorced women when grown up, generally like to go or are induced to go to their father's family where they have the right to be members. The children have also the right to demand help from their father in getting married. It is, however, likely that children brought up in their mother's brother's family may not like to go to the father's family, if the latter is not well-to-do.

A woman regards her husband's father and mother as the maternal uncle (māmā) and the paternal aunt (fui). She is, however, a stranger to the members of the conjugal family and to the agnatic relatives of her husband, but she seems to find

little difficulty in mixing with them. She is always serviceable to the relatives of her husband. As a wife, her duty is to work in the house as well as in the field, and to assist her partner in all his undertakings. The property of her husband is accessible to her for use. Articles such as wooden cot, chair, quilts, utensils and ornaments of gold and silver which she brings as bride-wealth (kariāvar) from her parents may also be made use of by the members of her conjugal family. She may also bring a milch animal from her parents; this animal (generally a buffalo) is known as dhāmalān and it is her property absolutely. In the case of divorce the dhāmalān has to be returned along with the calves, or paid for by the boy's family. The other articles of bride-wealth (kariavar) are also returned to the bride's family on divorce. The question of returning the bride-wealth does not arise when a widow chooses to remarry her husband's younger brother, or to continue to stay in her husband's family for the rest of her life.

The father has the right of marrying his children, sons as well as daughters, and on his death the right passes to his agnatic kin. The paternal uncles are recognized as the guardians of the children. At times a widow settles in her natal family for the rest of her life and gives the paternal uncle all the rights over her children. Generally the children of such a widow are married with the consent of their paternal uncles; but if the mother is dissatisfied with the latter's decisions she boldly opposes the transaction and she has in

this her brothers' support.

The chief factor which induces the grown up children of divorced or dead mother to remain with their father is their right to take a share in the father's ancestral property. A father may not give anything to a disobedient son, and a boy who is deserted by his father goes to live with his mother's brother. A boy takes the help of his mother's brother in filing a suit against his father if the latter refuses to give him a share in the property. A mother's brother is always anxious to assist his sister and her children when they are in difficulty; he may also help his sister's husband, invite the latter to his village and give him on lease a portion of his land to cultivate. If a girl is brought up in the maternal uncle's family and got married by the latter, her father may not get the bride-price. And when the mother's brother arranges the marriage of his nephew, the latter incurs all the expenditure, including the bride-price to be given to the bride's party.

A woman always follows the principle of self-respect and self-determination, if she is not well-treated by her husband or by the members of her husband's family, She goes to her natal family, obtains divorce from her husband, and re-marries. But she advises the children by her first husband to follow the principle of gain and benefit; she induces the children to go to live with the father, claim the share in his property and get married with his help. A Mer girl may choose

to marry either the mother's brother's son or father's sister's son. Her choice depends upon the richness and personal influence of either the mother or the father. Similarly a boy may experience a difficulty in choosing either the mother's brother's daughter or the father's sister's daughter.

Authority over the children depends also upon the initiative taken by the husband or wife in seeking divorce. A husband who enforces divorce may not establish full claim over the children of his deserted wife who has the right to refuse to part with the children. An adulterous wife may not get the support in keeping her children after she is given divorce. And also if a wife seeks divorce without the consent of the husband, and that too for remarriage, she loses the right to keep the children. Her parents has to pay a fine (vēl) to the husband's party when she remarriages. A widow who wants to remarry has to return half the amount of bride-price given to her family by her dead husband's family. A sort of concession is given to a widow who wants to remarry and who has a son. When such a widow remarries and keeps her son with her she has not to pay the sum to her conjugal family. The reason behind this concession given to a widow having a son is that her son is considered to be the rightful man to receive the fine (vēl) on behalf of his father's family and in this context the son of a widow is known as vēlio, (adjuectival form of vēl) meaning, the receiver of the vēl or the fine.

Thus the children of a divorced wife may stay with her in her father's family or step-father's family or with the family of one of their agnatic relatives. If a divorce has been fully agreed upon by the wife, the children are handed over, sooner or later, to the husband without opposition. A man seeking divorce has to pay some fine known as vēl to the girl's party; if he refuses or fails to pay the sum, the wife and her agnatic kinsmen would not allow him to take the children till he pays the fine. However, the principle of patrilineal heredity plays a great part in shaping a man's behaviour. The grown up children are urged to go to live with the father in order that they can strengthen their claim to the property of the father. But at the same time the mother seems to have been given some substantial powers and with her, her agnatic relatives also. It is not like the Coorg System in which the agnatic lineage has got much greater power over the children.

VI

In matrimonial transactions, right from the time of betrothal upto the completion of the marriage, the agnatic relatives on the bride's and even the groom's side take the main part in all the events. The paternal uncles of both the bride and the groom offer molasses (goi) to each other on the previous day of the marriage. The paternal uncle keeps the marriage-sword called khāndun on behalf of the groom. It must

be added that the marriage-sword (khāndun) is regarded as a substitute for the groom and is subject to rites in the marriage. The sisters and the paternal aunts of the bride and the groom play an important role on such occasions. When the ceremony is going on, the sisters and the aunts (real or classificatory) of the bride may put obstacles in the activities of the person who holds the marriage-sword. They may try to tease the person, prick needles, tie his clothes with the pedestal on which he sits and thus distract his attention from the performance of the rite. Similarly, the sisters and the paternal aunts of the groom do take care to see that the person holding the marriage-sword is not much harrased or distracted from the duty of circumembulting the sacred fire. These activities of the relatives of the bride and the groom pave a way for the affinal relatives to come into closer contact and thereby establish cordial relationships.

The presence of the mother's brother (māmā) of the bride and the groom is indispensable on such occasions. The most important duty of the man is to present gifts, ritually known as māmērun, to the sister on the marriage of the latter's daughter or the son. On these occasions he is expected to present suits of clothes to his sister and her husband and also to the latter's brothers. A person calls these relatives by the name karoiṛ which refers also to father's sister, one's own daughter, sister (half, full or classificatory) and their children. To make it more clear, the term karoiān is an

adjectival form of karoi which primarily refers to females. The husbands and the children of these women, named karoi, have legitimate right to receive gifts from non-karoiān men.

At the time of the marriage of a Mer boy or girl the agnatic relatives congratulate them by presenting them with some money. Such a present is known as vadhāmanu and it is a ritual act of congratulation accompanied by a gift of money. This gift is returned when the donor's children marry. If the donor of the gift (vadhāmanu) is a person of karoiān group, the gift is returned with some increase, generally before the conclusion of the marriage. In relation to the karoiān, the giving of gift is one sided, i.e., the gifts go to the karoian but it is not expected to return. There is a proverb among the Mers which says, "karoiān nē jarē", i.e. gifts can be digested by karoiān. The gifts that come to a person, to his wife or to his children, from the relatives of one's mother's brother's category or from one's wife's agnatic relatives has not to be returned. It has been made clear earlier that a bride is given a wooden cot as one of the articles of bride-wealth (kariāvar). The field of the wooden cot is provided with inkle or linen tape (pāti) and the task of winding the tape is given to the groom's younger brother. When the bride is taken to the groom's house by a marriage-party (consisting of the male and female relatives of the groom) known as āṇāni jān, the younger brother of the groom has to perform another duty towards the bride. He has to carry in his hand the bottle of hair-oil (dhupēl) given

to the bride by her parents. When there is no younger brother, these duties are assigned to any agnatic male member younger to the groom.

It is interesting to note here that at the time of the marriage the elder brother of the groom, (i.e., the jēth of the bride) takes the responsibility of holding and protecting the marriage-sword (khāndun) on behalf of the groom, but at the time of taking the bride to the groom's house the younger brother of the groom (i.e. the dēr of the bride) takes the responsibility of winding the linen tape round her cot and of carrying her hair-oil on the way. This shows the difference between the duties assigned to the elder brother and the younger brother of the groom towards the bride. The behaviour of the elder brother of the groom is of respectable distance towards the bride; he is expected to protect her chastity. The bride has, therefore, to show respect towards the elder brother of her husband. Her children call him as moto bāp or bhābho, the terms which convey the sense of a grand-father. On the other hand, the groom's younger brother is on terms of familiarity with the bride, and according to the type of leviratic unions prevalent, he might become her husband on the elder brother's death. Relations between a woman and her husband's younger brother are some what free.

The mother of the groom is a very important person at marriage. She is the leading member of a group of four women who perform the ritual act of vadhāvavun, the act which

constitutes a form of reception given to the groom when he finishes performing rites such as, the worship of the god Ganesha and Kshetrapala. It should be noted that if any one of these paternal aunts or the mother of the groom is a widow, she is not entitled to perform the act of vadhāvavun because widow-hood is considered inauspicious.

VII

On the death of a man or a woman, it is the duty of his or her agnatic relatives to see that the funerary rites are properly performed. It is the duty of a son or, failing him, of the nearest agnatic descendents to carry the corpse to the cremation ground and to set fire to the funeral pyre. All the agnatic and affinal relatives living in a village must stop their work for the day and observe mourning. They go in a procession when the corpse is taken to the cremation ground, and wait there till the corpse is disposed of. The women relatives accompany the cortege beating their breasts and crying. It is considered polluting to take part in the mourning procession and so, all those who take part in it have to take a purificatory bath before entering the house. On the first day, women relatives will carry food to the mourning house where no cooking is done.

On the next day, the agnatic relatives of the deceased man or a deceased woman's (if she dies in her conjugal

family) husband's agnatic relatives meet at the chorā of the village and send the news to other cognates and affines living in neighbouring villages. The relatives living in other villages must come to console the bereaved family before the end of the 11th day. A relative may be excused if he does not turn up for a wedding or such other auspicious occasion, but he will not be easily forgiven if he does not turn up for some one's death.

The mortuary ceremony, shrādha and ghadasun take place on the eleventh day. Anyone of the nearest married male descendents, e.g., son, son's son, brother's son, etc., has to take part as a subject. It is the duty of the agnatic relatives of the deceased to present clothes or a piece of cloth known as pot to the subject. This mourning-gift is given to console the principal mourner, namely, the subject of the ceremony. When a woman becomes widow, it is the duty of her brother to present her with a special suit of clothes known as rāndisālo. Her brother also gives pot to the person who becomes the subject of the ceremony. It is on the eleventh day that a feast is given to the agnatic relatives and the nearest affines. The nearest agnates (in the range of three to four generations) of the deceased man or the agnates of a dead woman's husband, assist the cooks in cooking the dinner. I should add here that on all feasts, whether of marriage, death or of a religious occasion, the male agnatic relatives assist the cooks.

VIII

I will now refer to the rules of familiarity and avoidance, and also to joking relationships include abuse.

A Mer son-in-law and daughter-in-law should behave respectfully towards their parents-in-law. They may not indulge in loose talk with those who come in the category of parents-in-law. Similarly, a younger brother's wife should not speak in a loud tone in the presence of her husband's elder brothers whom her children, as well as she herself, call by an honorific term such as bhābhā (pl.) or motā bāp (pl.). The persons of opposite sexes in a family, e.g., a father and a daughter, a brother and a sister, should show avoidance towards each other.

The behaviour of grand-children towards grand-parents is not one of respect and avoidance. Grand-children talk freely with and joke at grand-parents, but they may not carry such a liberty to the extreme. A husband and a wife may hurl obscene abuse at each other inside the home and even in the presence of their children. But when the couple go out in public they consider it shameful to indulge in loose talk and to walk together. A woman of any age will always walk a little distance behind her husband when they go out together.

Mother-in-law avoidance is basically absent among the Mers. One's mother-in-law may or may not be one's father's real or classificatory sister, but sheis looked upon as such and therefore one has close relations with her. As a matter of fact these 'in-laws' regard each other as the members of the same family. So while one shows respect to one's mother-in-law, such respect does not ban a certain amount of free talk.

Free joking, milder form of teasing and abusing exist among the relatives of the same sex. Brothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, and two men or two women whose children have married, may indulge in joking with each other. But in all cases of joking and teasing the younger members are expected to show restraint. It is significant to note here that while joking in one's family is harmless, in a village or public meeting it may lead to a fight.

A man may joke with a person from an affinal lineage, but not with his mother's brother (māmo). Mother's brother is an elder and also a potential father-in-law and hence deserves respect. A man should likewise respect an elder member of his mother's brother's lineage, but this is not observed very strictly. If a member of the mother's brother's lineage is of the same age and status as that of a man concerned, joking relationship exists between them.

There is a system behind the use of obscene abuse among the Mers. The development of the following points will

reveal the fact that the use of obscene terms with reference to specific relatives is regulated by Mer kinship system.

(i) In addition to mild joking about physical deformity, teasing, nick-naming, etc., the Mers use obscene abuse for their near relatives not to show antagonism but to express friendship and affection. The use of Mer abuse form a part of joking relationship. The use of abuse involving one's sisters (e.g., tāri bēnnē chodān, lit. I will copulate with your sister, or bēn chod, lit. one who copulates one's sister), is common between the cross-cousins, a woman and her husband's younger brother, a husband and a wife, and between the friends who belong to different lineages.

Obscenity is generally accompanied by lewd conversation, horseplay and teasing which may take the form of the fondling of the breasts and playing with sexual organs. A few Mer villages where the people of different lineages live, are notorious for indulgence in extramarital sex relations.

When unacquainted men meet somewhere, they would perform the ritual act of salutation known as rām rāmi (i.e., salute by shaking hands and saying rām rām), each asks the other to which lineage does he belong. The moment one of them knows that his stranger friend is an affine, he may abuse him involving his (friend's) sister, and the opposite may do the same thing in return with a view to establish intimacy. In this context both such friends are supposed to have married

each other's sisters, i.e., they are supposed to have exchanged their sisters for marriage. The hurling of abuse involving a sister of the opposite person may be considered to be a direct way of showing that the speaker belongs to an affinal lineage. A surprise meeting of two strange men of the same lineage may also result in joking and abusing, but the use of abuse involving each other's sisters is absent.

(ii) There are some vague obscene terms such as bhosadinā (pl.) (lit. belonging to female genital), chodinā (pl.) (lit. one who is the outcome of copulation), etc., which do not involve any particular individual but refer only to sex organs and to the act of copulation. These abuses are not considered very serious and therefore they may be exchanged between (real or classificatory) sisters, brothers, a brother and a sister, a woman and her husband's sisters and between any man and woman, even when they belong to the same lineage.

(iii) The abuse mentioned in (i) and (ii) are both used to exemplify the principle of reciprocity. But the type of those listed in (ii) may also be used only by one of the two participants, especially, by the elder ones. An elder person may level an abuse against a youngster, who on the other hand, is not entitled to reply in the same or equivalent terms. For instance, when the parents, uncles or aunts (real or classificatory) abuse a person he should not pay these elders in the same coin. However, we come across some children or grandchildren abusing their elders and they are tolerated on the

ground that they do not know the real implications of the obscene terms.

(iv) The members of a lineage or of an agnatic group may abuse one another involving their mothers. The abuse may be, tāri mānē chodē (lit., may some one copulate with your mother) tāri māno piko mārān (lit., may I copulate with your mother), etc. This is done because a woman who is the mother of one's agnate is generally a member of one's affinal lineage and so an abuse involving such a woman is permitted.

On the other hand, a sensible man will not abuse an affine in which the latter's mother is involved, because, it is likely that the affine's mother may be a member of one's own lineage and therefore as good as a sister.

(v) The month of ashwina (October-November) is a month of free joking and abusing among the Mers. The favourite abuse during this month is gadhēdānē jā, i.e., have sexual intercourse with an ass. This abuse is levelled by a person against an affine. To have intercourse with an ass is considered very low and therefore to accuse one's affine of such an act is to greatly ridicule to him or her.

A person induces his affine to enter into a conversation with him and he tries to make him say 'yes' (hā) to something and then he will tell him gadhēdānē jā, i.e. have sexual intercourse with an ass.

This type of joking relationship is common between a woman and her husband's younger brother or sister, or between the friends of affinal lineages.

These instances show how the use of obscene abuse is regulated by kinship system found among them.

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