

## The Lives of Bahuchara Mata

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Of the hundreds of temple sites in the modern Indian state of Gujarat, two, Dvaraka and Somnath, are known to Hindus throughout South Asia. One site that also draws large numbers of visitors, but is little known outside Gujarat is that of Bahucharaji (Becharaji) in north Gujarat. Gujarati and Rajasthani pilgrims frequent Bahucharaji to pray for male offspring and relief from disabilities, as well as for tonsorial ceremonies for their sons. Smaller, subsidiary temples to Bahuchara are found throughout Gujarat, although visits to the main temple grants greater merit.<sup>1</sup> Invocations to Bahuchara can often be seen painted on trucks and autorickshaws; films, devotional songs and framed posters of the goddess may be purchased in any town in Gujarat; Bahucharaji *bhajans* in Gujarati abound on the Internet. In spite of such local popularity, Bahucharaji is virtually invisible to most non-Gujaratis, with one significant exception: the *hijadas* (eunuchs or the ‘third gender’) of north India, for whom the goddess is patron and protector (Shah 1961: 1327). What is it that makes the temple of Bahuchara a specifically regional shrine, albeit one of great local significance and revenues? While Dvaraka and Somnath are readily recognisable throughout South Asia, why is Bahucharaji so unambiguously local?

Although all great Hindu pilgrimage sites, whether Shakta, Vaishnava or Shaiva, have histories of being shaped by competing interests, some are extra-locally known while others are confined to specific cultural or political regions. Certain local sites came to define the political identity of their regions, for example, the Jagannath temple in Orissa. Others, such as Somnath or Dvaraka, became associated with political ideas or mythological figures that transcended the politics of the region. In contrast, the discourses that swirl around Bahuchara are intelligible only locally, in Gujarat and Rajasthan. The shrine of Bahuchara is considered one of the three *shakti pithas* of Gujarat, along with Ambaji (near Banaskantha) and Kalika Mata (on Pavagadh hill near Champaner), thus positioning it nominally within a wider South Asian network.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the competing interests that shaped the site did not produce discourses that resonated or were exportable outside this region. This is why Bahucharaji is ‘typically Gujarati’ and largely attracts Gujarati and Rajasthani pilgrims, unlike other great *shakti pithas* such as Kali in Kolkata or Kamakhya in Assam. Thus, a study of the history of the Bahuchara temple is an investigation into an idea of Gujarat which

does not often travel beyond its own borders. It is an examination of what makes Gujarati religiosity Gujarati.

The Bahuchara temple lies in the former princely state of Baroda, to the north of Baroda city and north-east of Ahmedabad. Gujarat was, from the end of the sixteenth century, ruled by the Mughals, who took over from the independent sultans of Gujarat (ruled 1407–1584). In 1721, the Maratha chieftain Pilajirao Gaekwad conquered a strip of eastern Gujarat, including the city of Baroda, from where his lineage ruled until Independence. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, the Gaekwads concluded a treaty with the East India Company, allowing the former to retain their territories. Gaekwad control over the lands north of Baroda was always contested. Both before and after the Gaekwad conquest, local governance and land control in north Gujarat was effectively in the hands of powerful local landholders or *garasiyas* including Kolis, Solankis and Thakardas. Many of these groups claimed to be Rajputs or to have descended from the Rajputs. The Gaekwads' first interest in the shrine appears to have been in the mid-eighteenth century when Damajirao Gaekwad granted three villages for its maintenance. In the 1770s, Manajirao, the younger brother of the then ruler, was cured of an ailment by the goddess and built a stone temple in gratitude. Subsequently, the Gaekwads took a close interest in the administration of the site.

For overlords and elites, the Gaekwads, colonial administrators and upper castes, the adherents of Bahuchara were seen as culturally and politically subversive. This was the case from the sixteenth century, when the first texts about the shrine and the goddess emerged. Bahuchara represented the worship of shakti or the female principle, a form of devotion which was widely practised but was becoming ideologically suspect in Gujarat, where it was associated with sexuality and non-vegetarian practices. This was particularly problematic at a time when re-constituted Vaishnavism, Jainism and a vegetarian ethos were becoming increasingly dominant in Gujarat.<sup>3</sup> Bahuchara demanded animal sacrifice, had the power to turn women into men and more unusually, men into women. The shrine was the site for theatrical performances considered vulgar and unseemly by city elites. The goddess was served by cross-dressing attendants and hijadas, many of whom were Muslims.

The second reason for the mistrust of the elites of the shrine is that the goddess' primary worshippers were groups considered violent and disruptive by pre-colonial governments and colonial writers. These included low-status occupational groups and the local land-holding communities who regularly challenged their Mughal and Maratha overlords. Finally, these worshippers included the temple's main stakeholders, who derived substantial revenues from pilgrims and offerings. Successive administrations sought to regulate and safeguard these revenues.

In spite of characteristics considered undesirable by elites, but at least partly because of them, Bahuchara was a powerful deity, reckoned to grant favours, especially of male children, and cure disease (afflictions of the spine, stammering, deafness, blindness and so on). The goddess was also the protector of hijadas and representative of their sacral authority. Her appeal, though restricted to Gujarat and

southern Rajasthan, reached far beyond her core non-brahminical local base. From the sixteenth century, the history of the goddess and the temple show a continuing tension between the 'reformers' who sought to make the goddess conform to brahminical prescription and contemporary propriety and the 'traditionalists' who were afraid that too much reform would cause the goddess to lose her powers. Virtually every aspect of the goddess was debated: her origins, miracles, adherents and the practices at her shrine. These arguments were underpinned by a more mundane jostling over the extensive resources and rights of the temple itself, blessed as it was with grants of agricultural lands and abundant pilgrim revenues. These fierce negotiations over spiritual and material content excluded the goddess and her shrine from overarching singular narratives and consequently from trans-regional appeal. But it is here that we may discern fundamental debates about religious allegiance and political authority in Gujarat.

## THE TEMPLE OF BAHUCHARA

According to the *Bombay Gazetteer*, the original shrine was built by a king called Sankhal Raj in 1152 CE (Elliot 1883: 609). The first surviving mention of the shrine is in an inscription from 1280 CE that mentions its accompanying village, Vahichara.<sup>4</sup> We do not hear of changes to the temple's architecture until the eighteenth century, when the Gaekwads built a brick fort: '... loopholed for musketry, the corners topped by circular towers, the three gates made strong' (Elliot 1883: 610) around the shrine. The reason for this fortification was the threat of '... dacoits and robbers who in mounted bands' (Forbes Vol. 2 1924: 95) were said to frequent the Chunval plain. This was a prosperous site. In the 1880s, the *Bombay Gazetteer* made reference to 'large temple funds' and to the 'donations of the religious'. The temple complex then contained wells, tanks, rest-houses (*dharmashalas*) for pilgrims, public gardens, a charitable dispensary, a Gujarati school, a police station (*thana*) a government treasury and an office for the temple's administration.

Today, there are the usual stalls of ephemera, posters, compact discs and shrine offerings outside the fort, although on non-full moon and non-festival days, these are rather sleepy. On entering the southern gate, it becomes clear that there is not just a single temple, but a complex of shrines.<sup>5</sup> To the north of the complex are the offices of the temple trust. Along the inner perimeter of the fort are performance sites, shrines to subsidiary deities such as Sahariya Mahadev, Nilakantha Mahadev and Kachroliya Hanuman. There are also memorials to important devotees such as Dada Narsinh Vir and the eighteenth-century poet, Vallabha Bhatta. One room is filled with flimsy wooden fetishes festooned with tinsel and coconuts, used as offerings to the goddess. Chickens, the goddess' mounts, peck grain nearby. Another room houses hundreds of painted figurines of children, donated by those who desire male offspring. This room, known as *putreshna-bhuvan* (hall of those desirous of sons), includes an inauguration stone that states that it was inaugurated by Narendra Modi, the chief minister of

Gujarat on the 14 August, 2007. Near the southern gate is *shriphal sthal* or sacrificial site, where coconuts are nowadays offered. There is also a three-storied *chabutara* or bird-feeder, like those found in many Gujarati towns. A *kunda* or tank, renovated recently, stands outside the southern gate.

The oldest part of the shrine complex is a small temple enclosing a sprawling, small-leaved *varakhadi* tree, believed to be the site where the goddess first appeared. Adjoining this is another small temple, the *madhya sthan* (second or intermediate place), which houses an incised plaque representing the goddess and has a locked silver door at its entrance. This part of the temple is believed to have been built by a Maratha named Fadnavis (or an official with that title) in the eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

In 1779, Manajirao Gaekwad, the younger brother of the Maratha ruler of Baroda, built a third structure close to the original shrine after the goddess cured him of a tumour (Bookseller 1919: 9). This is the structure that still exists today, although it has been restored and renovated many times since then. This, the largest part of the shrine, is a double-domed stone temple with a spire or *shikhara* over its sanctum. At its entrance is a platform on which stands a statue of the goddess' rooster. Visitors then walk up to the main shrine, the roof supported by carved pillars embellished with mythological figures and doorkeepers. An inscription in Sanskrit and Gujarati is on the right pillar at the entrance of the sanctum. It relates that the temple was completed in VS 1839 (1783 CE) on the orders of Manajirav Gayakwad (Gaekwad), the brother of the current Gaekwad ruler. Within the sanctum, a beaten silver relief of the goddess is visible in a niche on a platform.

Unusually for a shrine claiming to be a shakti pitha, Bahuchara is a virgin goddess: shakti in the form of a young girl, unaccompanied by a male consort. None of her mythology associates her with a male deity. Although the goddess is widely and colourfully represented in the popular media as a woman seated on a rooster, this representation is not the actual object of worship, which is a *yantra* or mystical diagram representing a vulva of quartz (*sphatika*). The yantra, however, is hidden from view, covered by the silver plaque incised with an image of the goddess astride her vehicle, the rooster. Devotees make offerings of small such plaques (*angis*) made of silver or other metal, a custom that one commentator has interpreted as arising out of the mingling of Hindu and Muslim practices at the shrine (Maheta 1973: 110).

## DEVOTEES AND THE DIVISION OF THE SPOILS

Although the Gaekwads had captured this part of Gujarat in 1721, their control was nominal and local armed landholders regularly won back territories from them.<sup>7</sup> The temple came under direct Gaekwad supervision when the second Gaekwad ruler, Damajirao (ruled 1732–68) assigned the revenues of three villages (Bechar, Sankhalpur and Dodivada) to support the shrine. These revenues were supplemented by pilgrim offerings, which went into a temple fund called *golakh*, administered by Gaekwad officials. A proportion of the temple funds were paid out to three categories of

traditional temple *sevaks* or servants, the Solanki Rajputs of the neighbouring village of Kalri, the Kamalias and the hijadas (eunuchs) or Pavaiyas. Ritual duties at the shrine appear to have been divided amongst these three groups. In 1883, when the *Bombay Gazetteer* was compiled, the properties assigned for the maintenance of the Bahuchara temple included three substantial villages. Says the gazetteer: ‘... the people of these villages are not dependent on the temple for their living, but are, for the most part, agriculturists’ (Elliot 1883: 609–10).

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, the worshippers at the temple were primarily Rajputs and other non-Brahmin groups. In the twentieth century, the main worshippers continued to be Kolis and Thakardas, local land-holding groups aspiring to Rajput status, as well as occupational groups.<sup>8</sup> It was in 1859 that Sayajirao Gaekwad of Baroda appointed a *dakshini* or ‘southern’ Brahmin, Narayanarao Madhav, to officiate over the rituals of the temple in place of a ‘Rajput’ officiant. This would seem to be the first time in the record that Brahmins presided over the temple ritual. Six Brahmins were employed to attend the goddess and twenty one other temple servants of other castes were retained on the Gaekwad’s payroll (*ibid.*: 610).

Among the temple’s servants were the Solanki landholders or *garasiyas* of the nearby village of Kalri and a Muslim group called the Kamalias. Temple offerings were shared between the Solankis and Kamalias, between whom there was considerable competition, sometimes erupting into violence, as both claimed the full offering made to the goddess. The Kamalias, dressed partly as women and partaking partly of Muslim life-rituals, were crucial to the service of the goddess. They were also been seen as her staunchest servants. In 1851, their devotion was put to the test:

... A Solanki landholder (*garasiya*), came for the *darshan* [audience] of Mataji after his marriage, then returned home. When his women went for *darshan*, they were teased by the Kamalias. The women were enraged and taunted their men to wear bangles if they were not outraged at this insult to their women. The Solankis attacked the Kamalias and captured some of them, and claimed the income of Mataji. To resolve the conflict, it was decided that if the Kamalias could bring, in their oiled hands, a cannonball heated in fire from Padi vav ... to the Sriji temple, all rights would rest with them. They did so, but the conflict continued in secret. Eventually the judicial officials decided that as there were no documents, the [Solanki] landholders would get 10 annas and the Kamalias 6 annas of the income (Bookseller 1919: 18)

The gazetteer account says that the dispute was settled by Khanderao Gaekwad (1856–70), who imposed a similar division of the spoils on the Solankis and Kamalias.<sup>9</sup> However, there was another set of stakeholders who had historical and material interests in the shrine.

Half-a-century later, in the 1930s, a battle raged in the Gujarati press regarding the origin of the goddess Bahuchara. The debate was set off by a learned member of the Charan community (a group who are traditional genealogists and record-keepers all over Gujarat and Rajasthan), who published a booklet asserting that Bahuchara was a Charan deity and backed up his claim with references from the manuscript literature of the community (*Mahiya* 1935: 3).<sup>10</sup> This contested the view that the goddess was

an ancient Vedic entity with impeccable Puranic credentials. The Charan author, Gadhavi Samarthadan Mahiya, stated that it was 'historically true' that a Charan virgin was worshipped as Bahucharaji and offered an account of the origin of the shrine. In his circumstantially detailed account:

Bahuchara was born in Ujala village of Marvad in the Detha branch of the Maru Charans. Her parents were Bapal and Deval. Deval was an *avatar* of Jagadamba (World-Mother). She lived c. 1309 (CE). Bapal had three daughters: Butay, Balal and Bahuchara, apart from sons. As Bapal was learned, he obtained a *jagir* (landholding) in Kathiavad. While he was there, his wife died. He called his children over. On the way, they reached Chunval and camped near Sankhalpur for the night when a bandit named Bapaiya attacked them. Seeing this, the youngest daughter Bahuchara cut off her breasts and did *ragu*.<sup>11</sup> Her sisters did the same. Then she cursed the bandit: "You will become a eunuch (Pavaiyo)".<sup>12</sup> Hearing this, the bandit begged for mercy, which she granted, ordering him to build a shrine (*sthanak*) for her at the spot. He would then be blessed, and if a naturally emasculated man arrived at her shrine and lived in women's clothing and sang her praises, he would certainly reach her favour. She [Bahuchara] then died.<sup>13</sup>

Mahiya's (1935) account incorporates the claim that all Charan women were embodiments of shakti. The death by self-mutilation of a Charani had powerful consequences. In this case, she demanded a shrine in her honour, the now wealthy and powerful shrine of Bahuchara. The story explains the origin of Bahuchara's attendants, the Pavaiyas or hijadas (eunuchs), who would find sanctuary at the shrine. It thus connects the Charans' claims to authority over the Pavaiyas and the 'bandit' groups of the Chunval. It also upholds the Charans' 'traditional' view that the Pavaiyas were crucial to the mythology and structure of the shrine.

This Charan claim to a stake in the history of Bahuchara was not new. Alexander Forbes had recorded a similar but less detailed account of the origin of the Bahuchara shrine in the 1840s, albeit without the story of the bandit's conversion.<sup>14</sup> Forbes had great admiration for the Charans and as most of his informants were from that group (as Kapadia discusses in Chapter 2 of this book), it is not surprising that he recorded their claims. Charans were known to make even wider claims: an account was recorded by the compilers of the *Bombay Gazetteer* in the 1880s in which the Kachchhela Charans (from Kutch) recently settled in Halol in eastern Gujarat claimed that all the nine lakh Matas or mother goddesses were in fact unmarried Charan girls (Elliot 1883: 614).

Mahiya's account of the Charan origin of Bahuchara was fiercely contested by Rammohanray Jsvantaray Desai, a resident of Halol near Baroda (Desai 1937). His argument may not be unrelated to the fact that the *Bombay Gazetteer* recorded the claim of the Kachchhela Charans now settled in his hometown and in fact he cites a letter from Jamnagar relating that local Charans were attempting to appropriate a Kumarika (virgin goddess) shrine as a Charan goddess. He claimed that Mahiya's Charan claim was un-historical and had caused hurt to Sanatani (tradition-seeking) Hindus.<sup>15</sup> He also accused Mahiya of relying on the legend recorded by Alexander Forbes, which had no historical foundation. To controvert the Charan argument,

Desai argued that the goddess was mentioned in the ancient Puranas in which she was called Balatripurasundari, a version of Durga. She was also a version of Shakti, and her shrine, along with Ambaji in Arasur and Kalika in Pavagadh, was one of the three shakti pithas in Gujarat.

Desai's 'Sanatani', Sanskritic account of the temple's history is a stinging attack on the 'impure' and 'unhistorical' claims of the Charans, whom he accuses of staking unjustified claims to the goddesses of Gujarat, hand-in-glove with British writers. He points out that nowhere do Vallabha and Shamal, the two pre-British devotee-poets of Bahuchara, mention the story of the Charan woman's self mutilation (Desai 1937: 33). Nor do the theatrical traditions of the shrine, collected in the form of *Bhavai samgraha*, mention the Charan story. In any case, says Desai, the Charans are of low birth, the offspring of unwed Rajput girls and the grazers of donkeys, and thus their accounts are not to be trusted.

This debate between a Charan, who upheld the 'traditional' values of the goddess and her shrine and a member of the Gujarati literati such as Desai who sought to harness the goddess' power as a part of Sanskritic Hinduism demonstrates one of the lines of tension in the appropriation of the shrine's influence. The debate continued in the pages of the Gujarati press. However, in spite of the 'Sanatani' group's attack on the Charans' claim that Bahuchara was a virgin Charani, most 'modern' studies of the goddess continue to cite the story alongside the Puranic legends of the goddess' origins (Maheta 1968).

It is understandable that the Solankis and the Kamalias would have a stake in the running of the temple and versions of its history. It is harder to understand the perspective taken by Gadhavi Samarthatadan Mahiya in his strident assertion of the Charan origin of Bahuchara. What made the Charans stake a claim to the history of Bahuchara Mata? Part of the answer is found in Bhudharlal Gangaji Bookseller's account in which he relates that even after the conflict between the Solankis and the Kamalias had been settled, the matter may not have been settled. This was because the money due to one Amarsinh Trikamsinh Barot, a Charan, was withheld by the Solankis. Of the revenues from the temple's lands, part went to charity and the rest was used by Barot for issuing bonds or *lena* (Bookseller 1919: 14). As the Solankis were in debt to Barot, the latter took the matter to the courts. He obtained a decree granting him the Solankis' share of the temple's income in 1910 (Trivedi 1965: 272). It is not surprising then, that Charans would stake their claims to a share of the shrine's history too.

In 1933, the three villages donated to the temple by Damajirao Gaekwad in the eighteenth century were resumed by the then Gaekwad ruler, Sayajirao III (ruled 1875–1939), and a fixed annual sum of Rs 10,500 was granted in their stead (Trivedi 1965: 272).<sup>16</sup> In 1961, the Census records that this sum was still paid to the temple trust. Pilgrim taxes were collected by the village panchayat. The temple properties are currently the subject of litigation and it was not possible to obtain updated information on stakeholders' shares, revenues and taxes.

The last group of temple attendants were the Pavaiyas or hijadas (castrated men or transvestites), who received a small proportion of the offerings and supplemented their income with ritual activity at weddings, births and feasts in neighbouring areas (Shah 1961: 1328). The Charan version of the shrine's history attributed its building to a Pavaiya, a man neutered by the goddess in punishment for rape. In this narrative, the goddess' condition was that the 'third gender' would always be safe at the shrine. Many of the origin legends collected and published in the last century and a half ensure the Pavaiyas' place in the collective ethos of the temple. But the upper caste 'reformist' stakeholders in the shrine, uneasy with the Pavaiyas' claims, have whittled away their traditional rights. Currently (in January 2009), as Manajirav Gaekwad's shrine comes down and a new marble temple to Bahuchara is built on the site, it is unclear what the fate of the Pavaiyas will be.

## CONTESTED NARRATIVES

Although the main devotees of the goddess are said to be Rajputs, Kolis, Bhils, hijadas and other non-Brahmin communities, most of the currently accepted literature used in the shrine and circulated around it is authored by the Brahmins and other elite groups. These elite textual accounts reflect a profound unease with the practices of the shrine and its adherents while fully acknowledging its power. Bhudharlal Gangaji, a bookseller in the town of Mahesana in north Gujarat, wrote a history of Bahuchara in 1919, including poems and ritual verses addressed in her worship and many of the mythological narratives associated with her (Bookseller 1919: 12). He began his history with an attempt to associate the goddess with the story of Krishna, citing a verse purportedly from the Bhagavata Purana to suggest that the goddess was the infant born to Yashoda who was exchanged for Krishna.<sup>17</sup> He also asserts that mention of the goddess can be found in other texts such as the Devi Bhagavata and the Veda. However, he also relates that the first temple on the site was built by local pastoralists:

Where Bahuchara's temple now stands used to be a jungle, in which a *mahant* (religious mendicant or priest) lived. Cowherds (*bharvad ane rabario*) grazed their cattle there. They would come to the *mahant* to smoke with him and sing songs praising the goddess (*devi bhajano*). They built a small brick temple there (ibid.: 13).

The author of the *Bombay Gazetteer* also heard that the original shrine was that of a local Koli goddess of the region who then became assimilated to forms of Durga '... by the usual process of syncretism' (Elliot 1883: 609). This picture of a modest shrine, patronised by local pastoralists, resonates with the earliest mention of the shrine in literature. *Kochar vyavahari ras*, a poem in praise of a fifteenth-century merchant named Kochar, was written by a Jain writer named Gunavijaya in 1621 CE. The poem relates that a *vaishya* (merchant) named Kochar lived in Sankhalpur in the Chunval. In a village near Sankhalpur, Bhils used to

conduct animal sacrifice at the shrine of Bahuchara. This violence distressed Kochar. He complained to the Governor of Cambay Sajanshi about the violence at Bahuchara. Sajanshi in turn reported to the sultan of the time and got Kochar the governorship of twelve villages near Bahuchara, including Sankhalpur. Kochar then stopped animal sacrifice there, even protecting the fish in the pond (Valand 1968: 4; Majmudar 1961: 37).<sup>18</sup>

In Gunavijaya's account, the shrine was frequented not by pastoralists, but by Bhils who offered blood sacrifices to the goddess.<sup>19</sup> While the story is ostensibly about the Jain merchant's virtue and initiative in controlling animal sacrifice, it also relates how the administrative structure of the sultans of Gujarat employed Jains to pacify and regulate the cultural capital of manpower-rich 'turbulent' groups such as the Bhils. In the fifteenth century, Bahuchara's shrine had already become a site to be controlled and domesticated: in this case by collusion between sultanate authorities and a Jain merchant. This is the first reference to the unease of elites with practices at the temple and attempts to regulate them.

What caused such unease? Some indications may be derived from the legends or miracle stories associated with Bahuchara collected from devotional manuals, poetry and histories of the shrine. Although these stories have non-Puranic elements with which some re-tellers are clearly uncomfortable, it is evident that the goddess' power can *only* be demonstrated by relating these tales. Unlike other comparable goddesses in western India, Bahuchara was associated, from the outset, with animal sacrifice, Muslims and gender-bending attributes. The narratives that frame these attributes are subtly different depending on the re-teller, and each of these attributes are sought to be explained and regulated.

Kochar's observation that animal sacrifice was conducted at the shrine is corroborated by this tradition:

One day a captain of the Mughal army came [to the shrine]. The cowherds had brought a buffalo calf to the goddess. It was *kali chaudas* [the dark 14th of the month of Ashvin] and they had no weapon so they cut a branch and hit the calf's neck with it. The dumb beast's neck was cut off. The captain was mystified and said, "O fools, will your Mata be satisfied with this?" One cowherd replied, "Yes! The goddess and all the people will eat well." ... From this time a buffalo calf has been offered as *bhog* but this was stopped by Rajkumwar Saheb Jesingrao in VS 1973 (1917 CE) on the request of the *mahajans* (Bookseller 1919: 8).<sup>20</sup>

Bahuchara mata is said to ride on a rooster. Her association with chickens led to a popular legend in which she humbles a Muslim invader. In Desai's version (1937), the invader is the sultan of Delhi.

Sultan Alauddin II, known as *khuni* (bloody) conquered [the capital of Gujarat] Patan and began to destroy Hindu shrines. After destroying Rudramala in Sidhpur, he went towards Bahuchara. There were many fowls (*kukada*) there—they are the vehicles of Bahuchara—and the Muslims ate them. One escaped. At night, [the escaped] rooster began to call '*kukade kuu Bahuchari!*' at which all the fowls in the stomachs of the soldiers came alive, tore their bellies and came out (Desai 1937: 21).

The trope of Bahuchara's chickens (*bahichara-nau kukadau*) had already become proverbial when it was cited in Shridhara's *Ravan-mandodari samvad* in 1508 or Vikram Savant 1565 (Majmudar 1961: 35, citing verse 678). In Gunavijaya's *Kochar vyavahari ras* (1630), the poet has the following verse: '*bahicharanau ukhanau vadau, udar thaki vasi kukadau*' or 'the great riddle of Bahuchara, the chicken that lived in the stomach' (Majmudar 1961: 36). The phrase re-appears in the *Nandabatrasi* of the eighteenth-century poet Shamal Bhatta (1718–65), a junior contemporary of Vallabha Bhatta.

It also appears in a *duha* composed by a Charan or Bhat:

*Kukadia bhojan kiya, taliya tava tay:  
Te bolavya bahuchara! Mungal-ra ghatmay.*

The *duha* was translated by Forbes thus:

He ate a cock, in oil having cooked it;  
From the Mlech's body, you called it, Bechura! (Forbes Vol. 2 1924: 98)

In Vallabha's poem, the invader is an unnamed Muslim ruler (Majmudar 1961: 37). In Bhudharlal Bookseller's account (1919: 10), the story is extended to explain the origin of the goddess' servants, the Kamalias, who are servants of the goddess and have a right to a share of the shrine's income. After the chickens tore their way out of the soldiers' bellies, the sultan's army lay decimated.

Alauddin was distressed at the loss of his army and came to beg forgiveness of the Mata at her shrine. He promised not to destroy temples and departed.... The goddess accepted the plea of the chickens who had emerged from the [soldiers'] bellies and created the Kamalia community, who were to wear a moustache on one side [of their faces] but to wear bangles on one arm.... (Bookseller 1919: 6)

In this way, the goddess accepted the king's repentance, but took his soldiers into her service, rendered less masculine by the injunction to wear women's dress. The Kamalias, it is explained further, bury their dead and recite the *fatiyo* (*Sura al-fatiha*, the first chapter of the Koran). Their name comes from Kamali, 'the disciple of a great *bhakta*' whose own disciples were both Hindus and Muslims. In a different variant, Kamal was the man who killed and cooked the chickens, and it was decided that the sultan's army would leave him behind to serve the goddess. Kamal married a Muslim woman from Ahmedabad and the Kamalias are their descendants (Trivedi 1965: 269).

The *Bombay Gazetteer*, however, has another account, recorded from the Kamalias themselves. In this version, the goddess brought them into being to protect the Brahmins from a demon, Bhundasur, who plagued the forests around the temple (Elliot 1883: 613). She created a charioteer named Narbhekh Kamalia from the dirt of her lotus (*kamal*)-like face and after killing the demon, gave charge of her worship to the charioteer. This version fails to explain why the Kamalias are Muslims.

The temple was also associated with theatrical performances such as *bhavai*, which were staged in the outer halls of the temple. Reformers such as Rammohanray Desai were appalled by the lewdness of *bhavai* performed at the temple in the 1930s

and campaigned to have performances banned from the premises (Desai 1937: 19). Bhavai compositions were written by many authors in Gujarat from the sixteenth century (Panchal 1983). Another legend associated with the goddess is found in an episode called 'Becharaji vasha' (Becharaji's Garb, here 'episode'), several versions of which have been recorded since the seventeenth century (Majmudar 1961: 38–9).

The Solanki king of Kalri and the Cavada king of Patan were close friends. Both their queens became pregnant, and the kings decided that the children would be married to one another. But both queens gave birth to daughters. For whatever reason, it was not announced that the Kalri queen had a daughter. Eventually when they were married, the girl took fright and ran away on her mare. It was very hot in the Chunval and she stopped by a pond. A bitch that had been following her jumped into the water and emerged transformed into a dog. Then the princess led her mare [into the water] and she was also transformed. She then took a dip herself, and by Bala Bahuchara's blessing, was transformed into a man (Desai 1937: 18).

Thus the Solanki princess of Kalri turned into a man and was able to fulfil her marital and Rajput duties. The Solankis of Kalri were saved from humiliation and became loyal servants of the shrine.

The goddess' ability to transform gender and to protect those of ambiguous gender was celebrated by poets, albeit with some unease. Vallabha (1640–1751) wrote:

For the eunuch and the woman, you kept their masculinity, mother,  
to the wonder of the world, who praise you in sound and scripture, mother

The motif of a woman transformed into a man has mythological forbears and some of these are invoked in theatrical renderings and other retellings of the story.<sup>21</sup> What is significant is the body of gendered and un-gendered meanings that surround the figure of the goddess. One might interpret some of the divergences in the representation of the goddess along lines of gender: between those who possess unambiguous gender and those who, for reasons of biology, history or myth, are denied such certainty. Thus, while the goddess is conceptualised as *bala*, a pre-sexual virgin, she is represented by the feminine *shri yantra* diagram and popular prints show her as a mature woman seated on a rooster. In the Charani version of the origin of the shrine, Bahuchara cuts off her breasts after being raped: an act of self-mutilation that carries a curse and can also be interpreted as a disavowal of gender. We see, in the Charan foundational story, a bandit emasculated—un-gendered—after an act of rape. The bandit's penance for rape is to create a shrine for the goddess that would be a haven for the un-gendered. Similarly, Alauddin's marauding soldiers are transformed into temple servants who must dress in women's clothes and wear women's ornaments on half their bodies. The Solanki princess is turned into a man: an illusory transformation that saves face for her lineage and enables her to be dutiful. These narratives of un-gendering or re-gendering also touch on the other political motifs in the region: the pastoralist continuum from Bhil to Rajput, from bandit to

ruler, and the gendered codes of honour implicated in these transitions. The bandit rapist is emasculated, then forgiven. The Muslim army is decimated by the goddess, who regenerates the soldiers only to emasculate them. A Solanki woman, carrying her lineage's aspirations as high-status Rajputs, is granted male *vesha* (attire) in a perfectly theatrical transformation of gender. In the narratives, transformations of *jati* (birth) stand for both *jati* as gender and *jati* as caste. The goddess' traditional followers were a conglomerate of groups on the very frontiers of politics, caste and gender: these liminal groupings came into regular conflict with more mainstream custodians of religion.

It was the eighteenth-century poet Vallabha, considered the greatest devotee of the goddess, whose compositions did most to re-invent or 'engender' the goddess as a respectable, Puranic manifestation of trans-regional Shakti. He also made the goddess acceptable to Vaishnavas, at a time when Krishnaite Vaishnavism was on the rise in late-Mughal Gujarat. Although most of the devotees of Bahuchara at this time were said to be non-Brahmins, Vallabha was a Brahmin from Ahmedabad. He wrote poems to Bahuchara that praise her attributes, features and her ability to cure disabilities:

... Those whose feet, ears, gait are broken, lame, you make them walk,  
the dumb and the stammerers, you remove their distress.  
Those without vision, you give them eyes,  
those without sons, you cut that curse. ...<sup>22</sup>

In the early eighteenth century, Vaishnavism of the Pushtimarga sect was popular and influential in Gujarat and received considerable support from merchant patrons as well as the Mughal rulers. It was in this atmosphere of dominant Vaishnavism that Vallabha wrote his devotional poetry to Bahuchara. This anecdote reflects how goddess-worshippers were perceived and how Vallabha's devotion to the goddess was made unthreatening to the Vaishnavas:

... Once Bhattaji (Vallabha) went to Nathadvara (the main shrine of the Pushtimarga, now in southern Rajasthan) for pilgrimage. At the time of the morning worship, all the pilgrims said: "Shri nathji bava ki jai!" (Praise Shri Nathji Bava!) but Bhattaji said: "Bahucharamat-ki jai!" (Praise Bahuchara Mata!). All the worshippers said: "this is a *devi bhakta*" and pushed him out of the temple. Disheartened, he went to sleep in a garden under an *asopalav* tree. Mataji went into the Nathadvar temple, brought a full plate and fed Bhattaji. She placed her nose-ring on Sri Nathji. She told Bhattaji to return the plate and if accused of being a thief, to say that his Mataji gave Sri Nathji a nose-ring. He did so and the accusers asked his forgiveness, due to which Bhattaji said: "Shriji Bava ki jai!" (Bookseller 1919: 8)

Vallabha's poems also include verses on the avatars of Vishnu, and praise verses that would be recognisable to goddess worshippers anywhere in South Asia.<sup>23</sup> He offered a new synthesis of Vaishnavism and goddess worship, a vision that allowed groups who had moved towards the new, vegetarian Vaishnavism to visit the goddess or incorporate the shrine into new pilgrimage networks.

## CONCLUSION

The earliest datable devotional compositions to Bahuchara are found in the poetry of the Brahmin poet Vallabha Bhatta in the early eighteenth century. These poems became very popular, and the most famous, *Anand-no garbo* or Song of Bliss, is painted at several places on the walls of the temple. The compositions of the shrine's core adherents, Rajputs and those claiming Rajput status such as Kolis, Vaghris or Kamalias, have been largely supplanted by the *garbis* of a Brahmin poet. From Vallabha's time, he lived through the Mughal defeat at the hands of Pilajirao Gaekwad in 1721, through the next couple of centuries, we see a process in which the temple and its adherents were subject to regimes of domestication at the hands of the Gaekwads, their Brahmin priests and later, by elite Gujaratis who acknowledged the power and prestige of the shrine but sought to rein in some of its more questionable practices. Even before Vallabha, practices at the shrine were stigmatised in the Jain narrative of political control over the Chunval region, notorious for its semi-autonomous landholders and armed peasants since the fifteenth century. Although the Chunval had been rendered relatively stable and safe for travellers by the end of the nineteenth century, the goddess resisted domestication.<sup>24</sup> Denied her buffalo sacrifice because of elite pressure, she demanded symbolic substitutes, nowadays coconuts and cash. While her devotees have grown in number and variety, buses full of pilgrims from Gujarat and Rajasthan arrive several times a day, her core followers remain the same. She is still the refuge and deity of Pavaiyas and hijadas from all over north India, although it remains to be seen how the planned new marble structure will incorporate space for traditional adherents.

The narratives about the goddess arise out of local relations between Rajputs, Bhils, Kolis, Marathas, Brahmins and Muslims, and of course the hijadas. There are many variations and modulations in these narratives, depending upon who does the telling. The tension between those who seek to reform and those who seek to retain has introduced new variants to the old stories, and added meanings that are only intelligible to those who understand the frontier politics of the region. The shrine is both profitable and effective in securing the allegiance of liminal groups: desirable qualities for ruling elites. But these elites have been so far unable to pin singular, consistent meanings to the shrine and thus to render it transportable outside its immediate milieu. The shrine's meanings continue to be elusive, un-gendered, unanchored. Although the custodians of the shrine have had competing sets of values, it is the continuing tension between these strands that is integral to the success of the temple. It is also in the mechanics of such popular religiosity, however so restricted, ambiguous and culturally confined, that we discern the particularities of Gujarati politics and religious adherence. While Dvaraka, Somnath and the Swaminarayan movement have achieved a trans-regional portability, it is in the histories of shrines such as Bahuchara that we can still see how tensions between regional particularity and homogenising Hinduism influenced Gujarati politics in the past. It remains to

be seen whether the projected new government-blessed temple of Bahuchara will change the rules of the game.

## NOTES

1. Ann Gold discusses the distinction made by Rajasthani pilgrims between brief journeys to intra-regional gods (*jatra*) and pilgrimage to trans-regional sites (usually characterised by Sanskrit/Hindi *yatra*). The difference between the two, she suggests, constituted '... a developing awareness of Rajasthan as a bounded culture area' (Gold 1994: 81).
2. *Shakti pithas* are goddess shrines distributed over South Asia that commemorate locations where body-parts of the Puranic goddess Sati fell. Although the traditional number is 52, shrines claiming shakti pitha status are considerably more numerous: the myth enables local goddess shrines to link up to a pan-South Asian mythology. Bahuchara's shrine is believed to be the site of Sati's right hand. Ambaji (on Arasur hill near Banaskantha) and Kalika Mata (on Pavagadh hill near Champaner), the other two shakti pithas in Gujarat, are associated with Sati's heart and left breast, respectively. Gujarat's three shakti pithas are all clustered in north-eastern Gujarat, and have parallel histories that could be examined collectively.
3. The rise of Vaishnavism in Gujarat and southern Rajasthan from the early sixteenth century has been studied by Barz (1976), Mallison (1983) and Thoothi (1935). The rejection of violence in southern Rajasthan has been discussed by Babb (2004).
4. The inscription mentions the construction of a temple by a Solanki named Rana Anao Lunapasaka at a location '... East by the villages of Itila Kalhari and Vahichara' (Bühler 1877: 68).
5. In January 2009, the temple was being pulled down by a team of workmen to make way, I was told, for a grand marble temple blessed by the chief minister, Narendra Modi. Several individuals there expressed their resentment at the destruction, which they said had been initiated without local consultation.
6. During my visit in January 2009, the madhya sthan was protected by a group of hijadas who sat outside it and controlled entry to it.
7. 'The Chunvaliya Kolis were a body of organized plunderers ... As they had been almost entirely uncontrolled by the Marathas, at the beginning of British rule the Chunvaliya Kolis more than once, in 1819 and 1825, rose in revolt. On their second rising their hedges and other fortifications were removed and their power as an organised body of plunderers was crushed' (Campbell and Kirparam 1901: 239).
8. In the 1970s, other worshippers included Koli Patels, Nadodas, Vaghris, Bajanias, Saranias, Luhars, Suthars and so on (Solanki 1972: 141).
9. Elliot observes: 'With respect to the presents consisting of cash, clothes, ornaments and similar valuable articles, the rule is that articles worth more than Rs 50 are reserved for the goddess, and the rest credited to the fund called *golakh*. From this fund raw food is given to mendicants and Brahmans, upon chits signed by the Kamalias, Rajputs and the Gaikwar's officers. At the end of the year the balance of the *golakh* fund is rateably divided between the Rajputs and Kamalias. The yearly income of the *golakh* is about Rs 5000, out of which about Rs 3000 are spent on "*Sadavarat*" or charity, Rs 2,000 going to the goddess' (1883: 613).

10. Mahiya cites material from books of the Vahivancha Barots (record keepers) of his community, the family tree of the Charan girl and some verses prevalent in his community.
11. *Tragu* is the ritual self-mutilation or suicide practiced by Charans to place the curse of the goddess on someone. On the importance of *tragu* in Saurashtra see Tambbs-Lyche (1997). The sacral power of genealogist groups such as the Charans and Bhats to guarantee transactions continued to be used in the early nineteenth century (see Rabitoy 1974: 46–73).
12. Pavaiya is a Gujarati word for eunuchs, synonymous with the Hindi *hijada*. It can also connote an impotent man (see Shah 1961: 1326). The 1961 census records a tradition of the Pavaiyas' link to the shrine of Bahuchara. The king of Champaner was a devotee of Bahuchara. His prayers resulted in a son, Jeto, who turned out to be impotent. The king then dedicated his son to Bahuchara's worship (see Trivedi 1965: 274).
13. Anand-no garbo, Verse 40, in Majmudar, Vallabha Bhatta, 62. Translated by the author. Therefore, the subsequent note numbers would change.
14. Forbes records: 'Some Charun women, says the tradition, were travelling from Sulkhunpoor, to a neighbouring village, when the Kooles attacked and plundered them. One of the women, whose name was Bouchera, snatched a sword from a boy, who attended her, and with it cut off both her breasts. She immediately perished. Her sisters, Boot and Bulal, also committed suicide, and they, as well as Bouchera, became Devees. Shree Boucherajee is worshipped in the Choonwal; Boot Mother, at Urnej, near Kot; and Bulal Devee, at Bakulkoo, about fifteen miles south of Seehore' (1924: 95–6).
15. On the debates between Sanatanis and the Arya Samaj in Gujarat in this period, see Hardiman (2007: 41–65).
16. Trivedi cites Baroda State's Hazur Hukam 32/5 of 24 January, 1933.
17. In an account published in the Hindi monthly *Kalyan*, there is a different story of the goddess' origin. Here, the author finds a mention of the goddess in the Bhagavat Purana, asserting the Bahuchara was the female baby born to Yashoda who was exchanged for Krishna. She got her name from eating many demons (*bahu + chara = eater of many*). The name is also glossed as 'all pervasive', or 'one who roams widely'. '*Gujarat men shakti ke tin mahapitha* (The three great shakti shrines in Gujarat)', *Kalyan: Shakti Ank* 1934. The name Bahuchara is widely interpreted as referring to Kaumari from the *Devi Mahatmya* who is seated on a peacock or a rooster (*mayura-kukkuta vrite*). Manajirav Gaekwad's inscription refers to Shri Barhichara, a transcription that could be stretched to mean 'one who roams on a peacock' (*barhin*).
18. The *Kochar vyavahari ras* is published in Jinavijaya (1926).
19. Bhils, Kolis and Rajputs belonged to a continuum of groups who sought military power in the region in the fifteenth century. A chieftain named Asa Bhil controlled the Sabarmati valley (to the East of Bahucharaji) in the early-fifteenth century by Asa Bhil. He was defeated by the second sultan of Gujarat, Ahmad Shah (ruled 1412–20), see Sheikh (2010).
20. In this instance, the *mahajans* were probably the local notables or members of the temple's Gaekwad appointed trust. In the 1880s, the sacrifice was offered at night, so as not to offend the Brahmins. In the 1910s, the sacrifice held annually on Ashvin Vad 14 was described thus: 'The Kamalias used to bring the buffalo in front of the temple to a stone altar ... *Kumkum* was applied to the forehead of the sacrificial beast and it was

worshipped with flowers. A white cloth was spread over the back of the beast and a garland of flowers from the *angi* of the goddess was put around its neck. A lamp filled from one of those burning day and night near the goddess was brought and placed on a stone in the *chowk*. The buffalo was then let loose and if it smelt the lamp, it was considered to be acceptable to the goddess, and was at once slain, if possible at one stroke of the sword by one of the Kolis of the temple villages. A blood-tipped flower was presented to the deity and the bystanders applied blood to their foreheads ...' (Trivedi 1965: 271).

21. For an analysis of androgyny and the transformation of gender, see Doniger (1999b).
22. Anand-no garbo, Verses 104–5, in Majmudar, Vallabha Bhatta, 64. Translated by the author.
23. M. R. Majmudar (1961: 43) remarks that Vallabha's Devi-Vaishnava syncretism was not entirely novel in the eighteenth century and that others had attempted such syntheses earlier.
24. It is not 'pacified' entirely: peasant movements in the region in the twentieth century prove otherwise. For studies of Kheda District, just to the south of the Chunval, see Hardiman (1981) and Chaturvedi (2007).