CHAPTER 2

THE MEOS OF MEWĀT:
FRACUTED IDENTITY?

Departing from the conventional notions of religion, culture and civilization, and drawing heavily on an immense diversity of belief in the countryside, the Meos of Mewāt set an unprecedented example of a living peasant community that has offered prolonged armed resistance and unequivocal cultural co-existence for about a millennium.

The Meos are an indigenous and highly composite tribe found in the hill country of Mewāt, an ill-defined tract lying south of Delhi and comprising part of the British districts of Gurgaon, Mathura, and most of Alwar and a little of Bharatpur state.1 It is believed that they were originally Rājpūts who were converted to the Mahomedan faith in the medieval times but still retain a good many Hindu religious customs. The Meos profess the beliefs of Islam but the roots of their ethnic structure are in Hindu caste society. In fact, the neighbouring Hindu Jats, Minas, Ahirs and Rājpūts share the same bāns, pāls and gotras.2 The Meos have given their name to Mewāt. They were predominantly agrarian and lived mostly in villages. The dialect spoken by the community among themselves can be termed theth Mewāti which is a dialect of Rājasthāni and belongs to the Indo-Aryan languages of Indo-European origin.3 The chief characteristics of the present-day Meos is their fusion of Hindu and Muslim culture in

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Map 3: Situating Mewāt in Eastern Rājputāna

Source: Shail Mayaram, Resisting Regimes: Myth, Memory and the Shaping of a Muslim Identity, Delhi, 1997, p. 2.
their customs and practices which binds them to a composite culture. They have no conventional written histories but possess excellent cultural memory and oral traditions which narrate their prolonged resistance with the Turks, Afghans, Mughals, Jat, Rājпутs and the British.

SECTION A
MEO ORIGINS AND EARLY BEGINNINGS

Meo Origins:

The scholars recognize the existence of a distinct people in the region of Mewāt known as the Meos. Interestingly, the community remained constant while the nomenclature was a variable in their history and tradition. They are generally referred to as ‘Meds’, ‘Mids’, ‘Khānzādas’, ‘Mewātis’ or ‘Meos’, but the latter term has been more preferred and found convenient particularly after their conversion to Islam.

The origin of the term ‘Meo’ eludes the scholars, some deriving it from Mewāt, which is said to be the Sanskrit mina-vati, ‘rich in fish,’ while the Meos themselves derive it from maheo, a word used in driving cattle. According to Rose, ‘it seems highly probable that Meo simply means “hill-man.”' To some, ‘Meo’ originated from the word ‘Med.’, ‘The Meds or Mands’, Cunningham writes, ‘as they are called by the

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5 Crooke, op. cit., p. 485; Cited by Imperial Gazetteers, vol. xvii, p. 313.
6 Rose, op. cit., p. 82.
7 Shamsuddin, Meos, p. 18.
Mohammedan writers, are almost certainly the representatives of the *Mandrueni*, who lived on the *Mandrus* river, to the south of the Oxus; and as their name is found in the Punjab from the beginning of the Christian era downwards, I conclude that they must have accompanied their neighbours, the *latii*, or *Jats*, on their forced migrations to Ariana and India."

According to one tradition, Meo are also known as Meu and Meo Bohra. The Meo believe that they are the progeny of one of the two brothers viz. Meu and Maru. The descendants of Meu settled in Mewāt and those of Maru in Marwar.

Mewāt takes its name from the Meos, who appear to have been originally the same as the Minas of Rājpūtana, but say that they have not intermarried with these since the time of Akbar. Mina is believed to have come from Amina Meo or 'pure' Meo, a term applied to those who did not adopt Islam. The Hindu Meos and Minas make Rājpūt claims, but they are not so regarded by other Hindus, and it is certain that outsiders have often been admitted in the past. Their tribal constitution differs in different places. The Mohammedan Meos call themselves Mewāti." Their most remarkable trait is that being a Muslim community, they claim that they belonged to the *Ksatriya* caste and their origin can be traced to the *Chandrabansis*, the *Suryabansis* and

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10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., *Imperial Gazetteers*, op. cit. p. 313.
12 Crooke, op. cit., p. 313.
Agnikuls of the Rājpūt nobility glittering with such appellations as the Tomars, Yadavas, Chauhans and Rathors.  

The word Mewāti means a resident of the land of Mewāt. The frequency of the historical references to the term Mewāti, particularly by the Persian chroniclers, makes the question of their identification quite pertinent. Who are the Mewātis? Mewāt or the country of Meos, which included the districts of Mathura, Gurgaon and parts of Alwar and Bharatpur states, became an abode of notorious rebels and a source of constant trouble to the rulers of Delhi. It was ruled by Khānzādas, a line founded by Bahadur Nahir. The Yaduvanshi Rājpūts of Bayana and Tahangarh, having been deprived of their strongholds and territories, had migrated to this region; the descendants of Prithviraj of Ajmer were already living in the area now known as Ratha (Alwar district); the Jadon Bhattis had established themselves at Kaman, Tijara and Sarhatta (northern Alwar). These disgruntled nobles were known as Mewātis, who combined together to form a more or less solid block against the Delhi authority.

Though Khānzādas claim independent genealogies but it is evident that they were part of the larger group called the Mewātis that included ancestors of Meo clans. It is also suggested that the followers of the Khānzāda Bahadur Nahar are Mewātis or Miwan. It may be noted that Bahadur Nahar’s own grandson is referred to as Jalal Khan

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14 Shamsuddin, Meos, p. 18.  
16 Ibid.  
Map 4: Mewat Region and Adjoining Areas

Source: Shail Mayaram, Resisting Regimes: Myth, Memory and the Shaping of a Muslim Identity, Delhi, 1997, p. 3.
Meo. Later British writers distinguished between the Meos and the Khânzâdas, but they became differentiated only at this stage of Mewät's history, when for a brief period the Khânzâdas were co-opted by the sultanate. The Khânzâda chiefs were active in court politics, and Bahadur Nahar played a prominent role in succession dispute, switching sides to enhance his own maneuverability.

The Meos are divided into fifty-two original gots, which include twelve pals (See Table 1). Of the fifty-two original gots, three gots are named after the parent village, eight show Râjpût tribal names, eight those of Brahman and Gujar, and four occupational names, while the remaining sixteen are of unknown derivation. Thus, the Mewät is inhabited by and the Meo tribe is composed of four Râjpût stocks, Tunwars from Delhi, Jaduns from Mathura, Kachwahas from Jaipur and Chauhans from Ajmer.

The Meos who accepted Islam were divided into seven pals—Dahngal (Kachwaha), Saingal (Badgujar), Chirklot, Demrot, Panglot, Dhulot and Nai (the last five being Jaduns by origin). The origin of the pals reveal the distinct identity and the spatial spread of each pal. The Kalesa pal is eponymous and originated in Mewar, Kalsia (Kalesa?) the eponym being called Meo in consequence. The pal is sometimes called Pal Palhat. The Derowal pal was founded by Dera of Malab in Nuh. Der means 'a piece of land detached from the foot of a hill.' The Landawat pal, founded by Landu, of Niana in the Kishengarh tahsil of Alwar is also called Bhagoria from Bhagora, its earliest settlement in Alwar, and Larawat, owing to its warlike propensities. The Ratawat pal

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20 Ibid.
21 Rose, op. cit., p. 82.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid. pp. 82-83.
claims descent from Rattu, of Santhori in Alwar; but the name may well be derived from Rath or Rathauri, its earliest seat. The Balut pal is also eponymous, and originated in Silkoh, in the Nuh tehsil. The Dahngal pal claims descent from Raja Harpal, a descendent of Raja Nal. His eldest son Dahngal became a Muhammadan and the pal is named after, but it is also called Raisinia from Rasina, his original home in Nuh tehsil, or Ghaseria from Ghaseera in the same tehsil, to which place Dahngal migrated. The Saingal pal is named after its eponym. The Chirklot pal claims descent from Chirkan Rao of Dhulawat in Nuh, but it is said that the ancestors of this and the four following pals were imprisoned by Qutb-ud Din Aibak in Ballabgarh, and only escaped in various disguises. Thus the Chirklots forebear was disguised as a chhinka seller and so obtained for his descendants the name of Chirklot.

The Demrot pal is also known as the Raopala after Rao Bhimar, its founder, who was styled Demur. It, too, is fancifully derived from deru, a drum or some kind of musical instrument. The Panglot pal claims descent from Poan, and is improbably derived from pongi, also a kind of musical instrument. The Dhulot pal is similarly descended from Dohal, its ancestor, or the name is derived from dohal, 'in which he used to lie, as if insane.' The head-quarters of this pal is at Doha in Firozpur. Naipal is derived from Nai, 'barber,' or hardly less improbably from niyai, because its founder gave an impartial decision in the tribal dissensions.
Map 5: Location of twelve Meo Pals and thirteenth Pallakra

Meo Conversion to Islam:

The Meos were formerly Hindus. Estimates vary with regard to the time when their conversion to Islam took place. According to Cunningham, the conversion did not take place till the reign of Ferozeshah Tuglaq.

Meo traditions are replete with several versions of their conversion to Islam. Hunter is of the view that the process of conversion started at the time of Mahmood of Ghazni in the eleventh century. Watson and Kaye state that while the Meos profess to be Muslims, they have great veneration for a local saint, Salar, by whom they swear. Salar is a Musalmaan name and may probably be that of the person by whom their conversion such as it was made.

The tradition recorded in the Rājpūtāna Gazetteer is that 'the Meos were converted in the eleventh century after their conquest by Masud, son of Amir Salar and grandson of Sultan Mahmud (son of) Subuktagin on the mother’s side, general of Mahmud of Ghazni’s forces, who is venerated by the Meos and by whose name they swear.'

According to Rose, ‘this may be Masaud Ghazi reached the Mewāt in 1002 CE and converted many of the Meos to Islam. The Rājpūts thus converted were of the Tunwar tribe and were divided into five pāls, viz. Kalesa, Derwal, Landawat, Ratawat and Balut.' Subsequently, Rai Pithora was so against the conversion of the Meos to Islam that he used the Badgujars to force them to revert to Hinduism. During the reign of Qutub-ud Din Aibak Hemraj invaded the Mewāt from Alwar, but was defeated and slain by that ruler who then employed Sayyid Wajih-ud-Din against the Meos. But that leader was slain and it was reserved for his nephew Miran

24 Cited by Shamsuddin, Meos, p. 34.
25 Bharatpur, op. cit., p. 98.
26 Rājpūtāna Gazetteers, vol. i, Calcutta, 1879, p. 265; Cited by Rose, op. cit., p. 82.
27 Rose, op. cit., 82.
Hussain Jang to subdue the Meos, who agreed to pay jazia, while some accepted Islam. Hussain Jang’s flagstaff is still preserved by the Meos, who will not take an oath on so sacred a name as his.  

According to one version, reported by Shail Mayaram, ‘a Mewāti lineage under a chief called Nahar Singh gained popularity in the mid-fourteenth century. Nahar Singh compromised his position with Tuglaq sultan and adopted Islam under the new name—Nahar Khan. After the presentation of tribute and peshkash (offering) his lands were restored to him. The lineage continued the use of the name Khan and came to be called first as Khanzad and later as Khānzādas. Under Bahadur Nahar ‘the brave lion’, the Khānzādas emerged as a ruling power in Tijara (Alwar region). Bahadur Nahar was one of the most powerful chiefs in the neighborhood of Delhi. A regional history attributes his adoption to Islam to either a change of heart or to a tactical move so as to forestall a likely beheading and save his lands from being annexed. The latter seems more plausible and Bahadur Nahar expanded his territorial jurisdiction and sphere of influence and became an active player in court politics.’

Another version on Meo conversion is presented by Muhammad Makhdum: ‘Bahadur Nahar, the son of Lakhanpal, was originally called Samarpal and renamed Naharpal by Sultan Firoz Shah Tuglaq because he killed a tiger. Lakhanpal’s other son, Shoparpal was called Chajju Khan. The conversion, it is speculated, might also have been a “change of heart” come about from Bahadur Nahar’s association with the Sufi saint Nasir-ud-din Mohammad, Chirag-i-Delhi (d. 1356), a disciple of the Chisthi Shaikh, Nizam-ud-din Auliya. Bahadur Nahar is said to have

28 Ibid.
become rich and to have fallen in love with a Rājpūt Thakur’s daughter. The Thakur, however duped him and got him killed.30

From these arguments it appears that the Meos conversion to Islam took place in approximately four stages:

a) Firstly, by Salar Masud (1015-1036) who was a brave and young general of Mahmood Ghazni’s army.

b) Secondly, Balban (1286-1207) was instrumental in converting the Meos again. In a war between the Meos and Balban, many Mewātis were killed and those who survived were converted to Islam.

c) Thirdly, Ferozshah Tuglaq (1351-1388) was responsible for the conversion of the Meos in the fourteenth century when so many other tribes were forcibly made Mohammedans.

d) Fourthly, Aurangzeb (1657-1707) completed the process of converting the Meos to Islam. The Meos voluntarily accepted Islam during his reign because of their active interest in Delhi politics.

Situating Meos in History:

The history of the Meos has been characterized by migrations and displacements.31 They moved from one place to another either in search of pastures or to escape the cruelties of war, tyranny and oppression. From about the twelfth-thirteenth century, we find direct historical evidence about the Meos, but few centuries before this period, their history is retrieved through a considerable amount of speculation and corroboration.

In the wake of the Arab invasions of Sind, Arab scholars refer to the clusters of the Meds and the Jats inhabiting the swamps, mountains and deserts of Sind. It is believed that the Jats and one section of the Meds, migrated to Punjab whereas another section of the Meds crossed the Mewar and Merwara regions of Rajasthan, which derived their names from the Meds.\textsuperscript{32}

The earliest reference to the Meds dates back to the ninth century when the Arab scholar, Ibn Khurdadba refers to Sind: "From Sind are brought the costus, canes and bamboos. From the Mihran to Bakar... is four days' journey. The people are wanderers and robbers. From this place to the Meds are two parasangs; they also are robbers..."\textsuperscript{33}

We find frequent references to the Meds by the Arab authors on Sind, and along with their rivals the Jats, they seem to have been the earliest inhabitants of Sind who have survived to the modern times.\textsuperscript{34}

The earliest account of the Meds can be traced in the eleventh century text, *Mujmalu-t Tawarikh* which is as follows:

The Jats and Meds are reputed to be the descendants of Ham, the son of Noah. They dwelt in Sind and (on the banks of) the river which is called Bahar. By the Arabs the Hindus are called lats. The Meds held the ascendancy over the Jats, and put them to great distress, which compelled them to take refuge on the other side of the river Pahan, but being accustomed to the use of the boats, they used to cross the river and make attacks on the Meds, who were owners of sheep. It so came to pass that the Jats enfeebled the Meds, killed many of them, and plundered their country. The Meds then became subject of the Jats.

One of the Jat chiefs (seeing the sad state to which the Meds were reduced) made the people of his tribe understand that success was not constant; that there was a time when the Meds attacked the Jats, and harassed them, and that the Jats had in their turn done the same with the Meds. He impressed upon their minds the

\textsuperscript{32} Mayaram (1997b), op. cit., p. 28.
\textsuperscript{34} ED i, op. cit., p. 519.
utility of both tribes living in peace, and then advised the Jats and Meds to send a few chiefs to wait on king Dajushan (Duryodhan), son of Dahrat (Dhritarashta), and beg of him to appoint a king, to whose authority both tribes might submit. The result of this was satisfactory, and his proposition was adopted. After some discussion they agreed to act upon it, and the emperor Dajushan nominated his sister Dassal (Dushala), wife of king Jandrat (Jayadratha), a powerful prince to rule over the Jats and the Meds. Dassal went and took charge of the country and cities, the particulars of which and of the wisdom of the princess, are detailed in the original work. But for all its greatness, and riches and dignity, there was no brahman or wise man in the country. She therefore wrote a long letter to her brother for assistance, who collected 30,000 brahmans from all Hindustan, and sent them, with all their goods and dependents, to his sister. A long time passed before Sind became flourishing. . . . The city which the queen made the capital, is called Askaland. A small portion of the country she made over to the Jats, and appointed one of them as their chief; his name was Judrat. Similar arrangements were also made for the Meds. His government continued for twenty and some years, after which the Bharata lost possession of the country.

The earliest notice of the Meds is by Virgil, who "calls the Jhelum Medus Hydaspes. The epithet is explained by the statement of Vibius Sequester, which makes the Hydaspes flow 'past the city of Media.' Now this is clearly the same place as Ptolemy's Euthemedia, or Sagala, which was either on or near the same river, and above Bukephala. Lastly, in the Peutingerian Tables, the country on the Hydaspes, for some distance below Alexandria Bucefalos, is called Media. Here then we have evidence that the Medi, or Meds, were in the Punjab as early at least as the time of Virgil, in BCE 40 to 30, and as we know that they were not one of the five tribes of Yuchi, or Tochari, whose names are given by the Chinese writers, it may be inferred, with tolerable certainty, that they must have belonged to the great horde of Sus or Abars, who entered India about BCE 126, and gave their name to the province of Indo-Scythia."

Arab sources indicate that frequent Mid and Jat raids on seaports and the maritime trade of the Persian Gulf and the western Indian ocean invited the Arab invasion of Sind.

35 Mujmalu-t Tawarikh, in ED i, pp. 104-05.
36 ED. op. cit. p. 529.
They justify the conquest on grounds of defending the commerce of the Persian Gulf against alleged piracy. Gardizi describes the al-Mayd and the al-Zutt as sea pirates of the coastal region from Daybul (Debal) to Kathiawar.  

The ninth century Arab chronicler, al-Biladhuri throws light on the immediate cause of the Arab invasion. He says “the Meds plundered an Arab vessel off the coast of Sind and captured orphan girls who were being sent to Hajjaj, the viceroy of the Eastern provinces of the Khalifa by the King of Ceylon. Hajjaj demanded reparations from Dahir, the ruler of Sind, but the latter refused to do so on the grounds that the pirates were not under his control. This event led to the Arab war against Sind.”

During the period of Arab occupation, Muhammad Qasim is represented as making peace with the Meds of Saurashtra, “seafarers and pirates, with whom the men of Basra were then at war.” This gives a great extent of their dominion at that period towards the southeast.

The Arabs introduced measures to settle the pastoral–nomadic communities in Sind. Some groups of the Jats compromised and adopted Islam but the Mids of southeastern Sind remained hostile to the Arabs. The Jats were granted immunity on their submission, and they subsequently joined the Arab armies and were deployed against the Mids. Further commenting on the Med and Jat affairs Al-Biladhuri says, “In the reign of Khalifa, Amran proceeded to Multan…..and then made war upon the Meds, and killed three thousand of them. Then he constructed a band, which is called “Sakru-I Med.”

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39 ED i. op. cit., p. 521.
Band of the Meds. He encamped on the river at Alrur. There he summoned the Jats, who came to his presence, when he sealed their hands, took from them the jizya, and he ordered that every man of them should bring a dog with him when he came to wait upon him. He again attacked the Meds, having with him the chief men of the Jats. He dug a canal from the sea to their tank, so their water became salt; and he sent out several marauding expeditions against them. During the reign of Khalif, an Arab chieftain Muhammad bin Fazl proceeded with sixty vessels against the Meds of Hind. He killed a number of them, captured Kallari and then returned towards Sindan.40

The Mids continue to be described as robbers by Arab geographers through the ninth and tenth centuries. During the tenth and eleventh centuries there are references to frequent clashes of the Mids with the Muslim kingdom of Mansura (Sind). According to Masudi, when he visited Sind, the people of Mansura were supposed to defend themselves against the Med aggression. He mentions that “Multan is seventy-five parasangs from Mansura...... It is constantly at war with a nation called the Meds, who are a race of Sind, and also with other races on the frontiers of Sind.”41 Obviously, all these campaigns against the Meds could not effectively reduce the power of the Meds. Expeditions against the Jats and the Mids continued till 844 CE.

Arab geographic-history, composed from the sedentary state’s viewpoint, treats pastoral groups as the ‘other’ of the political order.42 According to Mayaram, this kind of perception tends to understate the actual position such as the active participation of the

40 Futuhu-l Buldan, ED i, pp. 128-9.
41 Al Masudi, Muruju-l Zahab, in ED i, p. 24.
Jats and Mids in the commercial life of the Persian Gulf. The *Chachnāma*, which degraded the Jats and other tribes as 'of wild nature of brutes,' 'refractory,' 'disobedient,' 'robbers,' and 'villainous set of people,' also mentions that they are employed in the armed forces of the Sind and served as guides of caravans. The Meds are also described here as sailors of the coastal regions of Makran, Sind and Kathiawar. It seems quite plausible that the real motive behind the degradation of the Jats and the Meds was the Arab ambition to control the trade and commerce of the Gulf. Trade and piracy were closely related.

It has been argued that Mewar and Merwara regions of Rājasthān have been associated with the Meos. According to James Tod, Mewar was known as 'Medapat,' meaning the country of the Meds. Some scholars, particularly contemporary genealogists of the Mers of Ajmer claim that the Meos of Mewāt are a section that migrated from the settlements of the Mers in the central Arāvallis. On the other hand Elliot says the Mers of the Arāvalli and Kathiawar are descendants of the Mids.
Successive invasions and the rise of monarchical states in the early medieval period led to the displacement of many pastoral and peasant groups including the Meos. According to Meo traditions, there was a considerable concentration of the Meos in the Ganga-Jamuna Doab. The Meos claim to have established many villages in Bulandshahar, Kol and Etah and to have battled Ghaznavi along with the rulers of Bayana.

After Prithviraj III’s victory over the Turks in 1191, a part of the Punjab and some of the Meo territories were brought under the Chauhan Empire. The Meos were dispossessed by the Râjpût clans of Bulandshahar and Etah at the order of Prithviraj of Delhi towards the end of the twelfth century. The Bargujar raja, Pratap Singh, a relative of Prithviraj is said to have cleared the region of the turbulent Mewâtis which pleased the Dor raja, Chait Singh so much that he gave his daughter in marriage to him.

The Meos first crossed the Jumuna in the period of anarchy in wake of Mahmud Ghazni’s invasion in 1018-19. In the first half of the eleventh century Salar Masud, the nephew of Mahmud Ghazni conquered Delhi and Meerut. Meo traditions speak of their dispossession from Doâb, the crossing of Jamunâ, their westward movement, and then farther to the south and southwest of Delhi.

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53 Mayaram (2004), op. cit., p. 22
54 Ibid.
56 Crooke, op. cit., p. 485; *Imperial Gazetteers*, op. cit., p. 313.
57 EB Joshi, *Moradabad: Uttar Pradesh District Gazetteers*, Allahabad, 1966, p. 38; Cited by Mayaram, op. cit., p. 262n. [According to Nevil, it was the Meos who overran the doab and expelled the Doras. But if this is so, it is surprising that a Dor raja, Chandra Sen was ruling when Aibak conquered the area in 1193. H.R. Nevil, *Aligarh: A Gazetteer*, Allahabad, 1909, p. 163; Also cited by Mayaram, p. 262n]
58 Crooke, op. cit., p. 485; *Imperial Gazetteers*, p. 313.
During Prithviraj’s rule Meo lands in Aligarh, Meerut and Bulandshahar are said to have been taken by the Rājpūts. The Bargujar Rājpūts were also victorious over the Meos, Chandellas and Bhihars. Another dislocation of the Meos is attributed to Mahmud Ghaznavi who made 17 raids on northwest India between 1000 and 1025. In the first half of the eleventh century Salar Masud, his nephew and general conquered Delhi and Meerut.

The victory of Muhammad Ghuri over Prithviraj III in 1192 resulted in the churning of the social and political situation in northern India. Delhi was occupied and soon his general Quub-ud-din Aibak conquered Meerut and Ajmer as well. The sweeping raids of the Turks over entire northern India shook Delhi and neighbouring regions and a considerable amount of the Meos were pushed out of Delhi region. The choice of Meerauli as the capital of the Sultanate resulted in the misappropriation of their territories and the subsequent marginalization of the Meos. Hence, their earliest raids were directed against the new Turkish capital in form of bold attacks on the traders, pilgrims and water carriers.

After the death of Qutb-ud-din Aibak the Turks began to loose control over Bayana on account of revivalist zeal among the dispossessed rulers. Ilutmish recaptured Bayana and Tahangarh and defeated the ambitions of these elements. But Ilutmish’s successor’s were too weak and the continued depredations of the turbulent people of northern Alwar region known as ‘Koh payah of Mewāt’ weakened them

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60 ED ii, op. cit., pp. 204-43.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Bharatpur: Rājasthān District Gazetteer, p. 51.
considerably. The Meos were also adversely affected by the early Mongol invasions in the thirteenth century.

In the mid-thirteenth century, we can spot a good number of Meo settlements in the region south of the Turkish capital. This region was known as Mewāt which possibly derived its name from Mewātīs. Mewāt seems to be "an ill-defined tract lying south of Delhi, and including part of the British Districts of Muttra (Mathura) and Gurgaon, and most of Alwar and a little of Bharatpur state. This region became the heartland of Meo resistance."

Balban, with his policy of 'blood and iron' restored the lost prestige and territories of the Sultanate. He adopted strong measures against lawlessness and deputed experienced Afghans to check the Mewātī depredations. Ziau-d din Barni provides a vivid account of the Mewātī menace and Balban's efforts in dealing with the Mewātīs:

Towards the end of the first year of his reign he [Balban] employed himself in harrying the jungles, and in routing out the Miwattis, whom no one interfered with since the days of Shamsu-din. the turbulence of Miwattis had increased, and their strength had grown in the neighbourhood of Dehli.....At night, they used to come prowling into the city, giving all kinds of trouble, depriving the people of their rest; and they plundered the country houses. In the neighbourhood of Delhi there were large and dense jungles, through which many roads passed. he disaffected in the Doāb, and the outlaws towards Hindustan grew bold and took to robbery on the highway, and they so beset the roads that caravans and merchants were unable to pass. The daring of the Mewattis in the neighbourhood of Delhi was carried to such an extent that the western gates of the city were shut at afternoon prayer, and no one dared to go out of the city in that direction after that hour, whether he traveled as a pilgrim or with the display of a sovereign. At afternoon prayer the Miwattis would often come to the Sar-hauz, and assaulting the water-carriers and the girls who were fetching water, they would strip them and carry off their clothes. These daring acts of the Miwattis had caused a great ferment in Delhi.

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65 Ibid.
66 Ibid., p. 23.
67 Imperial Gazetteer, p. 313.
68 Mayaram (200+), op. cit., p. 23.
In the year of his succession, the Sultan felt the repression of the Miwattis to be the first of his duties, and for a whole year he was occupied in overthrowing them and in scouring the jungles, which he effectually accomplished. Great numbers of Mewattis were put to the sword. The Sultan built a fort at Gopal-gir, and established several posts in the vicinity of the city, which he placed in the charge of Afghans, with assignments of land. In this campaign, one hundred thousand of the royal army were slain by the Mewattis, and the Sultan with his sword delivered many servants of God from the assaults and violence of the enemy. From this time the city was delivered from the attacks of the Miwattis.

After the Sultan had thus routed out the Mewattis, and cleared away the jungle in the neighbourhood of the city, he gave the towns and country within the Doab to some distinguished chiefs, with direction to lay waste and destroy the villages of he marauders, to slay the men, to make prisoners of the women and children, to clear away the jungle, and to suppress all lawless proceedings. The noblemen set about the work with strong forces, and they soon put down the daring of the rebels. They scoured the jungles and drove out the rebels, and the ryots were brought into submission and obedience.69

In the fourteenth century, “numerous Rājpūt adventurers are said to have poured into the defenseless country (Bulandshahar) and expelled the Meos from their land and villages.”70

One of the important causes of Mewāt-Sultanate conflict was the question of control over the land routes. The profitable overland routes, linking Delhi to Punjab that were further connected to West Asia and Central Asia, passed through Mewāt and it was economically essential for the Sultans to bring Mewāt directly under their control.71

Ala ud-Din Khilji conquered Mewar and brought much of Rājpūtana under his control. All turbulent chiefs and rais were suppressed in the region of Delhi, forced to pay tribute and rebellions were dealt with severely.72

69 Zia-ud-din Barni, Tārīkh-i-Firozshahi in ED iii, pp.103-5.
70 Imperial Gazetteers, vol. ix, p. 49.
During the troubled times of Timur's invasion (1398) Bahadur Nahar, who founded the subdivision of Mewātīs called Khānζadas, members of which were, for many years, rulers of Mewāt, was one of the most powerful chiefs in this part of India.⁷³

Mubarak Shah, the Saiyyid Sultan, set out on punitive expeditions to suppress disorder and insurgency. Yahya bin Ahmad describes the campaigns of Sultan Mubarak Shah against the rebellious Mewātīs in the fifteenth century:

News was brought that the Mewātīs had broken out into rebellion, so the Sultan [Mubarak Shah] marched into Mewāt, which he ravaged and laid waste. The Mewātīs having driven off all the population, took refuge in [the mountains of ] Jahra, which was their great stronghold. This place was impregnable, and grain and fodder were scarce, so the Sultan returned to Delhi.....In 829H.(Nov. 1425), he again marched against Mewāt. Jallu and Kaddu, grandsons of Bahadur Nahir, and several Mewātīs who had joined them, laid waste their own territories, and took up a position in the mountains of Andwar. They were attacked for several days by the royal forces, who drove them out of Andwar, and then they went to the mountains of Alwar. Next day His Majesty destroyed the fortified post of Andwar, and marched against Alwar. When Jallu and Kaddu posted themselves there, the royal forces followed them. At length they were reduced to distress, and were compelled to surrender. His Majesty granted them quarter, and afterwards graciously gave Kaddu reception.⁷⁴

"In the month of Rabi-ul awwal the Sultan [Mubarak Shah] marched towards the mountains of Mewāt, and arrived at the town of Taoru. Jalal Khan Mewātī, on hearing of his advances, shut himself with a large force in the fort of Andaru, which is the strongest place belonging o the Mewātīs. Next day the Sultan prepared to attack the place, but before his forces drew near, Jalal Khan set fire to the fort, and making his way out he went off towards Kutila. The greater part of the provinces and materials and grain, which had been collected in prospect of the siege, fell into the hands of the royal forces. His Majesty then marched away, and encamping at the town of Tajara, he devastated the greater part of the country of Mewāt. Jalal Khan, being distressed and helpless, returned to his allegiance; and paying his revenue and taxes according to old rule, gave up his rash proceedings, and was pardoned."⁷⁵

Mubarak Shah was able to subdue the rebellions at Bhatinda and in the Doāb and recover balances of tribute from a limited area. Delhi Sultanate had already begun to

⁷³ Imperial Gazetteers, 313.
⁷⁴ Yahya bin Ahmad Sirhindi, in ED, vol. iv, pp. 61-62.
⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 75.
crumble and the power and the prestige of the Sultans shrunk to the size of a principality. Between 1390 and 1428 there were widespread revolts and uprisings against the Tuglaqs and the Saiyyids. Some of the ambitious Mewāṭī lineages actively participated in Delhi politics and sided with one or the other court factions. These lineages carved out their sphere of influence in Mewāṭ and provided support and shelter to the insurgents. In 1398 Timur sacked Delhi and devastated neighbouring areas including Mewāṭ. The tussle between the Turks and Afghans further weakened the sultanate and ultimately the Afghan Lodis captured power in Delhi. Bahlol Lodi led several expeditions against the Mewāṭīs but could not crush their defiance. The evidence of endless Pathan tombs in Mewāṭ indicate the degrees of Afghan desire to control Mewāṭ and the resistance to their designs.

From the thirteenth to early sixteenth century, the assertion of the Sultanate’s authority brought about significant changes in the Mewāṭ configuration. Fortified towns and plenty of urban centres such as Rewari, Jhirka, Taoru and Tijara came into existence. Other centres such as Indor, Sarheta and Kharol were also identified with the resistance of the Mewāṭī warrior lineages. This period also witnessed the settlement and growth of the Jats, Ahirs and Gujars in this region.

In the early sixteenth century, Babur did not fail to notice the presence, defiance and the strength of the Mewāṭīs:

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76 Mayaram (2004), op. cit., p. 27.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
"On our first coming to Agra, there was remarkable dislike and hostility between its people and mine, the peasantry and soldiers running away in fear of our men. Delhi and Agra excepted, not a fortified town but strengthened its defences and neither was in obedience nor submitted. Qasim Sambhali was in Sambhal, Nizam Khan was in Biana; in Miwat was Hasan Khan Mewāti himself, impious mannikin! who was the sole leader of the trouble and mischief."82

Babur reports in his memoir the economic significance of Mewāti which yielded a revenue of about three or four cores.83 Babur wanted to establish complete control over the Mewāti territories by showing favours to the great Mewāti leader, Hasan Khan Mewāti but he rebuffed the offer.84 After the first battle of Panipat (1526), Babur tried to win over Hasan in order to abort Mewāti-Rājpūt alliance against the Mughals, but failed to do so:

"Mahdi Khwaja’s people began to come in, saying, ‘Rana’s advance is certain. Hasan Khan Mewāti is heard of also as likely to join him. They must be thought about above all else. It would favour our fortune, if a troop came ahead of the army to reinforce Biana.’ In the fight with Ibrahim, Hasan Khan Mewāti’s son Nahar Khan had fallen into our hands, we had kept him as an hostage and, ostensibly on his account, his father had been making comings and goings with us, constantly asking for him. It now occurred to several people that if Hasan Khan were conciliated by sending him his son, he would thereby be the more favourably disposed and his waiting on me might be the better brought about. Accordingly Nahar Khan was dressed in a robe of honour, promises were made to him for his father, and he was given leave to go. That hypocritical mannikin [Hasan Khan] must have waited just till his son had leave from me to go, for on hearing of this and while his on as yet had not joined him, he came out of Alur (Alwar) and at once joined Rana Sanga in Toad (Agra). It must have been ill-judged to let his son go just then."85

At Khanva (1527) Babur not just defeated the Rājpūts under Rana Sanga but also frustrated the designs of a massive Rājpūt-Meo-Afgahan coalition against the foreign invader. The Khanva debacle gave a powerful blow to the Meo aspirations. The largest concentration of Meo population was in Agra Suba, particularly in the Alwar sarkar that

82 Baburnama, p. 523.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid., pp. 577-8.
85 Ibid., p. 545.
incorporated southern Mewāt, while north central Mewāt was administered by the Tijara sarkar. Under Akbar, Mewāt was brought directly under the Mughal imperial control and divided into parganas subsumed under five sarkars that were governed by the Agra and Delhi Subas. As the Mughal empire was consolidated, the Meos underwent drastic change in their status. By the mid-sixteenth century the Meos seem to have been firmly sedenterized and reduced from a warrior, self-governing group to a revenue paying, landowning caste.

The unfolding events in other parts of Rājasthān had far-reaching consequences for the Meos of Mewāt. The rise of Kacchvaha Rājpūts of Amber (Jaipur), their submission to Akbar in 1562, and the subsequent Mughal-Rājpūt alliance altered political equations in Indian politics. Akbar accepted marriage alliances with the Kacchvaha Rājpūts and later Man Singh of Amber received the title Amir-ul Umra from Akbar and emerged as a great Mughal general. During the reign of Shah Jahan, the Kacchvaha Rājpūts were involved in all military expeditions including those against the Meos. The Meos who had already been reduced to a subordinate status could not withstand the Rājpūt onslaught. Under Jai Singh (1622-67) the Kacchawa principality of Amber rose to the position of dominant kingdom in early half of eighteenth century. They used the ijara (lease) system to legitimate the extension of territory by claiming to bring recalcitrant

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86 Ibid., p. 27.
87 *Imperial Gazetteers*, p. 313; Mayaram, op. cit (2004), p. 27.
88 Mayaram, op. cit., p. 27.
Mewāti Zamīndārs under control⁸⁹. In this way, the historical Mughal-Rājpūt alliance underwrote Meo marginality.⁹⁰

Jagirs were granted by the Amber ruler to his Rājpūt kin which started a process of transfer of land in which much land passed from the hands of the Muslim Meos and Khānzādas to the new Rājpūt gentry that was specially constructed to build a more loyal base to state formation.⁹¹ The Naruka Rājpūts used their access to Mughal power to acquire extensive land rights in villages through coercion or by usurping the rights of Meo and Khānzāda clans.⁹² As a result, the Meos offered a strong resistance to defend their rights from Mughal and Rājpūt aggrandizement.

The rule of the Mewātis was subsequently challenged by the Jats, who had already risen to importance before the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, and consolidated their power in Southern Mewāt in the first half of the eighteenth century; and from this time the history of Mewāt merges in that of Alwar and Bharatpur.⁹³

Khafi Khan mentions the activities of the Mewātis during eighteenth century:

“As the news (of Hussain Ali’s death) spread, the Mewātis and the turbulent Zamīndārs rose up and gathered round Saiyid Abdullah on every side. They attacked the baggage and tents in the rear, and plundered whatever they could lay hands on. A detachment of the discouraged army was sent against them, but without success. A party of men who were with the Saiyyids tent equipage were killed along with their commanding officers. A convoy that was coming from Delhi, with property belonging to Husain Ali Khan was attacked at the sarai of

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 28.
⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 27.
⁹¹ Ibid., p. 28.
⁹³ Imperial Gazetteers, pp. 313-14.
Jahana, two or three kos form Saiyid Abdullah’s army, and it and the property and the wives of the men fell into the hands of the marauders.94

The fast deteriorating rule of the later Mughals allowed the emergence of regional powers such as the Jats and the Sikhs. In the seventeenth century, the Jats endlessly raided the Mughal empire and by the eighteenth century they carved out a powerful Jat state, Bharatpur in the Mewāt region. The Meos fought against both the Jats and the Marathas. They raided Maratha battalions. According to local history, the Jats attacked the Meo clans of the Ghasera and Bhagora, troubling the Meos each day. In a Meo narrative, the ruler of Bharatpur, Jawahir Singh is referred to in kin terms by the chief of a Meo clan, leading to his alliance in battle with the Jats against the Rājpūts of Amber.

The Meos and Mewātis, however, retained their character for turbulence; and towards the end of the eighteenth century traveling in the upper and central Doāb was unsafe owing to armed bands of Mewāti horsemen.95

The transitions from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century reduced the Mewātis from a self-governing, relatively autonomous group to one with a mere peasant pastoral status. Marginality had both a political and spatial manifestation. It led to a remarkable contraction of the territory called Mewāt. British policy undermined the territorial basis of communities and converted erstwhile local chieftains into dependent landlords, revenue collectors etc. By the nineteenth century the largest concentration of Meos lived in the Gurgaon district of Punjab that was directly administered by the British and in the Alwar and Bharatpur kingdoms of Rājpūtana ruled by Rājpūt and Jat lineages.

After brief periods of Jat and Maratha conquest, part of Gurgaon area of Mewāt was taken over by the English in 1803. Another part was given to the nawab of Firozepur and Loharu, and brought under direct British administration in 1836 after assassination of Col. Fraser, an English resident.

SECTION B

FRACTURED IDENTITY?

'Peoples and nations', observed Samuel P. Huntington, 'are attempting to answer the most basic question humans can face: Who are we? And they are answering that question in the traditional way human beings have answered it, by reference to the things that mean most to them. People define themselves in terms of ancestry, religion, language, history, values, customs and institutions. They identify with cultural groups: tribes, ethnic groups, religious communities, nations, and, at the broadest level, civilizations. People used politics not just to advance their interests but also to define their identity. We know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know whom we are against.'

The evolution of the Meos and their development into a distinct community presuppose a fairly high level of historical consciousness and deliberate attempts in that direction. The community-building endeavour of the Meos are scattered in their history.

and oral traditions. It is important to focus on the 'ordering of historical consciousness within myth' and attempt the construction of the Meos. The constitution of the Meos as a community drew upon both from their narratives and folk traditions. It was orchestrated by their conversion and conflict, relationships and resistance, domination and subordination, ideology and mythology.

The Mewāti traditions draws upon a body of literature in both prose and verse which ranges across genres such as *lok gathas*, *khyats* (chronicles), *vansavalis*, comprising genealogies, clan, lineage and biographical histories. Many of these are known as indigenous form of recording and are written rather than oral. Meo narratives not only memorize but also memorialize the past. Regarding their narratives, it is said, 'Ye mevon ki tarikh kahte hain' (they tell the history of the Meos). Meo narratives are essentially heroic where the hero may be superior to others and therefore they tend to eulogize the Meo past. As their narratives unfold the past, the Meo marginality is overwritten and their defeats are converted into victories. In the *Panch Pahar* narrative, the fright of the Meo clan is highly exaggerated when the Rājpūts are described as worried by the fierce Meo challenge. Meo traditions carried by *jajmani* patronage often assumes a panegyric character when the Meo Mirasi performers imagines dialogues, fantasizes encounters and tend to provide desired endings to suit their patrons who in turn

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98 Mayaram (2004), op. cit., pp. 43-44.
99 Ibid.
rewards them handsomely. In this way, 'the poet-genealogist has a magnifying role, structured both in relations of reference and address.'

In a twentieth century narrative, Harsana, seventeenth-century events of the Panch Pahar ki larai, are referred to where the Meos claim to have 'looted the Badshah’s treasure with seven hundred thousand swords' (sat lakh talvar hi mara badsahan ki mal).

Meo narratives present suggestive fragments of resistance to state formation. The Mewāti story Akhay Singh describes rebellion in the Alwar kingdom. The phrase 'tilak terai tin sau sath' refers to the recognition signified by the mark of the tilak on the forehead given to Chaudhari Akhay Singh of Chandoli by the Alwar ruler. The vermilion mark symbolized ritual incorporation by the sovereign of the subject and his reciprocal obligation to pay taxes. But he defied the collection of the revenue (lag churai), raided the goats of the state (raj ki bakri kar ki band), and reclaimed local authority over Chandoli. For the ruler, his deeds were defiant (amai), but his heroism is acclaimed by the narrative tradition—'Ah, a Chaudhari must be like Akhay Singh' and views him as another vir (brave) Vikramajit, a reference to the legendary king of Ujjain.

Despite the Meo-Rājpūt struggle, Meo narratives suggest a shared discourse of honour with the Rājpūts. Warrior raiding and war making were a common idiom of political expression between the Meos, as a dominant landholding group, and the Jats and

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100 Ibid.  
102 Ibid., p. 46.  
103 Ibid., p. 69.  
104 Ibid.
the Rājpūts, who were trying to reduce them to the position of subordinate cultivators. The reference to brave (Meo) men who ‘kill and bring wealth and distribute it’ (lavai dhan ko mar kai bantai dhan khair hamēsh) represents a competitive aspiration toward valerous raiding and chiefly generosity.\footnote{105}

In the case of the Meos the shared ideologies of honour with the Rājpūts did not prevent their resistance to the Rājpūt kingdom or curb the constant striving for autonomy. It so happens that the myths of low castes internalize ideas of caste hierarchy and other notions from the great tradition when they simultaneously incorporate and question caste hierarchy.\footnote{106} By delving into the past when they were warriors and acquired an unclean status, caste is interpreted as historical not natural.\footnote{107} The shared ideologies of the Meos contributed to both reproduction and resistance to dominant ideologies of the Rājpūts.\footnote{108}

Eroding the myth of segmented village communities or unchanging republics, as held by Marx and Maine, Meo narratives show the use of tamakh or large drum as an instrument to enable intervillage communication and mass mobilization of their villages/pals. The constant interaction of the villages/pals with the outside world through sectarian networks, marriage networks, pilgrimages, fairs, visits of brahmans, faqirs, bai and khyal performers, kinship linkages, rebellions, wars and alliances etc contributed to the formation of the Meos into a well-connected, well-informed and dynamic community.\footnote{109}

\footnote{105} Ibid. p. 70.  
\footnote{107} Ibid.  
\footnote{108} Mayaram (2004), op. cit., p. 71.  
\footnote{109} Ibid.
It is also evident that the Meos made deliberate attempts to distinguish the ‘self’ from the ‘other.’ Though Meo Bansabali described Hindu deities and icons, Krishna, Rama and Arjuna as the founders of their thirteen clans, but this association was not allowed to override their strong sense of belonging to a distinct community and identity. The narratives take great care to situate the Meos in a distinctive spatial context (Mewat) and as an identifiable group (Meo), organized into thirteen clans. The conversion of the Meos from Hinduism to Islam is a great watershed in Meo history and tradition. The conversion draws a line between the Meos and the Hindus as well as between the Meos (new converts) and Muslims. The conversion transformed their Hindu identity but did not altogether divorce them from their legacy. On the other hand the converted Meos and the other Muslims were not a homogeneous entity. The Meos, despite their conversion, never regarded themselves and Muslims as one people and tried to reassert their ‘selfness’ from the ‘otherness’—‘Mev to mullah ki na maney’ (Meo doesn’t pay heed to a mullah). We can see that the conversion helped the Meos to demarcate their boundaries with both the new and the old faith. The Meo narratives are highly significant in constituting a cohesive community but they also contain strongly stated views of the Meos that they are different from both Hindus and Muslims.

Although the musical and poetic forms render cultural boundaries between groups remarkably porous, narrative content is significant in constituting community identity. There is another pattern discernable in Meo myth, which has been a significant strain. It can be seen in the constant attempt by the Mirasis to focus on memory. Thus Meo battles

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\(^{110}\) Ibid.

\(^{111}\) Ibid.
with the Mughals, and with the Rājpūṭ and Jats regional princely states of Alwar and Bharatpur, are described in a large number of narratives. Mewāt is the spatial centre of most of these myths. The sensibility that emerges from them shows a conscious attempt to define the Meos as a community with a distinctive identity, different from other groups, both Hindu and Muslim. The memory of a shared past is then oriented to the construction of community in the present and the future. (Resisting 257)

**Hindu Identity:**

The Meos were originally Hindu Rājpūts before adopting Islam in the medieval times. Despite their conversion they retain, however, a good many Hindu religious customs and Hindu idolatrous festivals such as Holi, Diwali, Janmashtami etc. The linkages between the Meo religion and Hinduism is more evident from their oral traditions. One tradition describes Lord Krishna as *autari*, (incarnation) who 'enchanted the milkmaids, thus drawing upon Hindu theistic traditions. The legend of Raja Basak Nath as one of the two mythic serpents, Vasuki and Seas Nag, who upholds the world, proves beyond doubt about their ability to remould gods and heroes into local identities. The use of the term devi for Draupadi is quite clearly suggestive of later traditions of the Upanishads such as the Devi, Sakta and Kalika Purāṇas. The Meos also shaped their lives by developing Puranic genealogies which supposedly qualified

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113 MA Sherring, *Hindu Tribes and Castes together with an Account of the Mahomedan Tribes of the North-West Frontier and of the Aboriginal Tribes of the Central Provinces*, vol. iii, 1974, p. 90.
114 Ibid.
115 Ibid.
116 Ibid.
Fig. 2: Arable Land and Land Revenue held by Jāṭ Zamīndārs in Delhi, Sambhal and Sahāranpur Sarkārs of Delhi Sūba in 1595.
Fig. 3: Proportion of Arable Land held by Jāṭ Zamīndārs in Delhi Sūbā in c. CE 1595.

Fig. 4: Proportion of Land Revenue held by Jāṭ Zamīndārs in Delhi Sūbā c. CE 1595.
them to become part of ‘Hindu cultural enclosure’, in which family, lineage and community identity are grounded.\textsuperscript{117}

Meo myths suggest linkages with Hindu traditions, such as the Vaishnavism of Brajbhumi and the Nath Jogis.\textsuperscript{118} The theme of the descent of the thirteen Meo pals or clans from Hindu gods or heroes can be traced in their oral traditions.\textsuperscript{119} The \textit{Palon ki Bansabali} describes the five Jadu Pals or clans as having descended from Krishna’s Jadu Rājpūts (Yadavas); and four Tonvar Meo pals consider Arjuna their ancestor, and their genealogies are thereby also mythically aligned to Smriti texts such as the Mahābhārata.\textsuperscript{120} Rāmāyana also figures prominently in the Meo traditions when we find ample references such as those of Kachhawaha Meo genealogies deriving Rājpūt lineages from Lord Rama’s sons, Lav and Kush.\textsuperscript{121}

The Meos also derived strength from a number of goddess myths and cults found in Puranic mythology and epic traditions. Chavand was the four-faced goddess of healing and Sitala was the goddess of smallpox.\textsuperscript{122} The seven Devis worshipped by some Meo households include Kalka, Hinglaj, Dhaulagarh, Gujuki, Nagarkot, Silliserh and Sherhmai.\textsuperscript{123} The \textit{Pandua ka kara} refers to local belief in ‘56 children’s souls, the 64 joginis, ascetics, satis and one crore deities.’\textsuperscript{124}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[\textsuperscript{117}] Ibid.
\item[\textsuperscript{118}] Ibid., p. 255.
\item[\textsuperscript{119}] Ibid.
\item[\textsuperscript{120}] Mayaram (1997b), pp. 255-6.
\item[\textsuperscript{121}] Ibid.
\item[\textsuperscript{122}] Ibid. p. 43.
\item[\textsuperscript{123}] Ibid.
\item[\textsuperscript{124}] Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
The Meos are as embroiled in civilizational categories as any other Hindu castes.\textsuperscript{125} The term ‘rajdhari’, occurring in the narrative Dhamukar ki Larai, is derived from the Sanskrit ‘rajdharman’ and implies an ideal ruler who is protector of the politico-moral order.\textsuperscript{126} Similarly, the description of the Meo pales is patterned on Rājpūt lines of descent, and the Meo bans (vams) are also traced to various Rājpūt clans.\textsuperscript{127} This is a clear indication of internalization of Rājpūt cultural codes among the Meos whereby they are expected to achieve martial traits.\textsuperscript{128} Like the Rājpūts, the members of one clan do not intermarry, but marriages are invariably contracted between members of different tribes.\textsuperscript{129} The names of some of the Meena and Meo clans are the same.

Meo narratives reflect the shared culture of pastoral-peasant groups. Meo rituals of marriage, childbirth and succession were similar to those of most other Hindu castes.\textsuperscript{130} Like other Hindu communities, the Meos observed rules of purity and pollution with regard to low castes.\textsuperscript{131} It is also reported that the Meos refrained from eating beef in some areas, and vegetarianism was widespread among them.\textsuperscript{132} The peasant Meos also celebrated festivals such as Holi and Sankrant following the spring and winter harvests; and Govardhan, a festival of cattle worship. Rose reported that ‘in religion the Meos profess a happy combination of Hinduism and Islam, but in practice they worship countless godlings or symbols such as Siani, Mangti, Lalchi, Salar Masaud and his

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{125} Mayaram (1997b), op. cit., p. 41.
\item \textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{127} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{129} Sherring, op. cit., p. 90.
\item \textsuperscript{130} Mayaram (2004), op. cit., p. 41.
\item \textsuperscript{131} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
flag. The protective deities of the village were also worshipped such as the Kheradev (Bhomiyia) as land or soil godling; Bhairu (Khwaja) as protector of water; as well as other godlings of disease and healing, both human and animal. Despite their conversion, the Meos also regarded themselves as the descendants of Kisan-Kanhaiyaji and Raja Rama.

In Mewati traditions, the references to ‘Ahir major’ or ‘Mewati chatris’ reflect caste consciousness and highlights a point that the Meo’s conception of the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’ is largely in terms of jati rather than religious community. In this way, the Meos share the ritual hierarchization of castes as pure and polluting, claiming its own Kṣatriya superiority. The Meo village can be perceived as both a hierarchical world as well as a ‘community’ created by shared kin nomenclature. Meo traditions portray peasant-patriarchal attitudes in formation of femininity as patinata (pativrata or devoted wife).

**Muslim Identity:**

The Meos believed in a variety of Islamic ideologies which ranged from the Qadiris to the Madariyya Tariqa. The warrior-saint Salar Masud was worshipped in every village on Shab-i-rat, Hussainis exercised reverence in Gurgaon, a group of fakirs showed religious inclination towards Banda Nawaz, while some others were followers of

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133 Rose, op. cit., p. 84.
134 Mayaram (1997b), op. cit., p. 42.
135 Ibid.
136 Ibid., p. 47.
137 Ibid.
138 Ibid.
139 Ibid.
140 Ibid., p. 39.
Hasan Basri of Basra near Baghdad. The Meos observe various religious festivals like Id-ul-Zuha, Id-ul-Fitr, Muharrum and Shabrat. They also make pilgrimage to tombs of Mahomedan saints.

Although the Meos were converted from Hinduism to Islam about ten centuries ago, their adoption of Islamic cultural practices or even the religious injunctions prescribed in the Quran remained at best nominal and did not advance beyond male circumcision and burial of the dead. The author of a revenue settlement refers to the Meos as ‘lax Mohamedans’ who ‘rarely observe the fasts or attend prayers in the mosque, drink spirits and are quite willing to reverence the same deities as their Hindu neighbours.’ Similarly, Powlett, the Alwar ethnographer perceived a ‘very impure type’ of Islam being practiced among the Meos who ‘are now all Musalmans in name; but their village deities are the same as those of Hindu Zamindârs. They too keep several Hindu festivals.’

**Hybrid, Syncretic or Liminal Identity:**

The discussion over the religious trends among the Muslim Meos has rather complicated the question of their identity. On the basis of our present understanding, it is somewhat difficult to categorize the Meos either as Muslims or Hindus. In fact, this would be a gross oversimplification of the facts. The elasticity of culture and religion, practiced by the peasant communities of Mewàt and the simultaneous manifestation of

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141 Ibid.
142 Sherring, op. cit., p. 90.
143 Shamsuddin, op. cit., p. 35.
144 Mayaram, op. cit., p. 41.
145 Ibid.
both Hindu and Muslim traits among the Meos offers possibility of designing some other kind of paradigm to understand the Meo identity. Are the Meos Muslims or Hindus? If none, then what are they—hybrid, syncretic or liminal? It is quite clear that the conversion of the Meos has not settled the issue of their identity. The case of the Meos demonstrates that the religious conversion is often only partial because communities continue their preconversion practices and is also differentiated within the same community.\textsuperscript{146} Hence, the notion of ‘conversion’ itself needs to be reviewed. Conversion suffers from binary syndrome as it tends to eclipse the social reality of the converted communities. It is not a ‘cut and paste’ technique but a kind of a transformation of matters of faith ‘from’ one state ‘to’ another. To be more precise, the converted communities remain in a transitional state for a very long period. In case of Meos, conversion did not bring about a major shift in their attitude toward the central authority.\textsuperscript{147}

The question of Meo identity is that of ethnic boundaries, cultural overlapping and intermediate identities. It may be noted that the problem of the Meos is not an isolated one as there are quite a few communities like the Muslim Merat, Bhatti, Kayamkhani Rājpūts and Malkana Rājpūts of central India who inhabit an interstitial space between Hinduism and Islam although the precise configuration of each displays substantial variations.\textsuperscript{148} Meos are one of such communities that falls between religious traditions. What then is the apparatus that can be utilized to comprehend identities that defy classification, that precede an either status.

\textsuperscript{146} Mayaram (2004), op. cit., p. 37.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{148} Manushi Hardyal Singh, \textit{Report Mandausamhuri Rai Marwar} (Hindi), vol. i, Jodhpur, 41-51; Cited by Mayaram, ‘Rethinking Meo Identity: Cultural Faultline, Syncretism, Hybridity or Liminality?’, \textit{Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East}, vol. xvii, no. ii, 1997, p.35.
The notion of hybridity is one of the most recent concepts of cultural theory that expresses the intercultural encounter. Although hybridity emphasizes the transgression of religion and language and is juxtaposed to purity and exclusivity, it is restricted in time and space to the metropolitan. According to Bhabha, 'hybrid hyphenations emphasize incommensurable elements – the stubborn chunks as the basis of cultural identifications.'\(^{149}\) Hybridity suggests how two entities combine to produce a third. But at any rate, the culture of the Meos is not hybrid as they are not a product of intermarriages between the Hindus and the Muslims but a simple case of religious conversion.

On the other hand Syncretism is used to describe the encounter between religions. Syncretism is a fusion, in perception or thought, of incompatible elements, somewhat like an inchoate image of two different things.\(^{150}\) The analysis of the syncretic is in terms of the building blocks of 'cultural traits.'\(^{151}\) Its main drawback is that religions become the legitimate great traditions while the margins are seen as inhabited by little traditions.\(^{152}\)

In case of the Meos, the term liminality seems to be more appropriate as it suggests a potentially anti-structural questioning of categorical identities, in this case Hindu and Muslim. Liminality does not presupposes binarism but seeks to transcend the binary mode of thought and understanding.\(^{153}\) Despite the conceptual distinction, there is translatability between the hybrid, the syncretic and the liminal.


\(^{151}\) Mayaram (1997b), op. cit., p. 36.

\(^{152}\) Ibid.

\(^{153}\) Ibid.
The identity of the Meos has to be retrieved from the liminalism of the Meo culture. Here, the Meo personality is redefined, as Taylor puts it, in terms of bi-culturalism. The Meos possess cultural flexibility whereby they can interact with the Hindus over puranic genealogy and at the same time they can express their Islamic affiliations. Meo identity is not to be seen as something static or fixed but rather as a dynamic and ever-growing phenomenon. Meo narratives reveal a fascinating and multifaceted world where aspects of heterodox Shaivism, Vaishnava Bhakti and tantric belief and practice are entwined with those derived from Shia and Sunni ideology. Historically, this enabled a dialogue with other groups, a repudiation of upper caste (both Hindu and Muslim) hegemony, a prolonged engagement with temporal power as well as a distinctive community identity reproduced through cultural forms. The sources of Meo identity are also not fixed but scattered in form of many voices buried in their oral traditions—folktales, myths, legends, epics, authored and performed to different audiences across time and space. Both the texts and other Meo voices are a useful point of entry into thinking about the ways in which identities are constituted and contested.

Rājasthān religious tradition show that agricultural castes of whatever religion tend to share Saivite and Sakta traditions of worship. Artisinal groups like tailors, washerman, barbers, potters, genealogists, leather tanners, liquor brewers and cloth printers consist of both Hindu and Muslim branches who share the same deities. Meo Muslims carry on the cult of Allah as also animism and the worship of Pirs and other deities. The Meos believed that the gods also dwell in this world who extend help in

155 Mayaram, op. cit., pp. 36-37.
156 Singh, op. cit.
need. To them, Mahadev is a benevolent god who is ready to help the Meos even to the extent of supporting them against the Hindu castes. The self-other relationship is tossed around and reordered in poetic consciousness so that the other is part of the self.\textsuperscript{157} 'Mev to mullah ki na maney.' A nineteenth century ethnographer described the Meos as 'very lax Muhamedans, sharing in most of the rites and customs of their Hindu neighbours, especially such as are pleasant to observe; their principle of action seems to have been to keep the feasts of both religions and the fasts of neither.'\textsuperscript{158}

There are "ambhibious communities" which cannot be said to be either wholly Hindu or Muslim. Such are the Meos of Rājasthān, and their religious status is likely to raise some very difficult question of law. Their amalgam of the customs of the two religions was considered bizarre by both Hindus and Muslims outside of Mewāt. The Meos' response to this view of their culture was to avoid outsiders. But they felt no pressing need to bend in either direction, because their position in Mewāt was secure. None of the other caste groups in Mewāt questioned the Meo dominance. In their dealings with Meos, the Hindus virtually ignored the fact that the former had embraced Islam.

Many divergences in belief and practice among the Indian Muslims are due to incomplete conversion. We have, therefore, had the communities or groups calling themselves Muslim, like the Malkana Rājpūts of Uttar Pradesh and the Meos of Punjab whose beliefs and practices were inconsistent with the teachings of Islam.

\textsuperscript{157} Mayaram (1997b), op. cit., p. 40.
\textsuperscript{158} Punjab District Gazettes, iv A. p. 25.
The arguments over the Meo identity that have been presented here now lead us to two major points. First, from the twelfth-thirteenth century onwards, the journey of the Meos from one form of cultural group to another, their endless resistance with surrounding regional and imperial powers, tossing them from chieftainship to peasantry, have battered the community to such an extent that they have been left wounded with an overall fractured identity. Second, in an attempt to decipher the most appropriate mark of identity from among the above-mentioned sets of identities, the most preferable choice seems to be the Mewāti peasant identity. During their evolution and course of struggle the Meos assumed different roles and as a result different identities but ultimately the most fundamental mark of identification or the badge that decorated the Meo personality or which they would never like to loose was that of a peasant of Mewāt. It was this peasant in the Mewāti which transcended all other kinds of identities that may have characterized them from time to time. The Mewāti drew upon from their Rājpūtism, they derived richly from their Hindu mythology, they equally took proud in their Islamic association but at the core of their heart they remained peasants. It was their pastoral-peasant identity which swept aside all other identities and gave them an outstanding and exclusive identity which separated them from both the Hindus and the Muslims. The formation of this unique community and the development of their unique identity is a classic example of cultural co-existence of so-called incompatible religions, unthought by Samuel Huntington who believes in cultural faultlines and the clash of civilizations. One cannot help discovering almost a conscious effort to imbibe the elements of both Hindus and Muslim cultures and to emanate a blend which is intrinsically Mewāti. Feelings of
reverence towards saints, scriptures and customs of both Hindus and Muslims are clearly visible. Both are absorbed as integral parts of the Meos' rural cultural heritage.

They are sons of the soil par excellence. They had accepted Islam as a religion in some by gone days and still take pride in regarding themselves and being regarded by others as Musalmans. But Muslim culture as developed in India is mostly on a feudal urban pattern. Only such characteristics of this culture have been imbibed by the Meos as fit into their rugged pattern of rural life in Mewāt. The other niceties born out of urban living, a certain economic standard combined with leisure, have at best come as a thin veneer to the Meos. Here in Meos we find a body of a Muslim and the spirit of a Hindus or more appropriately, a perfect synthesis of Indo-Islamic culture, one who can resist the hegemony of the mullahas and pandits and yet had the capacity to retain their Mewāti-peasant identity. As peasants, the Meos remained closer to the Hindus of Mewāt than to the Muslims of the rest of India. A very popular saying, emphasizing the superficiality of the difference between Hindu Jats and Muslim Meos is often quoted: 'Jat kya Hindu aur Meo kya Musalman'
Table 1: Gots and Pals of the Meos*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name of the original tribe</th>
<th>Name of the got or pal</th>
<th>Name of the mother village or place whence it originated</th>
<th>Principal villages belonging to each got</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>DEROWAL OR DARWAL</td>
<td>Delhi–Malab in Nuh tehsil</td>
<td>Punahana, Neoli, Andana, Tain &amp; c. (South of Nuh)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>LANDAWAT</td>
<td>Do. Niana Bhagora in Alwar State</td>
<td>Firozepur, Naoli and Bhagor (Firozepur valley)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>RATAWAT</td>
<td>Do. Sathori in Alwar</td>
<td>Patrali, Sahori, Alapur, Bilgari,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>BALUT OR BALAUT</td>
<td>Do. Gaddi Dhaina</td>
<td>Baraka, Lehrwari, Seri, Sangal Hari and Chandanki</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Sarohia</td>
<td>Do. (?) Seswala, tehsil Gurgaon</td>
<td>Fatehpur Taja, Sarohi in the Balabgarh tehsil, Seswala &amp; c.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Jangali</td>
<td>Do. Rajauli</td>
<td>Dougarbas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Chapolia</td>
<td>Do. –</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Lamkhora</td>
<td>Do. –</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Naharwari</td>
<td>Do. Dadi in Alwar</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Ghalot</td>
<td>KALBSA OR KALSAKHI</td>
<td>Mewar</td>
<td>Kompur in Alwar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Ghalot</td>
<td>Do.</td>
<td>Nayan, tehsil Lachmangarh in Alwar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Kachhwaha</td>
<td>DHAINGAL OR DAHINGAL</td>
<td>Amber, Jaipur and Raisina</td>
<td>Ghasira, Raisina, Londa, Rahna, Gawala, &amp; c. (in the north of Nuh)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Badgujar</td>
<td>Fatehpur Sikri</td>
<td>Sanghar, Mendhi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* List derived from HA Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province*, vol. I, Delhi, 1990, pp. 80-81. The original 52 gots include 12 Pals, given in capitals. The list also includes the thirteenth Palakam, and two gots of recent accretion.
### Table 1 (Contd.): Gots and Pals of the Meos

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name of the original tribe</th>
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<th>Name of mother village or place whence it originated</th>
<th>Principal villages belonging to each got</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>CHIRKLOT</td>
<td>Mathura–Tahangarh in Bharatpur, Pataudi and Dholat</td>
<td>Kot-Atawar, Unmara, Dhulawat, &amp; c. (in the south-east of Nuh and round Punahana)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>DEMROT</td>
<td>Do. Bahangarh, Pataudi, Khajota in Alwar</td>
<td>Khajota, Ghata, Beswan, Rali, Bisu, &amp; c. (in the Firozepur valley)</td>
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<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>DHULOT</td>
<td>Do. Mausa Wadha</td>
<td>Sekri, Malakpur, Alacara, &amp; c. (in the same)</td>
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<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>PANGLOT</td>
<td>Do. Dholat Deswala</td>
<td>Deswala and Bahala</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>NAI</td>
<td>Do. Nokuj in Alwar</td>
<td>Nekuj but Dal Dhayya, Mehdamka, &amp; c.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>Besar</td>
<td>Do. Malwasa, Kahera near Alwar</td>
<td>Sakaras</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>33.</td>
<td>Boria</td>
<td>Do. Khajota in Alwar</td>
<td>Sathana</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>Chukar</td>
<td>Do. Palkeora</td>
<td>Jodhpur, Satwasi, Ubbaka Malakpur, Jatwali, &amp; c.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>35.</td>
<td>Jandal</td>
<td>Do. Kewar</td>
<td>Kewar and Malawali</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36.</td>
<td>Chandlot</td>
<td>Do. Tahangarh and Lassi in Alwar</td>
<td>Lassi</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>37.</td>
<td>Markatra</td>
<td>Do.</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>38.</td>
<td>Khildar</td>
<td>Do. Maujpur in Alwar</td>
<td>Maujpur</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>39.</td>
<td>Jatlawat</td>
<td>Do. Andhvari</td>
<td>Andhvari</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>40.</td>
<td>Chauhan</td>
<td>Ajmer–Taragarh</td>
<td>Muhammadpur near Meoli, Nizamnagar in Alwar</td>
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<tr>
<td>41.</td>
<td>Sogan</td>
<td>Do. Mandwar Mauza in Alwar State</td>
<td>Mauja, Udana and Manotu</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>42.</td>
<td>Kanwalia</td>
<td>Do. Kanwali in Rewari tehsil</td>
<td>Badarpur, Jalalpur, Pakanpur and Ketwara in Bharatpur State</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43.</td>
<td>Jamlia</td>
<td>Do. Mandawar</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>44.</td>
<td>Patwar</td>
<td>Ujjain in Gwalior and Palla in Nuh tehsil</td>
<td>Rajaka, Karwari and Ninapur in Alwar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45.</td>
<td>Mewal</td>
<td>Jaroki in Alwar state</td>
<td>Polkheri and Ahmad Bas, &amp; c.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46.</td>
<td>Nirban</td>
<td>PAHAT Mundawar and Masarpur near Harsoli</td>
<td>Guliara, Balag, Noshehr, Selana</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47.</td>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>Bhoslia</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>48.</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Kharkatia</td>
<td>Goria Nangal in Alwar</td>
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<tr>
<td>49.</td>
<td>Bhatti</td>
<td>Nagaon in Alwar</td>
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<td>50.</td>
<td>Bhandarain</td>
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<tr>
<td>51.</td>
<td>Bankawat</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>52.</td>
<td>Khokhar</td>
<td>–</td>
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