Going for Visits with a Woman-Fakir: the African Diaspora in Gujarat

Basu, H.

Fieldwork

HELENE BASU

Going for Visits with a Woman-Fakir: the African Diaspora in Gujarat

Among the diverse practitioners of Islam in Gujarat, the Sidi stand out for their unique combination of a Sufi saint cult with the veneration of their African ancestry. Members of the small African Diaspora numbering ca. 6–7000 in Gujarat, trace their origins to slaves from the hinterlands of the East African coast captured and sold to India by Gujarati, Arab and Persian traders till the late 19th century. Today their descendants, the Sidi, live in ramshackle houses in urban slums or villages at the fringes of Gujarat society.

Amongst the regional Muslim population, the Sidi belong to the poor who are exempted from undertaking the *hajj* or giving alms. Rather, they themselves are receivers of *zakat* and other types of alms. Considering the unsteady and low income men and women derive – mainly from domestic service – some resort to begging, which is at times the only way to meet the daily demands for food in the household. However, individual begging outside a ritual context is considered shameful, whereas gifts received for group performances of dancing or other activities related to the cult are seen as expressions of emotion and respect accorded to the Sidi ancestors. Therefore, in times of need, people seek to develop strategies of begging that allow for avoiding the shame and humiliation associated with standing at the roadside with open hands. This latter applies typically to women who ultimately have to feed men and children, even when the men are unemployed or otherwise incapable of supplying enough money. In addition, there are quite a number of households run by women without a husband. During my fieldwork (1987-1989), I often wondered about the hundreds of little sources women could mysteriously tap when a household seemed at the verge of a major collapse. As an instructive example of Sidi women's ingenuity in mobilizing social obligations to give gifts or alms, I would like to present the following case which also sheds light on how the presence of the fieldworker may be used tactically by the people studied in following their own pursuits.

Throughout my fieldwork I spent much time in the village neighbouring the main shrine of the Sidi, the *dargah* of Bava Gor in the South of Gujarat. The twenty Sidi families of this village all basically see themselves as religious virtuosos involved in *faqiri,* although they also grow some grain and do odd jobs here and there. But whereas in the past the income of the shrine was distributed equally amongst the resident Sidi *faqirs*, nowadays it is in a process of expanding its clientele and one family has managed to control the *dargah* and its income more or less to the exclusion of the others. Amongst the latter was Madina, a woman who was around sixty years old when we first met. Madina had no children of her own but lived with her brother's recently divorced daughter and her two daughters and one son between the ages of three to ten. In addition, there was the old husband of Madina who suffered from tuberculosis. Formerly, he had been one of the main *faqirs* at the shrine but then became ill and contributed nothing to the household subsistence. They owned a small plot of land on which the women grew lentils, sufficient for about four to five months a year. Madina and the younger woman worked occasionally as domestics in one of the nearby towns in order to feed the children, the sick husband and themselves. On *jumma rat*, holy Thursday, which was the busiest day at the *dargah* attracting up to 150 visitors (many of whom seek a cure from possession), they sat with other Sidi women near the tomb hoping for alms.

PHOTO: HELENE BASU

Sidi girls

The visit

Once Madina suggested I accompany her to a 'brother' whom, she said, was a Hindu but a stout follower of Bava Gor, filled with sympathy for her and whom he treated as his 'sister'. She was full of praises for the man's generous and sympathetic ways and insisted that I meet him myself. The next day we left, Madina carrying a shabby bag that looked rather empty. After having travelled by bus some thirty kilometres, we walked from the road through dry fields until we reached the village. It took some time before Madina found her destination, the house of Rambhai, which was larger compared to the other houses in the street, but by no means resembling a rich peasant's shelter. A middle-aged woman sat near the door and looked apprehensively at the tall and dark figure of Madina approaching. She gave no sign of knowing her. Madina greeted the woman with a broad smile and asked for Rambhai. He was expected to return from the fields at lunchtime. Only after Madina had introduced herself as a *Bavagorvali* and me, the foreigner who, she said, wanted to meet all sorts of people in villages and therefore she had thought it a good idea to take me to Rambhai, were we asked inside the house and offered a glass of water. While we waited, the woman busied herself in the background and talked extensively about this year's bad crop due to the draught (the rains had failed), the loss of a buffalo cow and the general difficulty of making a living these days. Madina agreed. Finally, Rambhai turned up. Startled by the strange foreigner sitting in his living room next to an unmistakably poor Muslim woman, recognizable from the long dress Madina wore over her loose trousers, Rambhai asked the other woman, apparently his wife, who these visitors were and what they wanted. She did not know either. Madina reminded him of his visit at the *dargah* some four to five years back when he had brought a female relative possessed by an evil spirit. Didn't he remember, Madina asked undisturbed, that she had looked after his relative and that he, Rambhai, had called her sister? It seemed, Rambhai had forgotten about it. Still, he ordered his wife to prepare a meal for us.

A neighbour dropped in, a young man who spoke a little English and said he was 'B. Com'. He explained to me that 'these people' (the Sidi) are rather good-for-nothings and beggars and I should be very careful associating with them but that they are very powerful when it comes to evil spirits which may harm 'good people' like himself and his caste. This is, the young man clarified, because these Habshis are much closer to demons and spirits than ordinary people. Therefore, they may control them in a way other people can not – and look, he said, now roaring with laughter, at how black they are, almost like demons! I looked at Madina who sat somewhat behind the young man and who, though she did not exactly understand the words, smiled broadly at me while making an obscene gesture pointing with her finger to the lower parts of her body. Then the meal was ready and the young man disappeared.

A sister's right to a gift

Meanwhile, I had become increasingly confused about the whole venture of our visit, not seeing any point in Madina's wanting to come here in the first place. After lunch, though, things became clearer. While Rambhai fulfilled his obligations as host sitting with us through the final cup of tea, Madina produced a red string with some glittering silver paper at one side from her bag and confidently announced that now, like a true sister, she would give *rakshabandhan* to her brother. Although the proper day for this Hindu ritual – when the sister ties a string round the wrist of her brother who reciprocates the gesture with a gift according to his means – had passed since several weeks, Rambhai could not but accept Madina's sisterly act. Our departure then was postponed for another half an hour. First, the wife filled Madina's bag with grain and then brought another sack for me. My protests, from utter embarrassment and thinking of the dead buffalo, the draught and all the rest, went unheard (I secretly thought I could just buy for Madina what she would have lost by my refusal). On top of it, we were both given a fifty-rupee note. When I tried, at least, to return the money, I was told that since we had come together I was no different from Madina and therefore had to accept whatever was given, otherwise they would have to suffer the evil consequences of improper response to a sister's tying the string to her brothers wrist. This could not be argued. Back in the Sidi village, Madina was quite satisfied with the outcome of our trip and kept reminding me of her nice 'brother'.

With the Sidi, one is likely to encounter situations such as these during fieldwork, when one's own estimation of the interactions observed seem contrary to people's rationalizations of what has happened. For example, the Sidi consciously reject the name 'Habshi' (from Arabic 'Habash') because it is used with a derogatory and often racist meaning such as the young man had deployed. However, Madina and other Sidi have their own ways of countering condescending attitudes and racism – the assumed superiority of the Other is ridiculed and debased. By exploiting custom and cultural values such as gift giving, the Sidi are able to re-interpret and thus subvert attitudes and behaviour that would otherwise undermine the self-respect and dignity of the people. ✦

Dr Helene Basu is associate professor at the Institut für Ethnologie, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany.
E-mail: basu@gmx.net