

**LITERACY AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC
STUDY OF THE MEOS OF MEWAT, HARYANA**

**Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
award of the Degree of**

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Submitted by

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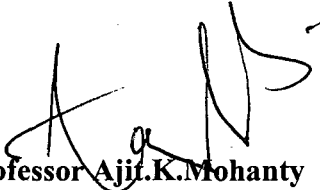



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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled, '**Literacy as a Social Practice: An Ethnographic Study of the Meos of Mewat, Haryana**', submitted by **Abdul Jabbar**, in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the degree of this University. This work is original and has not been submitted so far, in part or full, for any degree or diploma in this or any other University.

We recommend that the dissertation may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.


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In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

*We have created you all out of a male and a female,
And have made you into nations and tribes, so that
You might know one another....the noblest of you
In the sight of God is the one who is most deeply
Conscious of Him.*

The Quran, Surah Al Hujjurat 49:13

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Literacy is an important aspect of social life. No society is ever known to have existed where there had not been some form of literacy- oral or written. Each society imparts literacy to its members in the context in which it has had to exist. Literacy is seen as an integral part of the communicative process and as one of the indicators of human development. However, there is no precise understanding as to what counts as literacy. In general, literacy is construed as the ability to read and write. But, what constitutes reading and writing in each society is a problematic¹. It depends on a number of factors and on what a particular culture or society deems to be important and relevant. As Heath (1983), argues, 'what counts reading and writing is often specific to situations and cultures'. She, for example, discovered major differences between the values placed on aspects of literacy among the White and the Black working class communities- in the former children were frequently praised for reading and, in the later, the practice of reading was rarely mentioned.

Most often the idea of literacy is entrenched in the socio-historical and cultural milieu. For some communities, as in the case of primitive tribes, the idea of literacy or education is more of learning the skills to negotiate the everyday life. It is a part of the socialization process through which a child learns to imbibe the socio-cultural practices of his/her own society through the transmission of values by adult generations. It occurs at the formal level in the dormitories away from the homes or within the community or in an informal family context. Thus, for a child growing in that context hunting and learning the cultural traditions can be a part of as to what is literacy. For some other communities, as in the case of modern industrial societies, a child learns the complex values of social life in a highly hierarchical, systematic system of formal schooling. Therefore, the different notions of what constitutes literacy may be dependent on the specific socio-cultural and historical context.

¹ A structuralist Marxist term, popularized by Lois Althusser, which refers to the particular unity of a theoretical formation, the interdependence of its component concepts, and the way in which this facilitates the posing of certain problems and issues while excluding others (Marshal, 1998:526)

It is in this background the study attempts to examine literacy as a social practice (Street, 1984). That is to say, “literacy is a social construction, not a neutral technology; It varies from one culture or sub-group to another, and its uses are embedded in relations of power and struggle over resources” (Herbert and Robinson, 2001:121). The study places itself in the context of the Meos of Mewat, Haryana. The Meos of Mewat are educationally the most backward community in the modern sense of the term. The literacy rates and educational profile of the areas inhabited by this community reveal that it is a unique case of understanding the dilemmas of literacy as a traditional or a modern practice. It looks at the construction of literacy practices² in the socio-cultural context, drawing upon Street’s ideological model (1984). The study specifically focusses on literacy practices as part of the broader gender roles, which may also explain the appalling status of women’s literacy in the region. The study tries to relate to women’s situation within the family and the community.

LITERACY AND LITERACY PRACTICES: THEORITICAL DISCUSSION

The development of literacy is often cited as one of the defining characteristics of ‘civilization’ (Goody, 1977). Literacy and the mechanism of written languages is the key to many social and cultural changes. It increases the pool of available knowledge and opens the possibilities of innovation. Literacy favours historical consciousness by the creation of texts with an independent existence. It also facilitates the development of impersonal and abstract code for the purpose of ‘administration’ ‘law’ and ‘bureaucracy’. Literacy also contributes to the standardisation of cultural and craft technique and tradition and to the development of specialized educational institutions. However, the concept of literacy has been defined and employed in a great variety of different ways, and there is no consensus as to what is its precise meaning. For example, Bruner (1990) described literacy as an essential cultural toolkit and as ‘cognitive amplifier’. Luke, suggests, that people’s freedom to use literacy as a cultural toolkit is influenced by the ‘institutions ideologies and interests operant in a particular society (1991: 4).

²Literacy practices refer to the broader cultural conception of particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural context (Street; 2001:11).

Paulo Freire, on the other hand, argues that, 'institutions manipulate literacy materials to persuade the poor to accept their socio-political situation without question' (1972). Cordon (2000: 28) argues, 'by literate we can mean that some one is able to read and write at a very elementary level or we can mean that some one is well read and capable of critical literacy analysis'. Thus, it may be noted that literacy is a problematic concept, which depends upon a number of factors and what particular culture or society deems to be important and relevant. Philip (1983) in her study of 'North American Indians' notes significant cultural differences in communicative practices with, for example, Indian displaying more 'tolerances' of prolonged silences during conversation. UNESCO, however, adopted a definition of functional literacy based on the degree of reading and writing skill required for individuals to function effectively in their own society. This definition does not take into account literacy of 'oral societies', which exists even today, where there had not been any form of writing.

Wilkinson (1965) coined the term 'ORACY' for the first time and drawn our attention to these societies. He emphasized that for any oral society 'speaking and listening' are prominent features rather than reading and writing and argued that speaking and listening styles may be included in the conception of literacy. Meek (1991: 13) also says, that all societies are fundamentally 'oral' and that any understandings of literacy must begin with that orality. Literacy, she argues is about language and the primary form of language is of course, 'speech'.

These problems led Cordon (2000) to conclude that we should be wary of seeking absolute or unchanging conceptions of what it means to be 'literate'; however, literacy is to be understood as constructed socially. Likewise, Wells (1989) uses the term 'literate thinking', where real and imaginary worlds created through words may be explored through literate thinking in speech as well as in print. Thus, literacy behaviour is simultaneously both a mode of language use and a mode of thinking. People who are literate have an enriched control over their lives and environments. Literacy strengthens their capacity for rational thought and critical evaluation and allows them to participate fully in social and intellectual practices. In other words, reading and writing are always located in social context from which it derives its meaning. As Street (1994) argues, that 'literacy is a social practice' and there are multiple forms of literacy. That is, 'literacy in

this perspectives is not conceived as a single set of competencies but as different practices, embedded in political relations, ideologies and symbolic meaning structures' (Rockhills, 1993: 162). Literacy, therefore, can be defined not in terms of technical skill alone, but in terms of a variety of conventions or modes of using written language. What counts as literacy varies depending on the people using it and the social and political context within which reading and writing take place?

It is in this context, 'literacy practice' is conceived as specific to cultures and society. The concept of 'literacy practices' evolved within a social approach to literacy. It attempts both to handle the events and the patterns around literacy and to link them to something broader of a cultural and social kind. That is, 'literacy Practices' refer to the broader cultural conceptions of particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural context (Street; 2001: 11).

Baynham (1995) defines 'literacy practices' as 'a concrete human activity' involving not just the objective facts of what people do with literacy, but what they associate with what they do, how they construct its value, and the ideologies that surround it. However, the concept of practice is linked to the subjective elements in literacy practices. It involves the attitudes of people – what people think about what they do. It also involves the concept of values (Barton and Padmore, 1991). Literacy practices, thus, focus on the subjectivity and agency dimension of practice. Thus, practice dimension of literacy placed the case-study method in ethnographic research most suitable to illuminate literacy practices in multi-literate individuals and communities; since, in the these communities, concepts such as 'identity', 'power' and 'ideology' acquire a more significance as compared to a mono-literacy context (Horsman, 1987; Rockhill, 1983).

Applying this perspective to study literacy practices in various communities, anthropologists and social linguists have carried out ethnographic studies (Street, 1984, Heath, 1983), using relatively unstructured methods to focus on the function and meanings of literacy. They argued that in order to capture the diversity and complexity of various literacies in different communities, one needs to take account of the ideological issues and social practices that surrounds people's literacy practices. Hence, literacy and

literacy practices of a community cannot be understood in isolation, they have to be situated within broad socio-cultural context.

THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE: SOCIAL-ANTHROPOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING

We have noted in the preceding discussion that literacy is a social practice; it is always located in the socio-cultural context. This implies that the underlying motives and notions of the community influence the literacy activity in their society. Society then is to be deciphered in the context of a particular culture, which binds people, and gives meaning to their lives; hence, an understanding of culture would be helpful in any ethnographic undertaking. It is in this respect, the concept of culture is understood in terms of its historical, social, and epistemological growth. Both the views on culture, in plurality and in singularity, are reviewed and the concept of literacy and literacy practices are situated therein.

The concept of 'culture' has been in flux since its inception into the social science discourses. 'Culture' signifies 'total and comprehensive way of life', however, it is not as simple as it apparently seems to be, culture is much more than that is obvious and beyond in social life. The classic definition of culture is generally taken to be that of Tylor, Considered by many to be the founder of modern cultural anthropology. Tylor in his 'Primitive Culture' (1871), argues that 'culture or civilization taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and any other capability and habits acquired by man as a member of society'. This definition implies that culture and civilization are one and the same. This equation although possible in English and French, runs counter to the German distinction between 'Kulture' and 'civilization, the former referring to the symbols and values, while the latter deals with the organization of society (Marshal; 1998: 137).

Given the fact that anthropology has usually been defined as a study of 'other cultures', it is not surprising to find culture to be one of the most crucial concepts of the discipline. For 19th century anthropologists such as Tylor (1832-1917) and L.H. Morgan (1818-31), culture was a conscious creation of human rationality. Civilization and culture in this conception, showed a progressive tendency towards what were a hierarchy of

cultures or civilization, which provided a rationale for colonial activities by apparently higher order western civilization (Smith; 1986: 62). Further, the focus of anthropology has always been upon the diversity of ways in which human beings establish and live in groups and it is from this diversity that the anthropological notion of 'culture' at least in the 20th century is derived. This idea of plurality of culture contrasts with the idea of culture in the singular as an interpretation that began to develop in the 18th Century European thought [William, 1983 (a)].

The same singular interpretation became prominent in the 19th century. Framed through the social evolutionary thought linked to western imperialism, culture in the singular assumed 'universal scale of progress' and the idea that as the 'civilization' developed through time so too did human kind became more rational, that is, people's capacity for culture increased, the growth of culture and rationality were thought to belong to the same process. In other words, human beings became more 'cultivated as they progressed over time intellectually, spiritually and aesthetically. De Carteam (1994: 103) notes that such a model which proclaims culture as a defining feature of cultivated human beings (other people sometimes called it a tradition) can have strong political agenda, and in the hands of empire, it has served a rather useful tool for introducing elitist norms wherever they imposed power.

However, modern ideas of culture arose through the work of field anthropologists such as Franz Boas (1858-42) around the turn of the century, which tend towards 'cultural relativism'. The intention is to describe, compare, and contrast cultures, rather than ranking them. It was in confrontation to racism (Boas, 1911). Boas was startlingly liberal in his insistence that culture must always be understood in the 'plural' and judged within only its particular context. Thus, Franz Boas firmly placed all cultures on equal par, and scoffed at the notion that wed technological might with social and cultural superiority (Boas, 1886). In this view, Chinese culture is different from and equal to that of the African Nuer or the Amazonian 'Yanomami', each culture pertains to a specific historically contingent way of life, which is expressed through its specific ensembles of artifacts, institutions and patterns of behaviour.

Another and related use of the term within anthropology states that the culture pertains to that huge proportion of human knowledge, and ways of doing things that is

acquired, learned and constructed, that is not innate to a new born child, thus, while the capacity for language may be inborn but, the specific language that the child learns to speak is not and as learned knowledge, its particular grammar and idiosyncratic classifications of the world become a crucial point of his or her own cultural heritage (Rapport: 2000: 93).

While anthropologists have insisted upon the plurality of cultures, they have also tended to view a given culture in singular. Although Boas was, the most important force in introducing the idea of the 'cultural plurality' of historically conditioned cultures into anthropology. The discipline has not always followed his insistence that culture itself is an ongoing creative process through which people continually incorporate and transform new and foreign elements.

Boas argues further that, it is through creative adaptation, culture arrives at an 'integrated spiritual totality' and it becomes 'manifest' as a distinct coherent system. Thus, conception has considerable influence in social sciences. It underscores the notion of the aesthetic autonomies of cultures, a systematically harmonized whole. This is a notion strongly embodied in all functionalists and structural-functionalist thought. Thus, the notion of homogeneity of culture flourished and developed through many versions, but in the direction that assumed 'fixity', coherency, and bounded ness of cultures (Rapport; 2000).

Fabian refers to this status of culture as 'classical modern concept', a position of ontological realism is assumed with respect to culture which understands tradition as something real to be found outside the mind of individuals and objectified in the form of a collection of objects, symbols, techniques, values, beliefs, practices and, institutions, that the individuals of a culture share (1991: x-xi). This is a position, according to Fabian, which is at stake in portraying culture as having objective reality over and above individual's agency. This view also supports Kroeber's (1962) 'super organic view of culture', that is, culture is super organic, super psychic, and super individual'. Therefore, culture as an objective reality having super organic and super individual existence is overwhelming; Neo-evolutionist, L.A. white, also favored ranking of cultures on the basis of energy consumption in a particular society. The imperial forces tactfully used these perspectives in the conceptualization of culture during the 19th century and 20th

century, they dubbed other cultures as 'exotics, devoid of rationality. Cultural diversity, though a fact in human society did not found favour, because of incessant pursuit of a 'universal scale of social progress'. Thus, the singular conception of culture in western thought served imperial powers, vindicated colonial 'civilizing mission'.

Therefore, the singular conception of culture reigned supreme in anthropological discourses on culture; However, there had been voices against this, from the followers of Boas, who upheld 'cultural relativism,' who asserts that 'concepts' are socially created and vary cross-culturally. These concepts may include such fundamental notions as what is considered 'truth, morality' and what constitutes knowledge or even reality itself (Marshall, 1998; 134). Peter Winch (1964) even argues that our sense of reality is a social construction based upon the discourse of a society.

Cultural relativism also draws upon the tradition of linguistic philosophers especially, Benjamin Whorf and Edward Sapir; they contended that if language constructs the world, then reality does not independently exist but is shaped by culture and linguistic categories. Thus, two cultures then can be incommensurable since their world-views are based on quite different languages and premises; Thus, we have seen the construction of 'otherness', 'exotics' during 19th and 20th Century anthropological thought, for non-western people, were not objective reality as it had been assumed, neither culture ever devoid of rationality.

That is, culture (others) must be understood in terms of their 'own patterns' adopting an 'emic' or 'insiders' view. In this sense, ethnography becomes a process of uncovering the meaning by which people construct reality. It means culture is not something inherent, but often arbitrary and negotiated (Nieto; 2002: 13) Therefore, culture needs to be understood as a dynamic, multi-faceted embedded in a context; influenced by social, economic and political factors, created and socially constructed, learned and dialectical (Nieto; 1999).

ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVES ON LITERACY

Ethnography is characterized by the first hand study of a small community or a group or an institution. In the field of educational research, this method has received

scant attention. It is only in the 1990s, the ethnographic methods are being employed in educational and development research.

The ethnographic approach to literacy derives from recent theoretical understanding which argues that literacy is not just a set of uniform 'technical skill' to be imparted to those lacking them – the 'autonomous' model (Street, 1984), but rather that there are 'multiple literacies' in communities and that literacy practices are socially embedded (Health, 1983). This new perspective calls for an understanding of literacy in the wider context in which it takes place. Accordingly Street (1985) has extended his argument of understanding literacy and introduced three new orders in the face of changing socio-economic structures of society, such as the 'new work order'; the 'new communicative order'; and the 'new epistemological order'. These new orders, he points out, 'require radical thinking of what counts as literacy in the educational development context. This rethinking is necessary for academic researchers as it is for activists and practitioners, while the former have to accommodate to the need of knowledge-in-use, the latter are being called upon to take account of knowledge-in-theory.

Gee, et al (1996) have characterized these 'new orders' associated with globalization of production and distribution, Wand calls for accommodating literacy researches within these changed societal context. Moreover, within the theoretical approach that 'Literacy is a social practice (Street; 1994), two models of literacy are presented, the 'autonomous' and the 'Ideological' models. These models take care of the underpinning assumptions regarding the conception of literacy and its practices.

The 'autonomous' model works on the assumption that literacy in itself – autonomously will have effects on other social and cognitive practices. The 'ideological' model on the other hand starts from a different premise than the autonomous model. It posits instead that literacy is a social practice, not simply a 'technical' and 'neutral skill'; that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, being. Literacy, in this sense, is always contested, both its meaning and its practices, hence, particular version of it are always 'ideological', they are always rooted in a particular world-view of literacy to dominate and marginalize others (Gee, 1990).

The argument about social literacies suggests that engaging with literacy is always a social act even from the outset. The ways in which teachers or facilitators and their students interact are social practices that affect the nature of the literacy being learned and the ideas about literacy held by the participants, especially, the new learners, and their position in relation to power.

Thus, the notion of 'social literacy' contradicts with autonomous model, and it is clear that 'autonomous model disguises the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin it, that is, they are neutral and universal. On the other hand, 'ideological model offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy as they vary from one context to another.

However, the conception of literacy as a social practice and the models associated with this conception has its own share of problems. For instance, conceptualization of multiple literacy or 'multiple literacies' has its own problems, which the 'ideological' model of literacy employs to challenge the autonomous model. In characterizing literacy as multiple it is very easy to slip into assuming that there is a single literacy associated with a single culture. So there are multiple literacies just as there are supposedly multiple cultures; such as 'Tribal Culture' 'Tribal Literacy' 'Peasant Culture', 'Peasant Literacy', 'Hindi Culture'; 'Hindu Literacy' and so on. This conception poses the problem of 'fixed culture' and 'fixed literacy' which is obviously not the case with either culture or literacy.

If we start instead from a plural conception of culture, that is, 'Culture is a verb' (Street, 1998b), then we could recognize that culture is a process that is contested, not a given inventory of characteristics; It calls for, that, links of culture and literacy is not so simple and such easy links are not helpful.

The problem arises from the 'autonomous' model, led to relativising of literacy in ways that might have potentially negative consequences, for instance, it may be seen as celebrating local practices that are no longer appropriate in a modern, indeed post-modern condition, where empowerment requires high communicative skills including formal literacies. It is also seen as leading to potentially, divisive educational practice, in which literacy of local groups is reinforced while those with access to dominant discourses and power continue to reproduce the literacies as sources of their own dominance.

Ethnographic studies, therefore, reveal that adults coming to literacy classes, whether in China, Pakistan, or India are wary of being denied access to the language and literacies of power. Likewise, parents of ethnic minority children in countries, where 'multi-cultural' education and linguistic variations have been promoted, argue that their children are simply getting a 'second class' education and being denied genres of power (Leung & Tosi: 1999).

THE PRESENT STUDY

The rationale for ethnographic study of the Meos is driven by the fact that the knowledge about the community is inadequate and unsatisfactory from a sociological or anthropological viewpoint. Despite being a significant Muslim-Rajput community of north India, historical accounts are superficial. It lacks coherence and full view of the Meo community in its socio-cultural and educational context. The Meos are among the oldest Indian community who embraced Islam under the influence of Sufism. According to 1991 Census, the Meos constitute 34.40 percent of the population in Gurgaon, Haryana. About 96.87 percent of Meos live in rural areas and only 3.12 percent live in urban areas. The literacy of the community is abysmally low. According to 2001 Census, male literacy is less than thirty percent and female literacy is less than nine percent, which are the lowest rates of literacy in the entire country. Despite being one of the most educationally backward communities in the country, researchers have not focused on understanding the factors limiting the spread of literacy in Meo society. It is in this context, the study becomes relevant. It is important to investigate the problems of educational backwardness of the community in their specific regional and cultural context

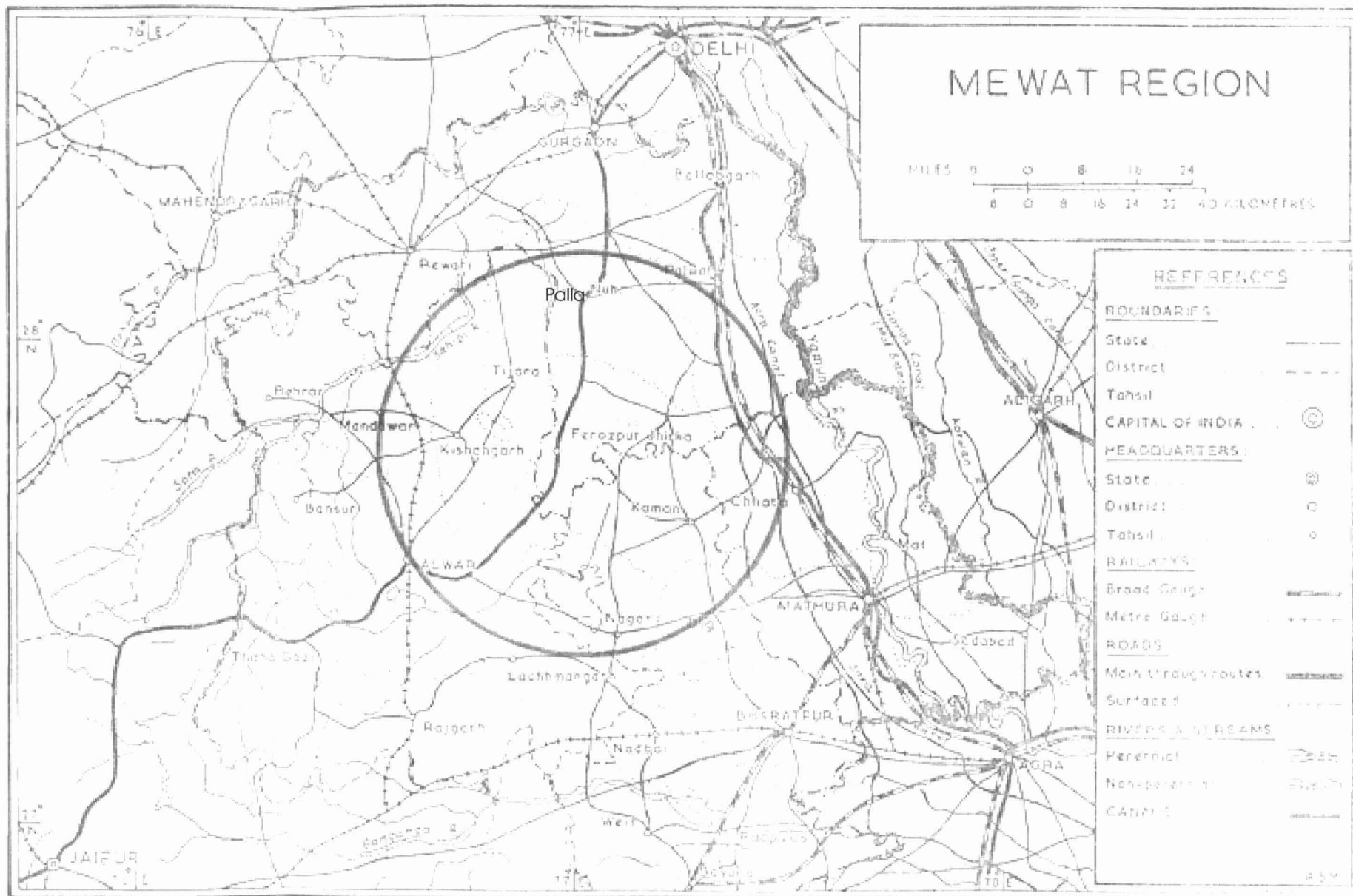
WHY MEOS?

The study focuses particularly as they are a distinct socio-cultural group representing the unique blend of plural culture of Indian society. A brief description of the Meo society illustrates why Meos of Mewat are chosen for conducting an ethnographic study on their literacy practices.

The Meos are primarily a peasant-pastoral community and trace their roots to the Aryans and call themselves Kshatriyas. During the reign of Tughlaq dynasty in the fourteenth century A.D, under the influence of Sufism these people embraced Islam. Yet, they have preserved their age-old distinctive ethno-cultural identities. Both the great traditions (Islam and Hinduism) are subtly diffused in the Meo society. The Meos are Muslims and perceive themselves as such but share many rituals, rites, and folklore with their Hindu neighbours. The community is divided into fifty-two Gotras (small clan organisation) and twelve Pals (lineage or a bigger unit consisting of several Gotras). The entire social and political structure of Meo community is based on their 'Gotra-Pal system'. Each Meo village is inhabited by a particular Gotra and is connected to others through marriage and kin alliances. The Gotra and Pal organization is as old as the community. It has been functioning through unwritten social laws; however, Kaku Rana Balot who fought incessant war with Balban, said to have organised it into a well-knit system as a political, social and military force.

The Meos do not marry within one's Gotras like Hindus, however, Islam permits cousin marriage; further solemnization of marriage among Meos is not complete without both '*Nikah*' as in Islam and *Kanyadan* by village Brahmin as among Hindus. They also share inter-community relationships with other peasants-pastoral castes such as Jats, Ahirs, and Gujars. Thus, the mixed-cultural practice is the dominant feature of the Meo community. Mayaram, preferred to call them 'syncretic community' (2004), and argues that for those used to thinking in exclusive 'Hindu' or 'Muslim' terms this is problematic but not so for the members of Meo community. They do have clear notions of a distinct identity, but are able to live in a 'liminal' space of religious existence (Ahmad; 2004: xviii). Hence, the importance of Meo culture and society, for both the writing of history and ethnography and the larger understanding of religious and cultural encounter can hardly be overemphasised. The Meo society is a classical example of cultural pluralism. The community lives peacefully in a 'liminal cultural space'. It is for this reason that the present study attempts to approach the problems of social and educational backwardness of the Meo community by placing them in the context of their regional milieu, social standing, and the class background of their members.

Map- I (Map of Mewat Region)



OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the present exploratory study are as following:

a. Broad Objective:

To explore and understand the notions of literacy and literacy practices within a specific socio-cultural context.

b. Specific Objectives:

- (i) To understand the socio-cultural context, of the 'Meos' of Mewat.
- (ii) To explore the 'meanings' of literacy among the Meo community.
- (iii) To understand the existing literacy practices of the Meos.
- (iv) To study the socio-cultural impediments to literacy among the children of Meo community, in general, and girl children, in particular

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted through fieldwork using the method of 'Participant Observation' in order to understand the everyday life of the Meo Community in the village Pala, Nuh, in the state of Haryana. The fieldwork was conducted for a period of more than two months from November 30, 2004 to February 09, 2005. The study takes full account of socio-cultural life of the Meo Community with a special focus on their understanding of the notions of literacy. The ethnographic descriptions in this study mainly rely on the 'Emic'³ views. The other techniques of fieldwork such as 'In-depth Interview', 'Group-Interviews', 'Case-Study' and 'Genealogy' has been carefully employed for understanding the Gotra-Pal system of the Meos. A field diary was also maintained to record everyday interactions with the community members as well as to record observations in the field.

THE FIELD SETTING: THE VILLAGE PALLA

Palla village is located in the lap of beautiful Aravali hill at a distance of three kilometers west of tehsil, Nuh. This is a large village with more than two thousand

³ Emic analyses are those, which stress the subjective meanings shared by a social group and their culturally specific model of experience, while etic analysis refers to the development and application of models derived from the analyst's theoretical and formal categories. This contrast was linked to the debate about cultural relativism and opposing positions in anthropology (Marshall.G; 1998:92).

population. A Majority of them are Meos (Pawar gotra); others include Kumahrs, one household of Valmikis and some migrant workers from Bihar and Assam.

Palla is nearly one thousand year old village settled by the Gujjars and the Meos (*Tupian gotra*). It had been once under thick forests and green pastures most suitable for animal grazing. The life of these people was semi-nomadic. However, in the mean time they came into contact with Sufis from Delhi. At that moment of history, during eleventh-twelfth century, Sufism was entering into the life of common people as a way of life. People attracted to Sufis because of their simple life style and message of love and compassion. Sheikh Musa was, one of the most respected, and influential Sufi who came to Mewat as a *darvesh* (*Sufi saint*). He was related to Chisti Sufi order, and was *khalifa* of sultan Nasiruddeen Chirag-i-Delhi another honoured Sufi saint of the same order. Sheikh Musa spread the message of love among the people. It is said and almost became a folk story in the villages of Mewat that when *Hazrat* was passing through the thick Jungles of Mewat the 'bushes and thorns' ticked many a time in his drapes and pallu (*daman*). This was for Sheikh Musa, an indication, hinted by his *Peer* (spiritual guide) for staying in such an auspicious place. To love people, share their sufferings and make them happy. He did the same. Adopted one Gujar boy; slowly the entire village came into contact with Sufism.

The village 'Palla' is named after Sheikh Musa's auspicious 'bushes and thorns' event popularly remembered as *Hazrat ke kanton ne Daman tham liye*. Many instructive apologues are credited to him. Later generations of Gujjars became disciple of Sheikh Musa, embraced Islam and received the title of 'Sheikh'. They remained in this village until partition, when they moved to Pakistan, but the Meos did not. The old forts, havelis, dilapidated stone houses of those Sheikhs can be seen even now.

The *Tupian* gotras of Meos are no longer there. It is said they had moved to Mecca for Haj much earlier than others, and never returned. What happened to them no one seems to be knowing. One possibility may be that they are settled in Mecca itself. Their broken old stone forts on the top of Aravali hill are still visible, when one is passing through Palla to Rewari. Gradually, the other Meos (Pawar gotra) settled in the village, came into the fold of Islam under the influence of Sufism. The Meos have deep emotional attachment with the village *Palla* and *Hazrat Sheikh Musa*, they want to live and die in the village under any circumstances. They have faced the horrors of partition in the past even then they decided to stay in the village no matter what the consequences are.



DARGAH SHEIKH MUSA, PALLA



THE SITE AROUND THE DARGAH



SHAKING MINERATE SHEIKH MUSA,PALLA



NAFISA AND HER SISTER IN THEIR FARM

The *Dargah* (shrine) of Sheikh Musa is located here and is famous for its twin shaking minarets and for the combination of Muslim-Rajput architecture. It was built in 1142 A.D by *Sheikh Abdu-s-Samad bin Khawaja Ahmad bin Mohammad Hashim*. *Dargha* enclave also includes '*Madrassa Islamia Arabia*' established in 1957 A.D by Maulana Niyaz Mohammad (d.2003), an influential *Ulema*(Islamic Scholar) associated with Tabligh; and scattered graves of *Hazrat's murids*(disciples). The *Dargha* had been deserted for a long time. It became an abode for wild animals and plants. It was in a horrible condition prior to *Madrassa Islamia Arabia* come into existence. In this *Madrassa*, religious literacy is imparted to the Meo children especially *Hifz* in Quran and elementary Urdu. The Meos revere these graves of *Murids* (disciples) as *Buzurg* (respected elders); each evoke unique history, however, orally narrated. Whether to believe or not is an open option but certainly these folk narratives unfold strands of Sufism in Mewat- its traditional knowledge, faith and subsequent changes in their society.

ORGANISATION OF THE CHAPTERS

The present study is divided into four chapters. The first chapter begins with an introduction to the subject and provides the theoretical and ethnographic perspectives on literacy. It also elaborates the concept of culture in a broad social–anthropological framework for understanding the cultural context of literacy practices among the Meo community. The second chapter provides a description of the Meos of Mewat. It tries to trace the ethno-cultural history of the Meos and attempts to capture the socio-cultural life of the community. It also discusses the existing conditions of literacy and schooling in the village. The third chapter is devoted to the understanding of the notions of literacy among the Meos. It focuses on the construction of literacy in a specific socio-cultural context. The discussion includes a description of the community perceptions vis-a-vis *Madrassa* or Islamic concept of literacy. The Chapter especially presents the perceptions on women's literacy in Meo society. It identifies the attitudes and aspirations of the children as well as the teachers towards literacy and education. The fourth and the final chapter presents a summary of the findings and tries to draw conclusions. It enumerates some of the limitations and identifies important areas for future research.

CHAPTER II

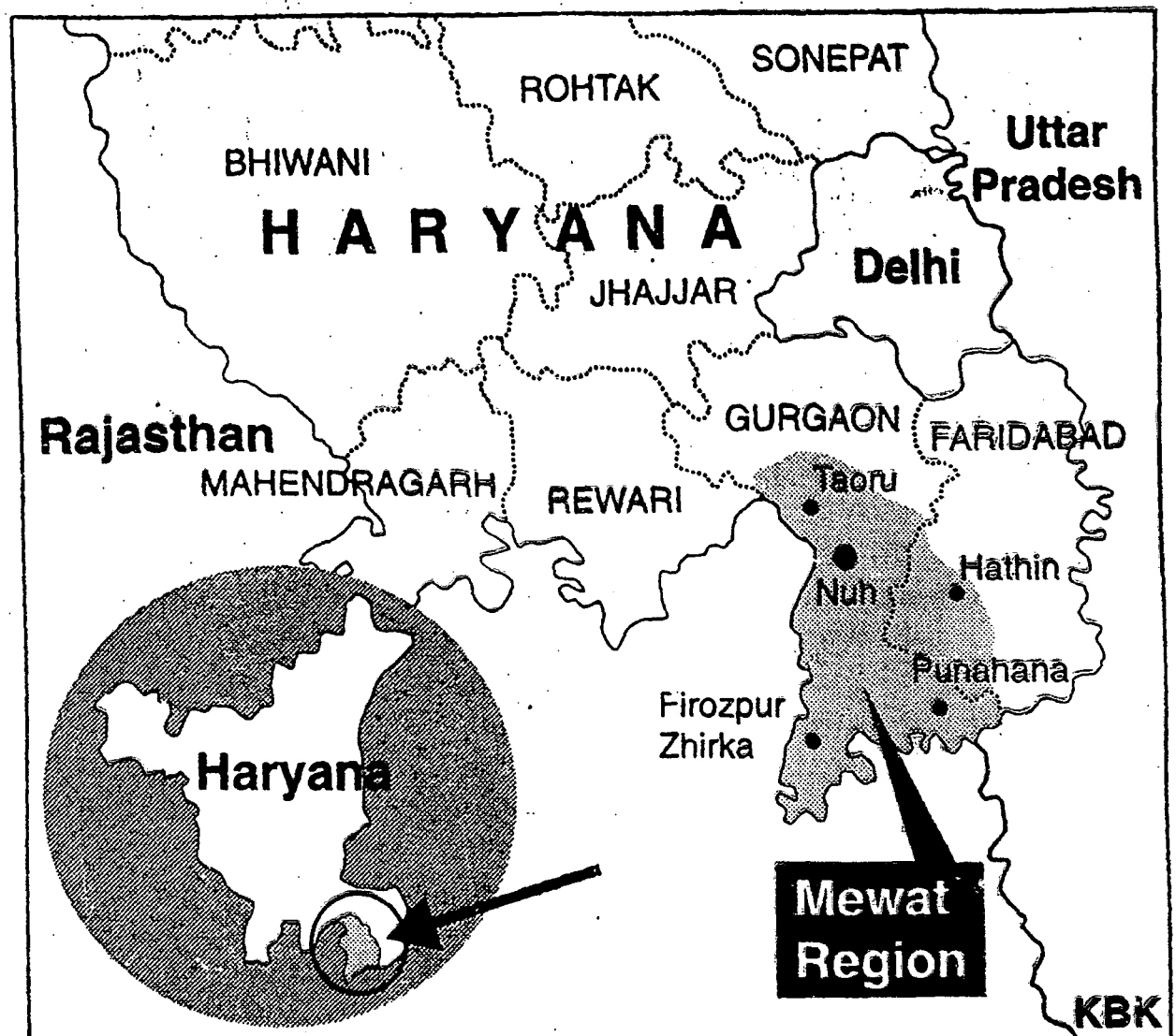
THE MEOS OF MEWAT

The triangular region with Delhi, Agra, and Jaipur as vertexes constitutes the heart of the territory known as Mewat, the land of Meos. It is divided and spread across the states of Rajasthan, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh. Mewat, however, never had a distinct political, administrative, or geographic unit. Its popularity is because of the old inhabitation of Meo community. Through the centuries, the Meos have seen historical vicissitudes: they resisted, adapted and evolved a distinct culture, which represents an intermingling of cultures and cultural practices.

Historical references to Mewat are in abundance and have been changing over time. In the works of Chandabardai (*Pirithivi Raj Raso*) and Col. James Tod (*History of Rajasthan*), Meos are referred to as *Mer* and the region as *Merat* (Shakur 1994:111). Chronicles of Sultanate period such as *Tabqat-i-Nasiri*, *Tarikh-i-Firozshahi* and *Tarikh-i-Farishtha* used the title 'Mewati' with reference to the people of Mewat either living in or out (Ashraf 1968:25). Gazetteer of the region compiled in the first quarter of twentieth Century mentioned that "Mewat came into existence because of the population of the Meos. It has no fixed boundaries. The region lie south of Delhi, it includes the districts of Gurgaun, parts of Mathura and substantial areas of the princely states of Alwar and Bharatpur, Meos call themselves Muslims" (Gazetteer of India 1908:313 -14). At present, Mewat region of Haryana comprises of six blocks, five blocks of the district of Gurgaon, namely, Nuh, Tauru, Firozpur Zhirkha, Nagina, and Punahna and one block of Hathin of district Faridabad. Mewat is declared the twentieth district of Haryana with headquarters at Nuh. The area is spread over one thousand eight hundred seventy four square kilometers. The total population is about fifteen lakhs and seventy percent of them are Muslims. It consists of four hundred and ninety one villages. A majority of the population is rural and dependent on agriculture.

Mewat lies between twenty-six and thirty-degree North latitude and seventy-six degree East longitude, covering a portion of Indo-Gangatic plain to the west of Yamuna river and south-west of Delhi in the southern part of Haryana and north-eastern part of

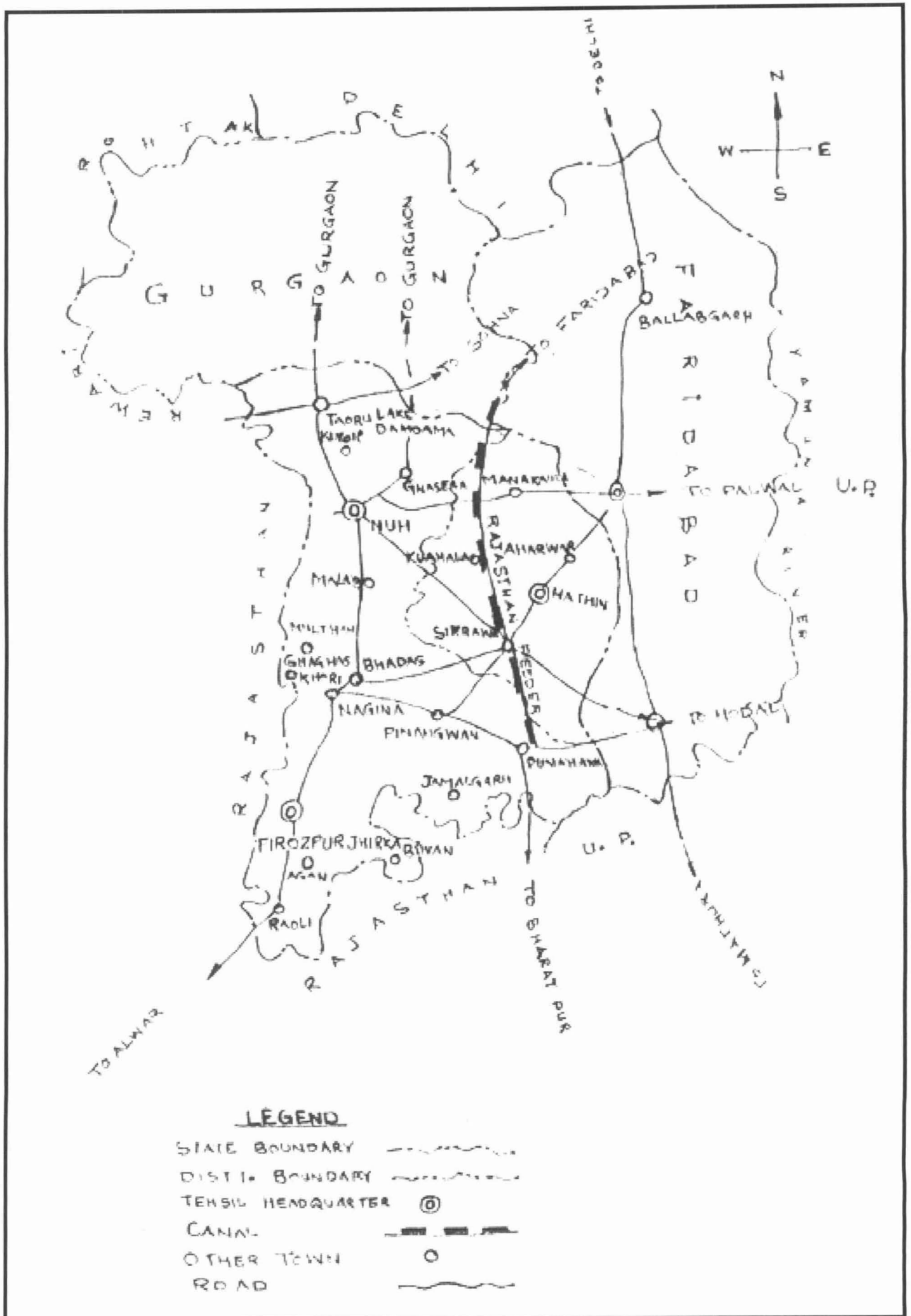
Map -II (Mewat Region Expected to 20th District of Haryana.)



- Mewat region will be Haryana's 20th district.
- The area is spread over 1874 sq. kms. Total population is about 15 lakhs and 70 per cent of them are Muslims. It consists of 491 villages and five townships— Nuh, Taoru, Firozpur Zhirka, Hathin and Punahana.
- While the literacy rate in Haryana is 56 per cent the literacy rate in Mewat region is less than 30 per cent, women literacy in rural Mewat is merely nine per cent.
- Mewatis are mostly dependent on agriculture. Yet there is a single crop in the whole year because the groundwater is hard.

Source: The Hindu, 1st November, 2004.

Map - III (Sketch Map of Mewat Region)



Rajasthan. Geographically, Mewat is divided into four natural regions, locally known as *Pahar Upar*, *Aryaj*, *Bhayana* and *Baraj Bhumi*. Western part of Aravali range is known as *Pahar Upar* because the relief feature of this region is uneven and elevated. The population of Meos are thinly distributed in this region and are relatively more poor and backward. They mainly reside in tehsils of Tauru, Pattukatra, Tijara, Kishangarh, Khertal, Kot Qasim, etc. Jaipur–Rewari National Highway passes through this region. Railway line also crosses this area. The region in between *Pahar Upar* and parallel Aravali hill upto Bharatpur is known as *Aryaj*. It is a shallow plain land surface; water logging during rainy season is a common problem in this region. The main area of population concentration is Sohna, Nuh, Nagina, Bhadas, Sakras, Firozpur Zhirkha, Duha etc. Delhi-Jaipur Highway passes through this region centrally. The eastern part of Aravali is known as *Bhayana*. It is also famous for strong medieval forts. The major chunks of the Meo population in this region are distributed in Hathin, Kot, Punahna, Pahari and Kanma, etc. This is the most fertile land in Mewat suitable for agriculture; irrigation facility is also available. Agra canal passes through this region. The forth division, *Braj Bhumi* is not so significant in terms of the inhabitation of Meos and falls under the Agra division in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

I. THE MEOS: AN ETHNO-HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

It is a fact that the question of tracing the origin of a community raises a complex set of historical and cultural problems. This also applies to the Meos because of their distinct physical features, linguistic and socio-cultural patterns. The Meos are a well-knit community, one can feel the strong emotional connection among them in the village. They stand apart from the others in Mewat. The Meos claim themselves to be belonging to the Aryan Kshatriyas. They trace their lineage to the ancient Indian mythological ruling classes, the Suryabansi and the Chandrabansi. However, they have no precise answer as to why they are known as Meo. They rely on folk traditions or oral histories, which they revere, preserve and pass on to the next generations. Hence, ethno-history or oral tradition is important in Meo community and may be treated as source of information to understand their contemporary culture, social system and history.

The oral tradition says that the Meos are the true inhabitants of Mewat and belong to Aryan tribes. In different times, however, they had been known with different names and titles. The term 'Meo' is very old. For instance, ancient Arabs knew it as 'Med', the Greek pronounced it as 'Mede' and the Persians as 'Madd'and, in Sanskrit, it is 'Madra'. For example, the name of Aryan tribes mentioned in ancient texts such as: Tolish of Azerbaijan, Minos of Greek, Mews of Greek, Mona of Thisli, Med of Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, Mergus of Germany, Moors of England, Meo of Australia, Newzealand and Meonis of Italy are the same groups of people whom Indians call Madd, Mer, Meher (Ahmad 1997: 6-7). The Meos fully identify with them and even call their women *Meoni* similar to the Meonis of Italy. The Meo communities at present are distributed mainly in India, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. However, their main concentration is in Mewat (Haryana, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh of India).

These references attest the presence of a community and conjure up in the minds of Meos' a sense of past glory. These literary evidences, however, lack authenticity, but some historians believe that Aryans are the direct descendants of Prophet Nuh, the ancient legend of 'Great Flood' (*Toofan-i-Nuh*), through Yasaf, Med, or Meo (Habeeb 2003: 34). Self-pride among the Meos might be attributed partially to this lineage. Although any arbitrary attempt to equate Aryans with a distinct race is unqualified but the term has been so commonly used in this context that it has become synonymous with race. Aryan is in fact a linguistic term indicating a speech group of Indo-European origin and is not an ethnic term. To refer to the Aryans as a distinct race is therefore, inaccurate; their ethnic identity is not known on the basis of the Indian evidence (Thapar 1966: 27).

Historical and Ecological pressures over time spread the Aryan tribes into different places and contexts; thus, each group came to be known with a different name, one such a group might have retained their title of the lineage as Med or Meo. Indian Meo Rajputs claim to belong to that revered lineage. According to Cunningham "the Meds and Mands, as they are called by the Mohammedan writers, are most certainly the representatives of the 'Mandruei' who lived in the Mandas river, to the south of Oxus and as their name is found in the Punjab in the works of several classical writers from the beginning of the Christian era downward and not before that time. The term Mewat is named after Meos. The Mohammedans, Meos call themselves Mewati" (cited in Crook

1975: 485). Historians even argue that Meo is a title given to the Tomar Rajputs when they embraced Islam. "During the reign of Sultan Mahmood Gaznavi, his deputy commander Syed Salar Masood Gazi overrun Mewat, Tomar Rajputs were defeated, but influenced so much by the high morals of their enemies that they embraced Islam, some moved with Syed Salar as soldiers to Bahriach, others remained in Mewat with the title Meo" (Makhdoom 1307H: 9).

These historical descriptions, however, are silent on what were the socio-cultural reasons for conferring 'Meo' as a title to these Tomar Rajputs. Nevertheless, oral histories of the Meos, and their claimed origin to the Lunar and Solar races and Agnikulas of the Rajput nobility helped them built imagined homeland over the whole of north-west India extending upto the Indus valley and the coast of Arabian Sea. Their presence has also been discussed in the chronicles such as *Fatahul Buldan and Tarikh-i-Sindh* of Ahmad bin Yahya Jabir Bagdadi al Shahir, especially Jats and Meds. King Dahir was the then ruler of Sindh, his territory extended upto Rajputana and Punjab where Meds were the dominant population. They have attacked the ships of Arabs coming from Sri Lanka in Debal and carried on both trade and piracy long before the Arabs invaded Sindh in the eighth century. According to Maulana Abu Zafar Nadvi, "the Meds of Debal have attacked Arabs ships off coast and plundered it, whatever was there they took away" (Baghdadi 1319H: 441 and Nadvi 1947: 4-11-41).

According to Romila Thapar, 'it is during this period that the now well known Rajputs enter into the scene of Indian history, where and how the Rajputs originated remains in doubt. That they were of foreign origin is suggested by the efforts that were made by the Brahmins to give them royal lineage and accorded them Kshatriya status, which the Rajputs have always insisted upon with almost undue vehemence. They were provided with genealogies which connected them with either the solar or the lunar race, thereby conferring upon them utmost royal respectability in keeping with the tradition of Puranas. The Rajputs rose to political importance in the ninth and tenth centuries A.D. When they were divided into a number of clans of which four of them claimed special status. These four are the Partiharas or Pariharas, Chahamanas more commonly called Chauhans, Chalukyas or Solanki and Pawar-claimed descent from a mythical figure who arose out of a vast sacrificial fire pit near Mount Abu in Rajasthan. Consequently, these

four clans were described as the Agnikulas or Fire Family. This was probably the first occasion where deliberate and conscious attempts were made by the rulers to insist on their Kshatriya status' (Thapar 1966: 227).

All such claims have no historical foundation. But, they are largely supported by the songs of valour and of glory, which *Mirasis* or professional bards sing to extol the past of the community as a whole and some individuals in particular. Historical record of these early times, and particularly records which specifically mention the Meos are so scarce that while there is not much to deny these claims there is still less to support them (Ali 1970: 19).

II. MEWATI LANGUAGE AND DIALECTS

Language, dialect, and culture are integral parts of a society. These together make social life possible. Language also represents the dominant aspects of a culture. Knowledge of the society is embedded in the language and inherently linked to the lives of individual's culture. Cultural identity of a social group is manifested in its language and literature. In this respect, Mewati language and its dialects are the true representatives of the Meo community.

Mewati is the mother tongue of the Meos, although it is spoken by all social groups of the region. In fact, it is the lingua franca of Mewat. Originally, Mewati had its presence in the areas of *Marwar, Mewar, and Harot* in Rajasthan, which was supposed to be once part of Mewat. However, with the passage of time, different forms and genres of dialects evolved. For example, *Mewati* in Gurgaon is influenced by *Haryanvi (Bangru)*, while in Bharatpur and Alwar it is dominated by *Birj Bhasa*. In the west of Mewat it has evolved into another form known as *Ahirwati*. George Grierson in the '*Linguistic Survey of India*' has specified that the boundaries of *Mewati* extend six miles from Rewari to Alwar, to south of Bana River and Dig in Bharatpur. He also classified it as a dialect of Rajasthan: which belongs to the Indo-Aryan Linguistic family.

At present, *Mewati language* is surrounded in the north by *Bangru*, in the south by *Dangi (Dhundhari)* in the east by *Birj* and in the west by *Ahirwati and shekhawati* dialects. It is spoken in the tehsils of the district of Gurgaon i.e. Firozpur-zhirkha, Nuh, Punahna and Tauru in Haryana and in the areas of the districts of Rajasthan (Alwar and

Bharatpur), such as Ramgarh, Tijara, Kishangarh, Alwar, Lakhmangarh, Gobindgarh, Kama, Dig, Nagar, and in the tehsils of Kosi and Chhata of the district of Mathura in Uttar Pradesh. However, Mewati language has no uniformity in these areas. It is different in style of speech in each of these areas.

The issue of origin of Mewati language is highly debatable. However, it is argued that the language belongs to the Indo-Aryan Linguistic family. It has roots in Ancient Sanskrit, which is also associated with the advent of Aryans in India. According to Khan (1996), the development of Indo-Aryan took place in three broad phases:

- I. Old Indo-Aryan (1500B.C-500B.C)
- II. Middle Indo-Aryan (500B.C-100A.D)
- III. New Indo-Aryan (1000A.D-to the present)



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During the first phase, the Aryans settled in North Western India. Ancient Sanskrit evolved in this period. It had two forms: Vedic and Classic Sanskrit. Apart from these, there were three regional styles, *Oodichya* (prevalent in the regions of North-Western India, it was considered to be nearer to standard Sanskrit and was refined); *Prachaya* (spoken in the North-Eastern regions with some distortions) and *Madhya Desha* (it was widely spoken in the Central regions of India, was neither refined nor distorted).

In the Middle Indo-Aryan phase, *Prakrit* and *Pali* came into existence, which gave way to the development of *Apbharanca*. New Indo-Aryan languages took shape from *Apbharanca*. Mewati language has its present roots in the *Apbharanca* and its regional forms. It would be helpful to understand the development of Mewati and its relation to other Indo-Aryan languages if we take into consideration Grierson's classification of New-Indo Aryan Languages. It is based on the linguistic structure of different interior and exterior languages and dialects. The following table 2.1 gives Grierson's classification of Indo-Aryan Languages based on *interior* and *outer* languages.



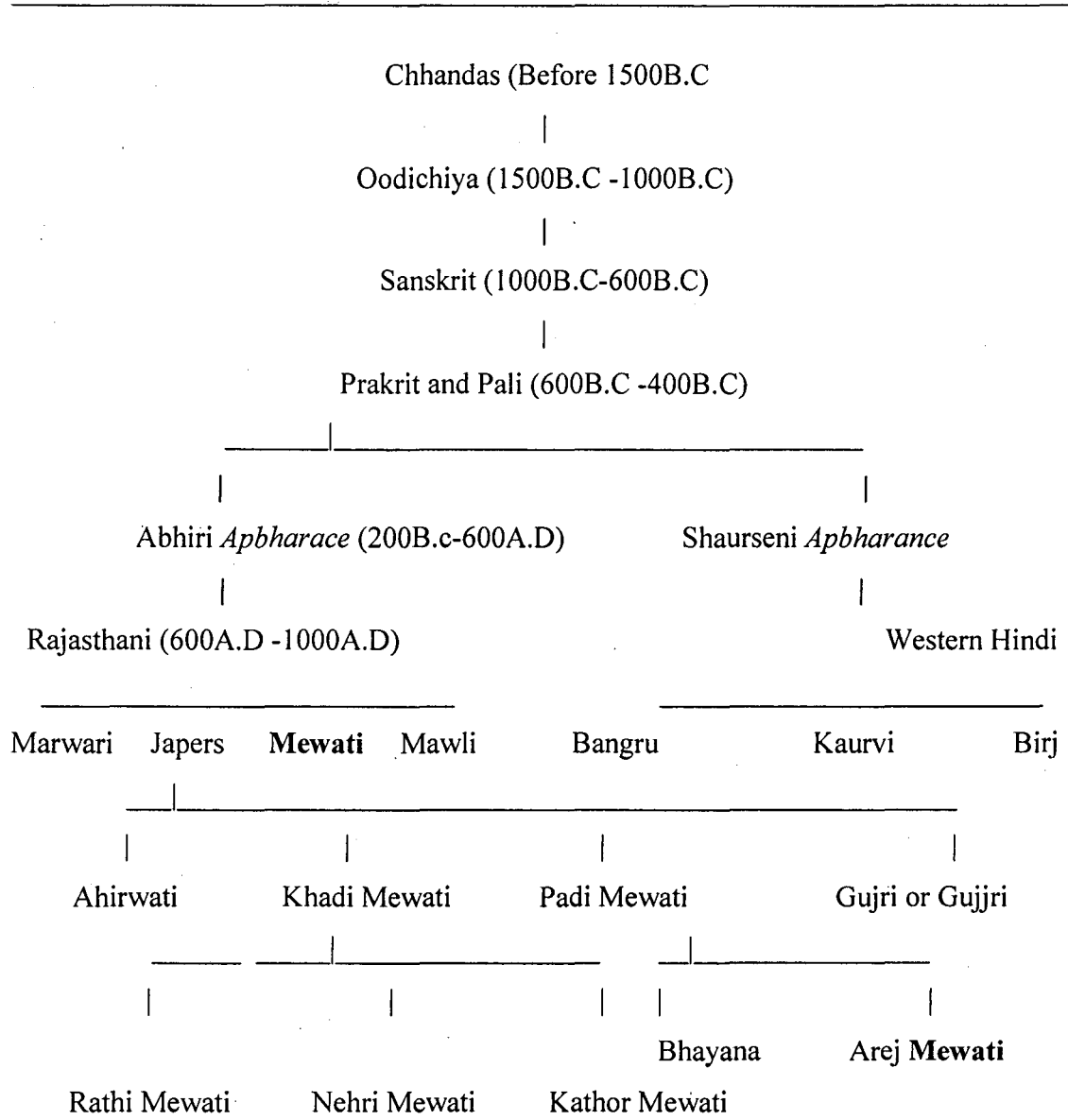
Table 2.1: Grierson's classification of New Indo-Aryan languages

I. OUTER LANGUAGES
A) North-Western Branch
i. Lanhda (western Punjabi) ii. Sindhi
B) Southern Branch
i. Marathi
C) Eastern Branch
i. Assami ii. Bengali iii. Orriya iv. Bihari Dialects.
II. MIDDLE LANGUAGES
i. Eastern Hindi
III. INTERIOR LANGUAGES
i. Western Hindi ii. Punjabi (estern) iii. Gujrati iv. Rajasthani.
IV. HILLY LANGUAGES
i. Eastern or Nepali ii. Middle iii. Western

Source: Cited in Khan .M.H 'Muquddama Tarikh-i-Zaban-i-Urdu', Educational Book House, Aligarh, 1996.

From one of the interior language, Rajasthani emerged four dialects: *Marwari*, *Mewali*, *Mewati*, and *Jaipuri* during the period (600A.D -1000A.D). However, regional variations also developed giving rise to different forms of dialects, viz. Ahirwati, Khadi Mewati, Padi Mewati, and Gujri. Siddique Ahmad Meo, a historian in the Meo community and author of *Mewat ek Khoj*, argues the historical development of the Mewati language with the classification as given in the following table2.2. in the next page.

Table 2.2: Origin of Mewati language and its classification



Source: Cited in Ahmad S.M 'Mewati Sanskriti, Adhyayan awam awalokan' Duha Taleem Samiti, Duha, Gurgaon, Haryana 1999.

During the early Vedic period, learned priests are said to have spoken in *Chhandas* composed Hymns of *Rig Veda*, and developed it into a highly respectable language. Forms of *Chhandas* also appear in the *Zend-Avesta*, which the Meos claim associated with the *Med* community of ancient Iran and hence their ancestors. Accordingly, culture and oral traditions in Mewati literature relate to those eras and

events. The Mewati language has 24 vowels and 36 consonants. It was supposed to be the predecessor of Classical Sanskrit (Ahmad 1996:44-45). However, over the period, these forms of language did not survive because of its high literary nature. New genres emerged with regional variations leading to the present big families of Indo-Aryan languages. Mewati certainly is one among them with its distinct linguistic features.

The literary traditions of Mewati are quite rich. But, the unfortunate thing is that it has not acquired the status of written literature. It is orally transmitted and recited. It does not have its own script and it is written both in *Devnagri* as well as in *Persian*. However, Mewati poetry traditions are direct, virile, and provocative. Chastity in the sentiments is preferred and there is an unconscious flow of the elements, which imbibe the cultural values of both Hinduism and Islam. A sense of togetherness prevails. Respect for saints, Sufis, scriptures and human values are clearly visible. Mewati poetry can be classified under the genres of:

Doha---A form of poetry and songs related to morals and daily experiences of life.

Ratoi--- Mystical expressions, more related to seasonal emotions. It is the dominant genre in Mewati poetry.

Kabad--- A kind of appreciation for love or of personalities

Jass--- praise for love and nature

Kujass--- Negative comment on some event or persons

Barhera---Nostalgic expressions especially emotions and pains of separation (Hijre year ki kaifiyat) in subtleties and fineness.

Dhola---direct saying in poetic forms (Tuk Bandi)

Holi---In the forms of songs, describing social relations of men and women as well as social problems

Chaturai---are songs which describe war and conquest

Rasia---Romantic lyrical poetry

Baramasa--- A women's pains are described by women themselves for living in loneliness or in the long absence of her husband or lover

Hamd--- Poetry dedicated in praise of God

Naa't--- Poetry in praise of Prophet Mohammad

Varsa ---A song for rainy season

Bhaat---songs on betrothal (Mangni or songs of engagements)

Sortha --- Popular folk songs

The most famous names associated with Mewati poetry tradition that comes to the Meo mind is that of *Sadullah Khan Akervi* and *Abdur Rahim Khan-i-khana*; they are considered pillars of Mewati literature. Their contribution to Mewati poetry is unparalleled, the ‘Doha’ of Rahiman is still remembered for its moral values, such as:

Rahiman dhaga prem ka mat todo chatkai
Toote se phir na mile mile ganth pad jaai
(Rahiman, beware! Sunder not (split apart)
The thread of love!
It cannot be rejoined,
You cannot hide the knot).

Sadulla’s translation of Mahabharat as ‘*Pandoun ka Kada*’ which is said to have been composed around 1730 A.D is unique for its lyrical beauty, although not in written form (Ahmad 1999:89). It is recited orally by the people of Mewat, its appeal mesmerises the audience in nostalgia.

Satrasau sattasiyan baras gaya han beet
Jaande Pandu kaal ha jinki jagat kare parteet
(Seventeen hundred years have been gone
To the Panduan era, still the world praise them)

The other important luminaries are *Bhikji*, *Lal Das*, *Khakke*, *Daddo*, *Nabi Khan*, *Ahmad*, *Chander Bhan*, and *Raja*. These names evoke memories, a sense of pride and fulfillment among the Meos. However, the most unfortunate aspect of the Mewati literary tradition is that the masterpieces of these literary giants are still not compiled into written forms. Bits and parts are available here and there, no effort has been made to save these treasures. It would be very sad if it is lost forever. The risk is that these are on the verge of extinction. New generations are very unfamiliar of their own traditions. Loss of

Mewati oral literary traditions would mean loss of plural cultural values of an Indian community.

III. MEO SOCIAL ORGANISATION

Gotras and Pals in Meo Society

As mentioned earlier, the Meos take pride in their Rajput heritage. They claim that the ancient Aryan tribes such as Med, Madra, and Madd, were the same people as the Meos of today. These tribes had spread far and wide even in ancient times. However, their identity had not been static over time. In the present context, the Meo community is divided into fifty-two Gotras (small clan organisation) and twelve Pals (lineage or a bigger unit consisting of several Gotras).

Table 2.3: Gotras and Pals of the Meos

S.no	BANS(RACE)	GOTRAS(CLANS)	PALS(LINEAGE)
1 2 3	Tomers	Mangria Sirohia Baliayana	1. Balot
4 5 6 7 8		Nanglot Kataria Sukeria Gonchia Bodiyar	2.Ladawat
9 10 11 12		Jamnia Bilawat Majlawat Bakdawat	3.Ratwat
13 14 15 16 17 18 19		Kanger Bigot Marag Mander Tawar Saugan Kahout	
20 21 22 23	Jadu or Jadav	Gorwal Mewal Kadnai Badnai	5.Demrout
24 25		Baghtia Bhoslia	6.Chiraklot
26 27		Singalia Machhalia	7.Pundlot

28		Kharakia	8.Dulot
29		Bhabhla	
30		Jounwar	
31		Lamkhera	
32		Besar	9.Nai
33		Batlawat	
34		Mahak	
35		Jatlawat	
36		Sailania	
37		Bahmanawat	
38		Nahrawar	
39		Khanjadoo	
40		Morejhangal	
41		Gumal	
42		Kheldar	
43		Kanwalia	Pahat(Pallakra)
44		Chaunker	
45		Chaurasia	
46		Chauhan	
47		Bhan	
47	Badgujar	Badgujar Loka	Singhal 10.Badgujar
48	Rathor	Bharkatia	11.Kalisa
49		Khokhar	
50		Chalukia	
51	Gor	Pawar	12.Dehngal
52		Sagrawat	
53		Gor	
		Khuswal	

Note.1: The names of gotras and pals of the Meos have been collected from the village elders and a poet Usman Fauji of Nuh, who provided some of these names from his own unpublished works.

Among these Gotras, strict rules of consanguinity is prevailing over several centuries. The system makes the Meos a distinct community of Mewat. The entire social and political structure of Meo community is based on their Gotra and Pal system. Each Meo village is inhabited by a particular Gotra and is connected to others through marriage and kin alliances. The Gotra and Pal organisation is as old as the community itself. It has been functioning through unwritten social laws. However, Kaku Rana Balot, who fought incessant war with Balban, said to have organised it into a well-knit system as a political, social and military force.

Each Pal and Gotra keeps a separate identity of its own and consists of a number of villages. In all, twelve Pals, one *pallakra* (another name for a Pal having low status) and *Chaurasi* (Nipalias or Meos having no Pal) together constitute the main Mewat

region in Alwar and Bharatpur districts of Rajasthan and Gurgaon and Faridabad districts of Haryana. Whole of the villages often consist of Meos who belong to a single Pal and in most of the larger villages the Meos belonging to a particular pal make separate and distinct localities designated by the name of the respective Pals. The same is also true of the Gotras; the Meos belonging to each Gotras live by themselves slightly apart from those belonging to the other. The system operates as a strong factor which serves to maintain the Meos as a distinct social group over the centuries by keeping the defined marriage alliance intact among the assigned Gotras. Each Meo is thus, aware of the Pals and the Gotras to which he belongs. Moreover, he is a kin to every one else at one point or the other in the alliance network.

A Meo village under the Gotra system constitutes a single family, the boys and the girls of which are socialised to regard themselves as brothers and sisters. Marriage between a boy and a girl belonging to the same Gotra is considered amounting to incest. It also prohibits Meo men from marrying not only from the Gotra to which he himself belongs but also the Gotra of his mother, father or even from the Gotra to which his maternal grand mother belongs. That is, a young man could marry from any of the villages of Mewat except his own and that of his mother, father and that of his maternal grand mother.

The Gotra system in Meo society is more or less followed consistently. However, the community expressed a sense of nostalgia when they compare the past with the present. The process of modernization, occupational pressures, adverse sex ratios and Tabligh movement to some extent seems to have loosened the grip. There are instances of marriage alliances outside the assigned Gotras. But, even now, Meos do not prefer giving their daughters in marriage to others. Traditions are the accepted behaviour in the society and through implicit powers of social control with its instruments of gossip, putting up noses, frowns; ridicule and even ostracism enforce such unwritten social laws. Elders prefer not to see instances of contravention and any such event is seen as flagrant immorality.

Pal is further sub-divided into '*Thambas*'. It is associated with the sons of the founder of the Pal they belong to. Thamba is again sub-divided as *Pattis* (small kinship groups). Sometimes, it is also known as *Thonks* related to a specific *Mohalla* and one of

the sons of the founder of the village. An influential village male of *thonk* is regarded as *Nambardar* and is responsible for tax collection, takes policy decisions of the village under the auspices of village elders.

However, the importance of a *thonk* is gradually declining, and Panchayat has taken over such responsibilities. Nevertheless, *Patti* and *thonk* affiliations come into picture during elections. It takes crucial decisions and influence voting patterns at village level. They also resolve intra-community feuds, and also give punishments. For example, there had been some fight in the Yasin Meo Degree College campus and this did not remain within the groups involved but soon became a fight between the respective *Gotras* and villages. The College authorities and the Police could not do anything to control the situation. Ultimately, Panchayats of the respective villages had to intervene through different *Tonks and Thambas*. They resolved the problem and announced the punishment to the convicts. The decision is generally accepted by all or just rejected on the spot. No one interferes in the disputes of the Meo community.

The Meo Family

Family is considered as the most important elementary social unit among the Meos. It is the basic regulatory institution in the community. Marriage, kinship and *Gotra-Pal* system function in principle, under the norms of the family. Since Meos are predominantly an agricultural community, joint family system is commonly preferred in their society. It consists of parents (grandfather, grandmother, father, and mother) and their children, own or adopted. Eldest male member is supposed to be the undisputed head of the family, he is respected and followed.

The family structure is based on 'Maxim-Pater-Families'¹, where father is the 'Karta', the provider and a manager of the family. All authorities are vested in him. Descent is patrilineal. The Meo family system operates on integrative bond of kinship²,

¹ This is identical with Roman family structure. According to Roman law, the pater is the mother's legal husband, irrespective of who may have been the genitor or actual physical father (Smith 1986: 217). In Meo community, this applies to an adopted child as well as children from first marriage of a woman. Descent is traced through the father only.

² Both patrilineal and matrilineal kins are recognised and taken into account for marriage and alliance. However, for reckoning descent male line is preferred.

this extend universally in both the directions, patrilineal as well as matrilineal. That is, to Father's and Mother's family of orientation.

However, Meo family is strictly patriarchal and virilocal³. Headship and succession is decided based on age and experience. Eldest son takes charge of the family after the father's death and in the case of elder brother's death, next to him is given the responsibilities. The purpose is to keep the family joint and avoid division of property. However, there is perceptible change in the traditional joint family system. It is gradually loosening its grip. In Mewat, joint family is becoming increasingly part of the history. Now a days, after the marriage the couple choose to separate out and establish a neo-local residence⁴ or prefer a separate kitchen. With this, even elders are being marginalised; respect is becoming only a formality and authority is fading.

The women in Meo family play the most important economic role. The field, animals and the household are entirely dependent on her active involvement. Purdah system is not followed. However, their dress altogether is not modern, they are fully covered in salwar, qameez and dupatta. It is wrapped covering the head, face, and the body. *Ghunghat* is compulsory in the persence of elders and strangers, it is strictly followed by daughter-in-laws.

In Meo society, Chaupal is a very important place, it is present in all the villages; here, elders spend their spare time, discuss village problems and community meeting is organised. Women are taught to respect these Chaupals, not allowed to sit on it. They are supposed to observe *Ghunghat* while crossing a Chaupal. This reflects both their tacit acceptance of Chaupal's decisions and respect for the meeting place of elders. The position and support of elderly mother is more complicated in Meo society. This is because of the fact that the inheritance of property is based strictly on patrilineal kinship rules. Father is considered, the most important authority in the family. He has the power to manage the family property and conduct all social and religious rituals and is responsible for taking care of the economic and other needs of all the members of the family, even if they are the key bread winners. The family is run in father's name.

³ This denotes a residence pattern or rule in which after the marriage a couple resides with or near the man's family or kin group (Smith 1986: 286).

⁴ A rule according to which both husband and wife set up a new residence after marriage.

However, matrilineal kins, especially old ladies (Meonis) are not insignificant. They are consulted on all important family matters. But, the existence of social inequality based on sex and traditional conceptions is very much prevalent among the Meos.

Kinship

Kinship is one of the main organising principles in human society. Kinship systems establish relationships between individuals and groups on the model of biological relationships between parents and children between siblings and between marital partners. That is, kinship is nothing more than an organisation and expression of the biological ties in social idiom. It is a fact of relatedness through the bonds of marriage and birth. It includes both consanguine and affinal kins. In Meo society kinship is complex, it reflects the social cohesion of the community. There are more than eighty terms of reference in use among the Meos social relationships. For example, In Meo community, husband does not call his wife by name and vice-versa. When speaking to his wife a husband says *Flane ki Maa* using his son's name or *Flane ki...* by taking name of her village. A husband also call his wife '*A-re*' and she replies '*Kahey*'. But, it is improper to call one's daughter with '*A-re*'.

Parallel reference is strictly prohibited when referring to wife and daughter, this is considered inappropriate way of calling one's daughter. Because a daughter is regarded as symbol of the family prestige.

The table 2.4 presents the terms of kinship reference of the Meo community. These terms are noted during the conversation with the people of the village, Palla. This proved very useful in understanding the Mewati dialect of the community.

Table 2.4: Kinship Terminology among the Meos

Kins	Terms of reference
Brother	Lala/Bira
Brother in law	Jeeja/Bahnoi
Brother's daughter	Bhatiji/ larki
Brother's son	Bhatija/Bhatijo/Chora/
Brother's son's wife	Bhatij- bahu/Beti
Daughter	Chori/Lali/Beti
Daughter's daughter	Nawasi
Daughter's son	Nawaso
Father	Baap/WalidSahab/AbbaJaa
Father in law	Sasur dokra/
Father's brother	Tau/Chacha/Bada Baap
Father's brother's wife	Tai/chachi/BadiMaa
Father's sister	Bua/Phuphi
Father's Sister's Husband	Phupha
Granddaughter	Poti/Chora ki Chori
Grandfather	Baba/Budho/Dada
Grandmother	Budhiya/Budhi Maa/
Grandson	Pota /Choro ka chora
Grandson's wife	Pot baho/BETI /pote ki Bauo
Great grandson	Parpota/Beta
Great-grand daughter	Parpoti/BETI
Husband	Gharwalo
Mother	Ma/Ammi/Walida shahiba
Mother in law	Sas docry
Mother's brother	Mama/Mamou
Mother's brother's wife	Mami
Mother's father	Nana/Budho Baap
Mother's mother	Nani/Budhi Mai
Mother's Sister	Mosi/Baap ki sadan
Sister	Lali/api/choori
Sister's daughter	Bhanji/Chori/Lali/Tikri/Beti
Sister's son	Tikkar/Bhanjo
Sister's son's wife	Bhanj-Bahu/beti
Son	Chora/Beta/Lela
Step mother	Maindar Maa
Wife	Berbani/Bahoriya/Gharwali
Wife's sister	Salia
Wife's brother	Salo/Sala
Wife's brother's wife	Sadan

Institution of Marriage

In the Meo society, marriage as an institution is considered sacred. It is fundamental to the family formation and *Gotra-Pal* organisation. However, marriage (*Nikah*) among the Meos is a 'civil contract' based on the concept of '*Ijab-o-Qubool*' between the bride and the groom. But, intervention by the parents or the guardians of both is a must, without which it is not acceptable in the community. In addition, marriage is not complete without the observance of certain traditional customs and rituals. Although, the Meos are Muslims and Islam do not approve of certain practices. They observe '*Hindu Rajput rituals*' as part of the marriage ceremonies. It is considered essential for a valid marriage. Both Islamic *sharia* and Hindu *customary rituals* are equally respected. Thus, marriage in Meo society can be understood under the following heads:

1. It is a civil contract (of permanent nature unless dissolved by *talaq* (divorce) or *khula* (redemption i.e. women's right to initiate divorce) or death of either party according to the *Islamic Sharia*)
2. It is a sacred religious ritual (as in *the Hindu Rajput tradition*)

The objective of marriage is to ensure the natural and lawful exercise of sex and procreation of children, under which rights of both the parties are duly regulated and maintained.

Selection of marriage partners

Marriage at an early age is a distinctive feature of Meo the society. It is considered obligatory for the parents to get their sons and daughters married as early as possible. The preferred age group for boys is 15-18 years and that for girls is 11-14 years. Even child marriage is not uncommon in the villages. The Meos are anxious to get their daughters married as soon as possible after attaining puberty, because they are very particular about the chastity of women folk. Other reasons commonly stated are lower status of women, endogamy, hypergamy, emphasis on female virginity and economic usefulness of women entering into early marriage thereby procreating more children.

The Meos follow both prescriptive (endogamy, hypergamy) and prohibitive (exogamy, hypogamy) rules of marriage while selecting partners. In Meo society, men can marry within certain gotras and women to some other specified gotras. Once a man gets married into a gotra, no woman of his family could be married in the same gotra. That is, there is *one-way exchange* of women. From some, women are taken and, to some women are given. According to these rules, a man is expected not to marry:

1. women of their own gotra and pal
2. women of their own village
3. women of lower caste
4. women of the village their mothers belong to even if they are of different gotras
5. women of the village of their grand-mother belongs to, even if they are of different gotras
6. Non-Meo women or women of a different religion or caste
7. sisters of one's wife at the same time
8. and women whose relation is traced to be of consanguine kins

The above restrictions on mate selection in Meo society clearly demonstrate the dominance of traditions rather than considerations of Islamic rules. Cousin-marriage is totally unacceptable in the Meo society though permitted in Islam. From the Islamic point of view, the Meos fulfill only two conditions of a valid marriage that is, *Meher* and *Nikah*. However, these two fundamental principles are not strictly followed. For example, in *Nikah* ceremony, one *vakil* (a pleader) and two *witnesses* from both the sides are required as evidence for marriage and at the same time, 'consent' of the bride is sought first, by the *qazi* before performing the rituals of *Nikah and recitation of khutba* (reading a particular message to the audience). However, both the practices are not taken into consideration. Consent of father on behalf of the bride is taken as enough. But, according to the rule of *Ijab-o-Qubool* (offer and acceptance) 'free consent' of both the bride and the groom is necessary. Similarly, *Maher* (dower) is compulsory in Islam, which is a fixed amount or jewellery of equal value, required to be given to the bride by the groom as *bride wealth* for her 'consent' on which she has the absolute ownership. This is recognised, but rarely given or even if it is given or promised, she does not enjoy rights

of ownership. Because woman does not have the right to inheritance and property in Meo society. This is reflected in the rituals performed. She is expected to live by the provisions of her husband.

Settlement of marriage

The initiation of marriage proposal as such is important. It opens the way for negotiation and settlement. The main initiation starts with the parents or guardians concerned but there are other people in the village connected with it. For example, *Mirasis*, *Nai* and family friends. It starts from the side of the girl's family. However, the right to initiate a marriage by the mates themselves has been sanctioned in Islam. But in Meo society it is not approved and seen with contempt. As an extreme case, even after finalisation of settlement and engagement, if the boy anyhow comes into contact with the girl or just able to see her, the settlement (engagement) is forcibly annulled citing breach of trust amounting to 'fornication' as the reason. Only female members of the boy's family are allowed to see and talk to the girl before the marriage. During the process, certain rituals are performed such as *Ghar Dekhna* and *Chora Rokna*, the former is associated with preliminary inquiries about the boy by the male relatives of the girl's family. They look for suitability of age, social standing, honour, and manners of the groom as the main considerations. If these considerations are found encouraging, the girl's family send cooked rice to the boy's family, which signifies approval and the boy's family reciprocates by inviting their select relatives to taste the cooked rice. Hence, they approach for *Chora Rokna* ceremony thereby confirming *Sagai* (engagement). Then rests of the rituals are followed.

Marriage rites and rituals

In between the *sagai* and *nikah*, there are a number of rituals observed, the prominent among them are: *Biyah Likhna*, *Chaak Pujan*, *Swasni Neota*, *Tel Ban Nutna*, *Tel Aana*, *Pendi Ka Neg*, *Batnaand Banwara*, *Bhaat* etc. These are popular traditional practices and hold respect in the Meo society. These ceremonies lead to the observance of *Nikah*, which is compulsory and is to be performed by the Qazi. This is the real Islamic tradition in the Meo community performed in accordance with the spirit of the *sharia*. If

the marriage is to be legally valid *Nikah* is a *sine qua non*. Its violation invites marriage to be declared void *ab initio*. This is performed in the Mosque by a Qazi. The groom is seated facing towards *Qibla* (The holy Qaaba in Mecca) and Qazi facing the groom. Baarat and relatives of the groom sit around him. The Qazi then recites the verses from the Q'uran:

“Ya Ayyohannasu ttaqu Rabba kumallazi Khalaqaqum Min NafsinWaheden wa Khalaqa Minas zawjaha wa Bassa Minhuma Rijaln Kasira wa Nisa’a. Wattaqulah allazi Tasa’aluna behi wal arham.Innallaha, kana Alaikum Raqeeba” (Surat An-Nisa 4 A’ yat 1). (O! Mankind! fear your Gaurdain Lord, who created you From a single person, Created out of it, His mate, and from them twain Scattered(like seeds) Countless man and women ;-Fear Allah ,through Whom Ye demand your mutual(rights), And be heedful of the wombs (That bore you):for Allah Ever watches over you).

In some cases, Qazi also explains the significance of the message to the audience and then administer an oath to the groom whereby he accepts the bride as his wife and declares by saying *Qubool hai, Qubool hai, Qubool hai* (I accept it, I accept it, I accept it). The mother of the bride fasts on the day of the *Nikah*. On being informed of its completion, she breaks her fast and offer two *rakat Namaz-i-Shukrana* (offer prayer of thanks) as gesture of thanks to *ALLAH*.

Apart from *Nikah*, here are a number of other ceremonies celebrated in Meo marriages. The prominent among them are *Chaupal Ka Neg, Kuan Pujan, Dahej, Milni,* and *Badhar* ceremony. It is the marriage feast that takes place after the dowry has been presented.

Dowry.

Dowry is a must in Meo marriages. This is negotiated openly during the process of marriage settlement. Full demand is put before the bride’s family. If it is acceptable, the negotiations proceed. Classes VII pass boy demand a four-wheeler and he gets it along with cash, property in land and other modern home gadgets even if he does not

have a home to keep and maintain these. In Meo society, marrying off two-three daughters is a tough obligation for the parents. They sink into debt and sometimes the family is totally ruined.

The commercialisation of marriage ceremony, the elders note, is a recent phenomenon. In the past, it was considered auspicious to provide the newly married couple with security and gifts in the form of cash and jewelleries to start a family, no demand was made by the groom. However, now marriage is not possible without finalising the dowry first. It is a status symbol. Public display of wedding extravaganza is a common practice such as weighing groom's father in coins, gifting Baaratis in cash and valuables and giving pomp and show to the marriage feast. The following Persian verse is proudly recited during the marriage ceremony,

Ai Khan-i-Jahan Khan-i-Khanaan

Daram saname ke mah jabeen ast

Gar Jaan talabad mazaika nist

Zar me talabad sukhan dare in ast

(Illustrious Khan!

O, Khan of Khans

My loved one

Doth outshine the moon;

If she so wished

My life I'd give

But gold she wants

There lies my doom.)

Amount of gift to Qazi and Brahmin has also gone high. Sofa, Television, Motor cycle, four Wheelers, refrigerator, and jewelleries are commonly given in dowry. It is said that more the dowry is the more is the marriage. The negative consequences of this practice are clearly visible in the Meo society, virtually everyone in the village is living in debt. A poet, Mohammad Ilyas, has beautifully expressed the situation:

*“Ja ghar janmi putrid, sawapahar tak noor
Sab kuch Bali chad gayo, Dahez soo khusia door”
(Birth of a girl brings light in the home
Now it is gone! Dowry took away the happiness from...)*

Divorce

Divorce is also a pressing problem in the Meo society. In the recent years this has become a disturbing trend in the community. A Meo husband enjoys full authority over his wife and may divorce her without citing any reason. His arbitrary dislike of his wife or love for other women often results into divorce. Although Islam has made provisions for dissolution of a marriage, under the Islamic law marriage is treated as a civil contract, and to that extent, it can be dissolved by writing a divorce deed. However, the conditions are laid down. It is desirable only when life in husband- wife relationship becomes miserable and there is no chance of reconciliation. Prophet Mohammad (Peace be upon him) have cautioned to the believers *“with Allah the most detestable of all the things permitted is talaq, the curse of Allah rests on him who repudiates his wife capriciously.”*

However, restraints imposed by Sharia are hardly followed. Meo elders feel that the trend has been destabilising family structure and Gotra-Pal system. A Meo man divorces his wife simply by pronouncing triple talaq, also known as *talaq-i-bidat*. This is most commonly prevalent among the sections of Meo community. In fact, elders in the community explain that illiteracy and influence of modern urban cultures have affected the youth adversely. Lack of awareness about Islam is cited as another reason for the state of affairs. The traditionally low status of women in Meo society becomes worse once she has been divorced. Although the Meos consider their Marriage as a civil contract, yet the breach of contract is found to be common. A Meo Man tend to regard himself as the lord of his wife and demand complete obedience, even if he is a drunkard or a man of vices. There is a popular saying in Mewat, almost a legend ‘*Aurat jaat par kabhi bharosa na karo*’, that is, women should never be trusted. However, this goes against the spirit of the marriage and respect for women as revealed in the Quran that:

‘SLANDER OF WOMEN IS A GRAVE MISTAKE’(S-24: An-Nur).

A Mewati poet, Usman Fauji, when asked, lamented to the situation with his *chhand* (stanzas):

Padh likh dunya aage badh gai, chand talak ho aai
Peechad gai Mewat hamari, bhaiyon bina padhai
Padhno likhno jab tak inko, jab tak howe shaadi
Ache daan dahez milo phir suroo hooi barbadi
Ek sal main do do bachche lambi lain laga
padho likhno gayo bhaad main pahli aur gawandi

(The world has progressed with education, returned from the moon

O Brothers! Mewat remained backward without education

At the time of education, youth get married

And get full dowry!

Beget two children in a year

And shun Education! With it, he goes stray).

IV. EVERYDAY LIFE OF THE MEOS

Housing

The nature of housing as a physical artifact, its spatial distribution and the terms of its occupancy (physical, legal and financial) are affected by social structures and processes. Conversely, these features of housing have social effects. Thus, housing may be seen as a social construct and as socially causative (Marshal 1998: 285). In the case of the Meo community, housing is simple and more generally, consists of one room and a verandah both elevated above the ground level and surrounded by a wall hiding the interiors from the streets. The room is commonly of 10 /12feet-size, which can only serve for living, cooking, and storing of necessary utensils and foodstuff. The verandah is mostly used by men, women are only seen when men are out which is surprisingly less frequent. The Meo housing patterns speak of typical social interaction at the micro level husband–wife, children (both adolescent boys and girls) sleep in the same room.

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To be quite and calm in the room is accepted social norm that is strictly observed. No body talks about privacy, it is hinted that the field at night is the most romantic place. *Mewat main to hanimoon kheton main bhi man jati hai* (In Mewat, honeymoon is also celebrated in the field). The ownership is patrilineal. It is said that women are entitled to get accommodation in her husband's house.

Occupation

Agriculture is the main occupation of the Meo community⁵. They take it as a noble and a respected occupation, associated with social status and pride. Its importance is understandable by the popular songs they often sing while puffing their *Huqqa*.

*“Kheti main ras bahoot hai, upje bahri niyar
Sat tod solakhna Bhains bandhwan chaar
Bhains bandhwan chaar ke khawe chhach malida
Nirbhai pelo dand, bandhe dahi pe gudo
Ho tan soo hosiyar kaam sab karo ageti
Chhod soch sainchj, ranj-o-gam, kar leyo kheti”*

*(Agriculture gives happiness; we get plenty of grains, and fodder
This is enough, for animals; pours milk, butter and curd
Do lots of push-ups and have milk butter in full
Be healthy and do your work swiftly
Forget thinking, trivials, scars, and sorrows
Get in Agriculture.)*

⁵Though a majority of the Meos own land, some are daily wage labourers as well. They work in agricultural fields, stone quarries (despite Indian Supreme Court's ban, the Meos claim land rights on Aravali hills just beside their village houses. They are using these hilly lands as stone quarries to supplement their income). Some households own auto-rickshaws, tanga (horse cart), mainly run by children (both Meo and non-Meo) of the age group of ten to fifteen years. Some children also work in roadside dhabas as helpers.



A MEO CHILD WITH HIS TANGA



A MEO CHILD WITH TANGA AND COMMUTORS



MEO YOUNGSTER GOING FOR WORK

Land and cattle are considered an integral part of a Meo household. In Mewat, each Meo family possesses some piece of land and have animals such as cows, buffaloes, oxen and goats. Some keep camels and horses. Animals are specially decorated with beads (*Makhna*) and designed cloths, horns are coloured artistically and peacock feathers are tied around their neck. However, with increased pressure on land, unemployment is on rise. Agriculture and animal husbandry are becoming more and more unprofitable enterprises. This is hitting hard on the Meos, particularly the youth, because they are mostly unskilled. Moreover, they do not take interest in other kinds of occupations. The Meos did not take even business as a respectable profession. But, some of them are taking driving as an alternative. This is a blessing in disguise to the Meos because for the first time they are exposed to the world outside their villages. They are now deeply aware of their conditions of poverty and backwardness. They now desperately want modern education for their children. An experienced Meo reacted to the existing conditions in his village,

*“Padh likh dunya aage badh gae chand talak ho aae
 Peechad gae Mewat hamari, bhaiyon bina padhai
 Bina padhai aaj hamari haalat badtar ho gai
 Aankhan pai pardo pod go aur akkal pathar ho gi
 Aoundhi soodi bole hai aulad jaltar ho gi
 Woo bhi soodo na bole jaaki umar pichattar ho gi
 Jal bhun ke kah ri hai budhia moku mout na aa ee
 Peechad gai Mewat hamari bhaiyon bina padhai”*

*(The world has progressed with education, returned from the Moon
 O Brothers! Mewat remained backward without education
 Our condition became worst without education
 Vision has blurred and wisdom gone
 Our children speaks filthy
 Even he does not say well who turned at seventy-five
 And elder women seek death out of frustration
 O Brothers! Mewat remained backward without education).*

Dress and Ornaments

The dress of the people is simple and traditional. Usually, it consists of *Dhotis* (a long white soft cloth worn from the waist to cover the lower portion of the body), *Tahband* (a plain cloth that covers lower body), *Fenta* (turban) and *Pehna* (pair of leather shoes). For men, a turban on the head is a must which is generally whitish but even with printed dots are quite popular. A thick cotton sheet (*Khess*) is commonly used as a wrapper. A *Lathi* (*Stick*) is integral to this dress. It is a sign of dignity to the Meos with long moustache and thick beard. The *Huqqa* is a favorite pass time of the males. It is puffed in groups in a circle; it also signifies equality and goodwill. A Poet Usman Fauji, finely captured this imagination of a Meo's identity in Mewat-

*“Murki damke kaan main, chaunp jadi ho daant
Fainta, kandho chadaro, lathi howe haath
Munche khadi turab si chle bali ki bhanti
Chakkoo bandho langot main nickchoti ke saath
Charr-charr suneah hai sironta, tare jadi banath
Yeh baante dekho jahan woo meri Mewat”*

*(Ring flashing ears, silver studded teeth
With turban on head, thick drape solder and stick in hand
Long pointed moustache, moves fast as loin
A knife under the garment with a sharp pin
An emerging noice in the field with flashing stick in the moon light
When you see these! It is Mewat).*

However, the dress patterns of younger generation are changing rapidly. They do not subscribe to the traditional styles. They are more comfortable with jeans and shirts, which was rare in Mewat a decade earlier. *Khoosni* and *Loogra* were the traditional dresses of Meo women. Now it is disappearing very fast. Today they wear loose salwar-qameez of full sleeves reaching to their wrist and a dupatta with scarf covering heads.

Meonis are very enthusiastic of ornaments. In traditional families, women are known by the quantity of jewellery wear. These are generally made of silver metal. Some of the important ornaments used in Meo society are- *Hansli, Taweez, Tora, Haar, Kathla, Batna, and Mala* are worn around the neck. *Pachelis* and *Karula* are for the wrists, *chooris* (bangles) are inserted in between them. *Angoothi* is another important item worn in the second finger at the right hand. *Kara, Bankre, and paazeb, Payal, Chhalla, Gathia, and Nevri* (leg ornaments) are other varieties of jewelleryes women wear in Mewat. It is said Meo men used to wear *Murkies* in the ear in the past but this practice is found to have almost vanished. Even women's heavy jewelleryes are fast disappearing. Now *Meonis* in Mewat of prefer lighter ornaments. A Mewati poet Usman Fauji beautifully expresses the identity of Meonis in full ornaments-

*“Kada neori paon main bala, bakdre haath
Kathla, haar, hemal aur toda melad saath
Kurti niche khusni lage lugri bhanth
Hirni jaisi aankh ho, chandi jaisi daanth
Paut chutila mai jadi nagan si balkhat
Jahan gaj bhar ki ghoonghat mile woo meri Mewat”*

*(Ornaments in legs and wrists
And around the neck
Well covered in khusni, kurti and lugree
O! Deer's like eyes and teeth like silver
Paut in hairbuns, moves with snake waves
When you see Ghunghat large! It is Mewat).*

Food and Festivals

The Meos have their own typical food habits and customary festivals. Their food is naturally frugal and prepared with simple recipes. The prominent items are *Maheri, Shakrawan, Dalia, Ganji, Malida, Khichri, Gawar ki pahli, Chane ka Saag* along with *Bajre ki roti* and some other delicious preparations especially for rainy season such as

Chhilla, Khajoor and Tikia. These are served during festivals, *Malida* (prepared from jaggery) ghee and bajra/Millet loaf) during *Moharram*. *Bread of bajra* and *wheat* is taken on regular basis. Meat (*beef*) is a favorite dish in Meo society. It is consumed at least twice in a week. On annual occasions such as *Id-ul -Fitar, Id-ul-zoha*, and *marriage* festivities *Palao, Biryani, Zarda, Kheer, and Sawain* are specially offered. Milk is the most important drink in all seasons for the Meos. However, unfortunately, it is now sold to the *Dudhyas* (milkman) to supplement family income. A Meo family is thankful to God for having simple *Dal-Roti or Chatni-Roti*. Apart from religious festivals, the Meos also celebrate traditional regional festivals such as *Chhati Pujan, kuan Pujan, Teej, Jathuti, Koar kapat ka Mela, Holi, Deepawali, etc.* These festivals hardly have any importance. Today, the Meos have only memories of their ancestors and their celebrations. Strong Tabligh activities have almost eliminated these traditions from the Meo society.

V. LITERACY PROFILE OF MEWAT

According to the 2001 Census, literacy refers to a person who can read and write with understanding in at least one language. Literacy rates are counted by excluding the age group of 0-6 years from the total population. The state of Haryana recorded 68.59 percent literacy rate during 2001 Census. However, the data indicates that there is a significant literacy gap between male and female population. The situation becomes more acute in the rural areas. All the tehsils of Mewat were found to be lagging far behind in terms of total literacy. The literacy gap is much higher than any other tehsils of Haryana. In fact Mewat region has one of the lowest literacy rates in the country. The disparity is more acute between male and female literacy rates as well as between urban and rural populations. The 2001 census, recorded male literacy as less than thirty per cent and female literacy less than nine per cent. But, it is interesting to note that the census data is based on statistics and provides information of literacy for the entire Mewat region, which includes all the communities of the region. The census did not explicitly provide data on literacy rates among the Meo community, which is abysmally low. The data collected by 'Duha Sakcharta Samiti' which is an organization of the educated Meos concerned with literacy and education in the community states that male literacy rate is



MADRASSA STUDENTS, PALLA



SOS SCHOOL, PALLA

1.7 per cent while female literacy rate is even less than one per cent among the Meos (Ahmad 1999:39). The following table 3.1 presents the comparative literacy rates of the blocks of Mewat.

Table 2.5: Distribution of Literacy Rates in Mewat

Block's Name	Total literacy			Urban literacy			Rural literacy		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Haryana	79.25	56.31	68.59 (1.407)	86.58	72.05	79.89 (1.201)	76.13	49.77	63.62 (1.529)
Gurgoan	77.11	48.29	63.65 (1.596)	89.53	74.27	82.42 (1.205)	73.23	40.52	57.79 (1.807)
1.Tauru	74.79	39.89	58.21 (1.874)	89.44	69.57	80.13 (1.283)	72.13	34.68	54.29 (2.074)
2.Nuh	63.63	24.67	45.23 (2.579)	78.28	55.02	67.40 (1.422)	62.76	22.90	43.92 (2.740)
3.FPJhirka	59.17	20.12	40.61 (2.943)	76.10	49.72	63.55 (1.530)	57.72	17.57	38.63 (3.285)
4.Punahna	55.69	17.42	37.58 (3.196)	80.62	51.72	66.79 (1.558)	53.90	14.90	35.45 (3.617)
5.Hathin	64.30	25.83	46.46 (2.489)	84.24	57.37	71.89 (1.468)	63.08	23.95	44.93 (2.633)

Source: Government of India, Census 2001(Haryana, chapter 7, p. 52-60), Registrar general of India, New Delhi.

The numerical value in the brackets indicate the literacy gap i.e. the ratio of male and female literacy rate of the respective blocks. For larger the value, more is the literacy gap between male and female and hence educational disparity of the area. In comparison to Haryana and Gurgoan where the literacy gap is 1.407 and 1.596 respectively. The same for the blocks in urban areas is higher and become acute in the rural areas. The highest literacy gap is recorded in Punahna (3.617) followed by FP Jhirka (3.285).

The low levels of literacy are accompanied by a high rate of dropout at the elementary level in Mewat. For instance, though a considerable proportion of children are enrolled at the primary level, about 38% to 53% fail to reach grade V in almost all regions of Mewat. According to M.K.Ali, the Project Officer in Mewat Development Agency (MDA), that *"most of the Mewati people have serious problem of reading a document or filling in an application form. Children are not receiving quality education*

and too many repeat classes and finally drop out.” He observed that the quality of education is poor in Mewat. The other reasons cited are ‘lack of proper training of teachers to address the academic, emotional, and psychological needs of children, poor physical facilities both within and outside classroom, lack of parental and community involvement in the education, and vacant posts of teachers. In a majority of Mewati schools reported to have shortage of staff.

Table 2.6 The Teaching Staff Position of Each Block of Mewat Region

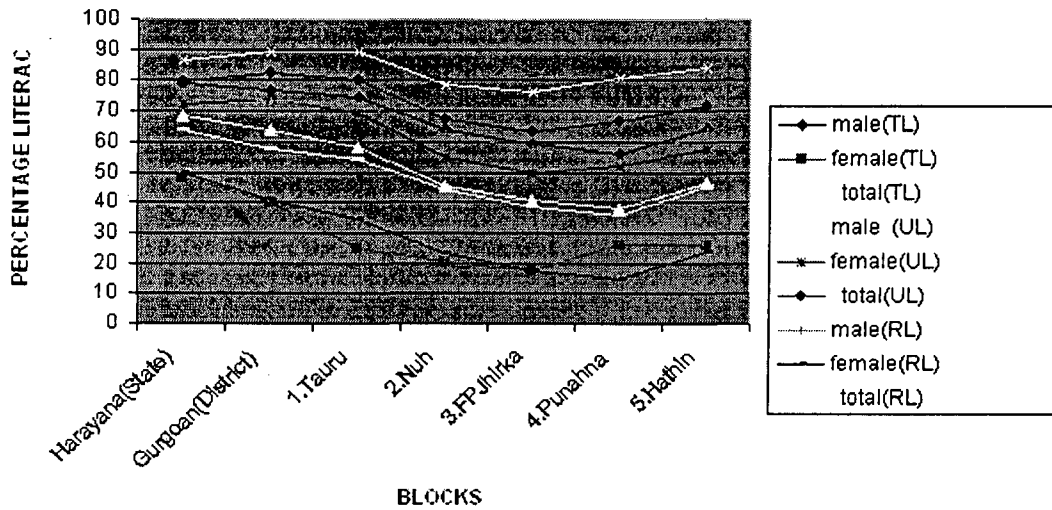
S.No	Name of the Block	Total number of posts	Vacant posts
1	Nuh	414	204
2	punahna	349	174
3	Nagina	232	108
4	Tauru	237	76
5	Firozpur-Zhirka	201	89

Source: Cited in a Mewat Development Agency’ Report, 2005.

There are 829 posts of teachers as per Government records out of which 648 posts are lying vacant from past several years. The Nuh block has suffered with the maximum number of vacancies of 201 out of 414 posts. Moreover, there is no education officer in all the blocks (all posts are lying vacant). On the other hand, 125 schools are waiting for headmasters from four to five years. All the above findings underline the problem of educational backwardness as a result of low growth of literacy in Mewat.

The statistical facts of table 2.5 can also be represented by the following the graph in the next page, which clearly indicate the trends of downward movement of literacy as one move from state to districts and from districts to blocks and then from urban to the rural areas. Male and female literacy gap is obvious. Since, the economy of the Meos is agriculture, they mainly reside in the rural villages of the blocks of Nuh, FP Jhirka, Taudu and Hathin in the districts of Gurgaon and Faridabad, the same area is expected to be the twentieth district of the state as declared by the Government of Haryana and named Mewat. Therefore, the persisting low literacy in the rural areas of the above blocks particularly women, reflect the of educational and social backwardness of Mewat.

**THE COMPARATIVE LITERACY RATES
IN THE BLOCKS MEWAT CENSUS-2001**



Hence, the imperative of the need for understanding the issue of low growth and literacy and educational backwardness can not be ruled out. However, there is little data available that may be helpful for understanding the prevailing condition of Mewat and the actual literacy need of the Meo community. Even less is known about how the socio-cultural and political structure of the community affect literacy goals, practices and the significance of the literacy itself to the community.

The next chapter deals with the notions of literacy among Meos and it specifically tries to understand the perceptions of Meos on girls' education.

CHAPTER III

LITERACY AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE

This chapter is divided into three parts. The part one provides a description of the notions of literacy among the Meo community. It draws upon the ideological model of literacy of Street (1984) and looks at the notions of what constitutes literacy, the dilemma between the traditional and modern definitions of literacy, and problems of dropout and non-performance of the Meo children in the formal school system. The second part explores the reasons for a very low level of literacy among the women in Mewat and it focuses on building the social context of girls' education. The third part of the Chapter places the community perceptions vis-à-vis the Madrassa or the Islamic concept of literacy and education to understand the tensions and dilemmas between the two.

I. The Notions of Literacy among the Meos

The village Palla has two schools. One Government Primary School and the other Hermann Gmeiner School run by SOS Children's Villages of India¹. The Government Primary School is in a dilapidated condition. The school has only one teacher. There is a total absence of basic infrastructure. The teacher occasionally comes to school. Whenever he is there the children rush to him but he shows more interest in Radio F.M rather than in the classes. Children run, cry and fight with each other for sometime or just go home to take care of their siblings. Parents never ask their children about school or teacher or about reading and writing. SOS Village School seems to be concerned with the education of Meo children. Here, girls' education is offered free. It has provided some space for learning in the village. Apart from these schools, the village has four Maktab within the Mosques, which impart basic reading in Urdu and the Quran. Even then, there are children in the village who never attend any kind of literacy classes. Most of the time they can be seen in the street playing in the dust or in the field.

¹ It is a voluntary childcare organization and is a member of the worldwide SOS family working in 131 countries with SOS-Kinderdorf International (established in 1960, in Austria) as the umbrella organization, which is a non-governmental, non-denominational organization entirely founded by private contributions. SOS Children's Villages of India runs community projects like Schools, Vocational Training Centres, and Social and Medical centers to provide opportunities to the children and youth of SOS Villages and the local communities, to integrate and help them grow into self-reliant and useful members of society.



A CLASS IN PROGRESS, SOS SCHOOL



REPUBLIC DAY CELEBERATION, SOS SCHOOL

Among the adults, Sphoon Khan and Zahida are the only graduates in the entire village, others are mostly non-literate, and a few men are educated in the Madrassa. The women of the village are mostly to be non-literate. But, a majority of the children of age group 6-14 are enrolled in the SOS Village School. Nearly 80 children are enrolled in the Government primary School. There are no separate classes for different groups of children. They are made to sit on the floor in a single classroom.

However, the desire for literacy and modern education among the Meos is relatively a recent phenomenon. The desire is largely fuelled by the awareness campaign launched by 'Mewat Sakhcharta Samiti' in the 1990s and the community's realisation of the relative social, economic, and political marginalisation.

The Meos have a deep sense of self-respect and self-pride. They claim themselves to be original Aryan Kshatriyas, never like to depend on others. But because of illiteracy, they say, they have to depend a lot on others such as the Moulvis and the Baniyas (traders) in the market or anyone who is literate in the village. This may be for simple literacy tasks, be it as simple as reading bus destination boards, bus tickets, and names in a ration card, writing letters and sending messages or operate remote control for television. Hence, they welcome any educational and literacy program hoping to reduce their dependency on others to perform literacy tasks for them. But the Meos clearly did not regard literacy as a means by which to gain information, knowledge or understand philosophy of life which they do not take at abstract level, they believe in straightforwardness, simplicity, and concrete meanings of the world around or go for higher education, rather they link literacy with self-independence or freedom. For instance, Haji Taufique Ahmad, a respected man of the village Palla, view literacy as,

“A means to understand and practice ‘deen’ (religious practice) properly. For them, literacy mean ‘Ilm’ (knowledge) which contributes to the better understanding (samajh-o-kherad) and enable man to be nearer to Allah.”

Reading and writing are acknowledged important but no one among the non-literate, village elders and women possess the necessary knowledge to pass it on to others. *Maktabas* are very important in Meo village. They are the primary institutions for literacy and education in the community. Here, children are taught to read and recite basic texts (*Qaida Baghdadi*) and the *Quran*. However, *Maktabas* do not encourage writing and writing practice is almost absent. They consider Urdu language important as they associate it to '*Din-o-Tabligue*' (preaching the religion). The Meos desperately want their children to learn Urdu. However, schools in the village do not have provisions for Urdu teaching. It is limited to *Maktabas* and *Madrassas* where children learn basic Urdu, which the villagers consider insufficient. There is also a general feeling among the people that they are marginalised and ignored in the developmental process in Haryana. They do not benefit equally from the development strategies of the Government- whether it is agriculture, forestry, dairy development, irrigation, education, and industrialisation or anti poverty schemes.

Interestingly, the people of Palla village noted that traditionally, the Meos were never attracted towards education. They revealed that there is no history of learning in the community, and hence they have not made any effort for education in the formal sense of the term. The idea of literacy was almost absent. Literacy practice in terms of reading and writing has been strange to them. There were no institutions of learning formal or informal till the end of the nineteenth century. The reasons cited are that the Meos have always loved the occupation of agriculture (*zamindari*) or service in the army; for some even robbery was the profession. They have no interests in business of any kind. This attitude is still prevalent. Hence, they felt no need for literacy, its importance not fully realised. Even religious teachers were rarely available. They have had to travel a lot of distance to get a person capable of performing even rituals of '*nikah*'. However, Sufis in the villages used to instruct them about mystical beliefs and practices. Preachings of Sufis were in the form of oral dialogue. People sit around their *peer* (saint) to learn a few words of social and spiritual values. The Meos generally remember those teachings in the form of fables (*hekayaat*), orally recited, and heard. In this way, they passed on the knowledge to the future generations. This condition continued till the end of nineteenth century, when some efforts were made to educate the Meos through *Maktabas* and *Madrassas*.

Tablighi Jamaat has played a significant role in introducing literacy in Mewat. However Islamic in content, they established Maktabas and Madrassas in the region. The Meos for the first time exposed to reading and writing. Through the subsequent years, the unlettered community became aware of the values of literacy and education but the focus remained on religion. Thus, from the beginning influence of religious teaching has shaped their thought patterns. It is in this context that the notion of literacy in the Meo community could be understood.

What Constitutes Literacy?

The Meos are primarily a peasant–pastoral community. Their occupation and social structure is largely traditional, only a few of them are able to receive education in Madrassas and become Moulvis or Muftis; they are highly respected in the community for their newly acquired knowledge. Modern education though started at the same time, in a limited scale, largely confined to the upper sections of the community. Hence, the notion of the people about literacy and its ideology remained differentiated and contested. The intellectuals, the clerics, and the common people among the Meos see literacy from different points of view. For example, the intellectuals (English educated) regard modern education as important and empowering and as a vital tool for employment and development hence, they go for it and follow the movement started by Chaudhry Mohammad Yasin Khan. The religious leaders (Madrassa educated) see it with suspicion. Their argument may be articulated as following,

‘That the modern education is incomplete without undersanding basics of Islam. It may also lead to moral decay and a condition of indecision. The modern educated youth are said to be unable to take right decisions in consistent with basic Islamic values. Their faith is weakened. Therefore, basic Islamic education is a must for everyone and this is a farz (compulsory obligation) on every Muslim. It is very important for keeping the Islamic faith and values alive’.

A group of Meo elders in the Mosque of the village Palla responded when asked about the meaning of literacy to them,

“The meaning of literacy in Mewat is that our deen (religious practice) should become perfect, we must be able to recite the Quran and if possible be able to write letters this is considered enough, more is not needed as we are sure we will not get a government jobs. Meos also do not like petty government service. For girls deeni talim is enough we do not want them to go for jobs.”

The overall understanding of the community is that they think literacy very important, but have different viewpoints. However, they usually relate themselves to Maktab and Madrassa education. They think that it is the *deeni talim (religious learning)* in the Madrassa that is meaningful for life. Moreover, they think it is absolute and permanent hence its value is higher than any other.

The institution of Madrassa is held in high respect. Secular learning or what they call *asri talim (modern education)* is useful but is secondary. For that, middle class school education is sufficient. Literacy also mean *Talim for Tabligh (education for preaching)* to them. One is expected to be able to read the *Fazail-i-Aamal* in the mosque after congregational prayers and make aware the others in the village. *The Tablighi Jamaat* view ‘literacy in terms of *Ilm* i.e. knowledge. For them, the pursuit of knowledge should create interests in research and make mankind aware of their *self* and the relation between God and men. Second, knowledge should help making life meaningful and perfecting prayers.

The common Meos on the other hand seem to be more concerned with jobs and survival. They respect both kinds of literacy but expressed their inability to go for it for long. Some youth of the village such as Shamim Ahmad, Rafique, Zakir, Shahoon Khan (the only graduate of Palla) even wanted to know what kind of literacy can provide them jobs immediately. But it is interesting to note that none expressed their willingness to go for higher education or spend enough time in education even when support is promised. When they are asked about their disinterest in literacy and education, they replied

Some men have expressed fear and responded that they were afraid to go to city to shop or do business because they would not be able to read the names of stores or work units and would have trouble finding what they were looking for. Women invariably responded that they were afraid they might get lost if they went to the city by themselves.

Modern versus Traditional Literacy

The Meos are very keen to educate their children and expressed their liking for literacy that can guarantee jobs. They did not want their children to face the problems they had faced. Agriculture as an occupation, they said, is no more profitable. It could not sustain large families and, hence, income from other sources is a pressing need. For they are sure, that it will not be possible without modern education. None, however poor they may be, in the entire village were unwilling to send their children to school. But, they were not sure how far they could support the education of their children. This is a significant change in the attitude of the community. According to Noor Mohammad, an advocate and a social activist responded, that before 1990s, the Meo society was in a pathetic condition. Secular education then was a hated word. In the 1960s, 'Hindi' language and learning in a 'Hindi School' was considered as becoming a Hindu. It was a popular saying in the community that '*Hindi padhna yani Hindu banna*' (reading Hindi mean becoming Hindu). In the 1970s, girls' education was considered *haram* (inauspicious). It was stated that only in the 1990s there is some progress in school or secular education because of an all out effort made by a few educated people of the community. They organised 'Duha Sakcharta Samiti', which took the responsibility of generating awareness in the community. The Campaign appeared to have succeeded in breaking some of the narrow and prejudiced notions of the community. Noor Mohammad, time and again emphasized and was categorical that:

“It is a fact that the Meos don not apply their mind or think in advance. They act without taking pros and cons of a situation into consideration. Aggression and rigid attitude have made them the victims of time; they have often moved against time.”

Further, he said, "Thank God, now at least the community is not opposed to secular education and do not hesitate sending their children, particularly daughters to school. He added persistence of social evils such as child or early marriage, dowry and low status of women in the community keep women and girls in a subservient position".

It is stated that after partition, the community was left leaderless and directionless. The Meos were pushed to ground zero, a majority of them were non-literate, and to come up from that shock needed vision and change from within the community. It is because of these historical pressures and change in the traditional occupational structure, the Meo community appear to be making efforts to educate their children. They are using the options available to them. They send their children to the village Maktab and to the school. The Madrassas in or around the village have very limited provision even if education is freely given. Parents do not want to educate their wards in a Madrassa alone because it limits the possibility of future occupation. However, the basic learning that Madrassa provide is highly respected, so the community wants to keep it going simultaneously with the school education. According to Ramzan khan, the village *Imam* who teaches children in the Maktab:

"We value education whatever be the type. If it is knowledge, it is respected. But, the problem is how to pursue the knowledge without family support. Even monthly school fee is too high for us. A Majority can not afford it. The Government school in the village is in a bad shape it is better not to send children there. Teacher is hardly seen there. Hence, we focus on educating our children at the Maktab. Whatever little we know we give it to our children, at least they will not be unlettered in basics of deen (Islam)."

Problems of Dropout and Non-Performance among Meo Children in the Formal School

In a majority of the villages, only Government Primary School exists with inadequate infrastructure. The facilities for High School or Senior Secondary Schools are limited in Mewat. They are mainly located in the district headquarters or in the nearby towns. So a majority of the children either dropout after primary stage or manage to complete class VIII but do not continue thereafter. They get married and start working in the family land or go for driving. The reasons cited are lack of family support, inadequate or no literacy environment at home, tradition of early marriage and preference for large number of children. A village youth, Zakaria, argues that because of the attraction for early marriage boys do not concentrate on studies,

“As boys grow up, they do not take interest in education. Even if parents extend their full support they pay no attention nor they help in any work, once they are married, they start working, so how to continue education? Moreover he said, the Meos are not going to get any job because of high corruption in the Government, then what is the point wasting so much time in education.”

Further, it may also be noted that the dropout and never-enrolled children belonged to below poverty² level households. Parents pointed out that education was not cost-free and they found it difficult to meet non-tuition costs like uniforms, books, etc. According to Khalil Ahmad, a Meo advocate,

“the child development programmes such as compulsory enrolment of all children of 4 - 6 years age group in class one, those above the age 6 are trained in small hamlets and then enrolled in the school at an appropriate class. Introduction of

²A majority of the villagers in Palla come under what is officially stated as Below Poverty Level (BPL). That is, those whose income is said to be less than Rs.6000 per annum and those who are given red ration card. These families do not possess any land and are wage labourers.

Mid-day meal schemes in Government schools did not solve the problem of dropout. Retention of the child in the school becomes very difficult after some time”.

Home environment speaks volumes about the kinds of literacy practices the community has. The housing patterns and the general environment in the village reveal some interesting findings. Each house in the village consists of only one room with one small window and no proper arrangement for lighting. The entire look of the house gives an impression that it could be used only for limited purposes. No trace of books related to literacy, or reading and writing in most of the houses. Overall, the house type in Palla appears to be not conducive for reading and writing. Study at home is said to be a rare event. It is noted that the children keep their books and other reading materials in the Mosque. This is the only place where reading activity takes place. According to Sanjay Singh, a primary school teacher of Meoli, another village adjacent to Palla, observes that the problems of illiteracy in the Meo is because of poverty, low status of women, large family size, heavy domestic works, girls are retained for sibling care, no interest in modern education because they do not regard education would help them getting Government jobs. He further notes that towns have obvious impact on the villages, hence, near the towns village people show some interest in education but only upto school level. Girls after classV do not study and are married by the age of 13 and leave parental home by the age of 15. The Meos take more interest in Madrassa education because it is given free along with food and accommodation, they do not want to pay even Rs.45 annually to the Government school. Moreover, parents take away their child from the class during school hours. This lead to either drop-out or non-performance of the child. For instance, teachers repeatedly complained about the non-performance of Meo children in the school. A teacher remarks,

‘The community is not interested in education, they do not make efforts to educate their children; they send children to school, but never enquire about their learning. They do not want to pay school fees even though it is free for girls, parents do not help in homework of children. They also pointed out that

the children do not keep their uniform clean, they do not study at home even for half an hour because the community do not value literacy especially school education. The teachers remarked that the Meo parents are illiterate, therefore they did not value children's education.'

The other notable observations that may be cited as a possible reason for the state of affairs is the time mismanagement in the maktab and the school. The Maktab takes three sittings daily i.e. morning (6.30 to 9.00), afternoon (2.30 to 4.00) and evening (after sunset to 8.30). In such a condition, children do not get enough time for self-study, and they spend most of their time in the Maktab.

All these may represent the condition of literacy environment among the villagers of Palla. Thus, it may be pointed out that modern education and literacy in the Meo community does not find actual expression at home and school which is ideologically influenced by the religion. The clerics hold the social space enforcing their versions of restricted literacy³, thereby limiting access to modern school education. Mohammadi of Mewat Development Agency (MDA)⁴ a woman working as a field officer in the Self Help Groups (SHGs) argues, that increased agricultural prosperity has brought misery to women's lives as the number of livestock has increased substantially, and all of it means more and more work for women and girls. She pointed out that the demand for women teachers is strong in the Mewat area, as also the need for Urdu teachers. Some of the girls such as Shamshad, Arsi and Lali, who have dropped out of the school expressed their willingness to return to school given an opportunity. It is noted that the dropout is negligible in the age group of 6-8 years, and is the maximum after class V. Nearly all women teachers commute to village from cities and towns, and the children and parent do not get time to interact with them. Teachers also do not attempt because they have to

³ Restricted literacy' in Goody's terminology is special purpose literacy which is limited to specific fields such as religion on the one hand or administrative purposes on the other. In the Meos case, the former's hold is strong (Smith; 1977).

⁴ In the year 1980, the Government of Haryana with a commitment to deliver social and economic justice to the backward and under privileged sections of society, constituted Mewat Development Board under the chairmanship of Chief Minister, Haryana. Mewat development Agency is its executive agency at the field level, its governing body comprises of Commissioner Gurgaon Division, as Chairman. The role of MDA is of planning, coordination and administration. It is the prime development agency in Mewat.

leave to catch the bus to go back home. As a result there is no follow up on the drop-out children.

II. Women's Education in Meo Society

This section of the chapter presents the socio-cultural perceptions on women's literacy. It situates the educational backwardness of Meo women in the broader social context. The section views literacy practice as part of the broader gender⁵ roles, which relate to power in the family, home and community.

The Meo society is a patriarchal society⁶. Their social position is secondary and sub-ordinated to men. In other words, irrespective of the specific conditions, most Meo men hold the view that being masters in a distinctly patriarchal society they do not treat their women as they deserve. Customs and traditions in the Meo society keep them away from public space. They are expected to nurse the family and shoulder the household responsibilities. These roles keep women involved almost exclusively in the family and the field. There is little time left for other activities. The Meo society provides little or almost no social space for women to engage actively in reading and writing. Nearly in all the households where the researcher interacted women were keen to know about him, about his personal particulars. Once they are convinced, they were ready to answer sincerely and thoughtfully. Their simple answer to most of the queries was '*pato na bhai*' (I do not know brother). This may reflect both their simplicity and ignorance.

For an understanding of the social context of literacy, it is important to look at the daily life of the Meo women, which is in sharp contrast to the life seen in towns and cities. The most notable of the observation, however, is that the women in Meo society do not have time to think and engage in any literacy event. It may well be understood by their involvement in household economic activities. It is noted that the life of a woman in Mewat starts in the early morning and continues thereafter until late at night. Women's daily life is tough. They are pivotal in Meo economy. Their daily life can be divided into three broad activities, namely, farming, animal care, and household. Although, these are not exclusive, women are involved simultaneously in all the three. Since Meo society is

⁵ Refers to the cultural ideals and stereotypes of masculinity and femininity and at the structural level to the sexual division of labour in the society (Marshal.G; 1998:250)

⁶ The social system is based on the authority of the male heads of the household.

primarily agricultural, the main source of livelihood is the farm land. Women take full responsibilities for taking care of the crops, animals and the household. Men only engage in ploughing through tractors or traditional bullocks and initial digging. Women actively perform rest of the farm related works such as sowing, weeding, harvesting, thrashing, winnowing, and staking. These activities keep the women tied to the agricultural farm for long hours.

Animals (cows, buffaloes, and goats) are very important in Meo villages. Each family owns atleast a pair of buffaloes and cows. They sell the milk to the *Dudhiyas* (milkman) to supplement the family income. They also try to increase the number of animals over the years. The notable point of Meo society is that men do not take interest in these activities at all. It is the women who look after the animals of the household. They graze the fodder, feed, milch and wash regularly. Women also take care of the medical need of animals. They use traditional medicines and administer injections when required.

The household activities are even more extensive, e.g., cooking for a big family, grinding the corns in stone hand mill system, washing both utensils and cloths and child care of an average of eight to ten children in each household. They are also expected to keep the household, cattle shed, and the areas their kith and kin take rest. Sometimes they have even to prepare *Huqqa* (Puff) for their men. Apart from these, water and fuel is a constant problem in the villages. Women have to go long distances to fetch water and collect fuel wood and make gober cake (*Ople*) which are used as no cost fuel in the community. Hence, the structural and the institutional set-up in Meo society does not leave any time for women for any kind of literacy activities. The ability of a woman to adapt in these different kinds of activities makes her respectable in the Meo society. According to Usman Fauji a retired CRPF Inspector and a poet in the village,

“Meo society is still backward, traditional thought patterns of the people have not changed. The status and respect the women should enjoy is a dream. Modern education for girls is considered bad. It is alleged that education will spoil the morality of the girls; they cite the isolated examples of some

love affairs and make these as pretexts for not sending or giving enough space to girls. Moreover, the whole society is dependent on agriculture, naturally, the thinking is more traditional, but in the case of Meos, it is rigid. Spare time for women is a luxury. Therefore, a girl child is not properly taken care of. She is actively engaged in the daily chores in the household activities. Dowry is becoming a curse in the society. Gotra-Pal system is tottering. No one in the community is concerned with these problems in our society. None of our leaders are trustworthy. The community remains backward because of illiteracy and rigidity. It is unfortunate that our community does not trust our own daughters, really, this is the worst.”

The observation regarding the women in Meo community reveal that there are ideological and structural inequalities. Further, according to the village Imam, Abdul Mobeen, some of the most commonly held ideas about women in Meo society are,

“women are inferior to men, they are created to serve, and Men are created to judge over them’ (Aurat mardon se kamter hai, mardon ko aurton per hakim banaya gaya hai); ‘daughters are others’ property’ (Beti paraya dhan hoti hai), and the social ideal is that women should restrict themselves to the home and take care of the family; they are better suited for childcare”.

Thus, the educational backwardness among Meo women may be situated within this broader socio-cultural context. The women’s position in Meo society is certainly contingent upon the broader ideological and structural inequalities in that society. It is interesting to note some of the observations of the villagers regarding education of their girl children. For instance, Abdul Mobeen, the village Imam, observes,

“Ham ladkiyon ko jiyada padhana nahin chahte, kyunki ham sab isko bura mante hain. Aksar dekha gaya hai jyada padhne

par ladkiyan bigad jati hai. Ham apni ladkiyon ko ladko ke saath padhne dena nahin chahte, kyonke ladke badmas hote hain, ladki ko kharab kar dete hain. Biradari ki izzat ki baat hoti hai, doosri baat yahan gaon me sakool nahin hai, hai par panchvi tak, wahan bachiyon padhti hai, jo kaafi samjha jaata hai. jyada se jyada gaon wale aathwin tak padha dete hain iske aage padhana nahin chahte, phir shaadi ka waqt aa jaata hai” (we do not want girls to be educated more because we think it is bad. It is often observed that girls go astray during schooling. Moreover, we do not want to let our girls to study with boys, because boys are bad. They spoil girls. It is the question of biradary prestige. The other thing is that in the villages there are no proper facilities for schooling. it is only upto class V, we send our girls there but after class five problems start, in any case, the villagers do not want to educate girls more than class VIII. Now it's time for marriage)

Further, Yunus Khan, a truck driver in the village, strongly asserts,

“Hum log auraton ki kamai khana nahin chahte hain na hi naukri karwana chahte hain” (We do not want to eat women's income nor we want our women to go for jobs).

In a way, they link modern education with jobs, which they find impractical for women. Hence, the need of education and literacy for women is not taken as essential. Basic religious instruction (*deeni talim*) at the village Maktab is supposed to be sufficient for a girl, and considered important, as it raises her value for marriage, and help her discipline household activities. Further, a woman is expected to protect herself from all kinds of social and psychological perversions because respect of the family is attached to her. In case she commits a mistake, the entire family's prestige is considered fallen. Moreover, in such cases no one would come forward with a marriage proposal. It is a popular belief in Mewat that:

“Daughters should not be immoral, but who cares for sons even if he has one thousand spots.” (Hai kanya dhan kalanchani na honi chahia beta ka to hazar aib bhi dab jai).

A girl cannot express her choice in selecting a marriage partner. It is entirely on her parents to select a husband for her. In case, her husband dies after marriage, she is considered inauspicious (*kalmuhi*), witch (*daain*), the man-eater, and second marriage is impossible in this condition. Again, if she bore only daughters she is considered useless (*manhus*). The birth of a son is welcomed in the family and her status becomes high. She is called ‘mother’ (*Maa*). But she is not given enough say in the family. Her advice is not sought in important decisions. Rather she is considered to be of unstable mind (*naqis-ul-aql*).

As Mohammad Hasim expressed his opinion,

“Why should a women be consulted, their mind is unstable and out of place” (Bai un ber banan soo kiya pooche un ki guddi pe aqal howe)

However, he added that old women are consulted and regarded valuable for their experience. The Meos ask for advice from old ladies. It is popular in Mewati,

“Boodhi soo koi rai le lo”

(Take a few advices from the old lady).

Women of the village Palla expressed their unhappiness over the state of affairs of girls and said that education is not making any difference for their daughters. Even after girls get education, the dowry demand did not come down rather, it goes up in some cases. The mind-set of the society about women and girls did not change even after education, they are seen with suspicion and parents are constrained to marry off their daughters early. Otherwise, there is a risk of not getting good match for them. It is feared that the girls might elope with someone of different caste or *biradari*. This invites social tension in the community. Thus, chances of a girl getting good school education are

remote in our society. Mohurbai, an old women of the village while interacting with the reseacher at 'The Barli Development Institute' remarked,

“Chahe ladki padhi ho ya anpadh ho dahej to dena hi padta hai, agar na di jaai to ladki ki jindagi sasural wale tabah kar dete hain, rojana tane sunne ko milte hain, gadi to yahan dena hi padta hai, jiski kam hasiat hai wo kam hi dwte hain par shadi mai bahut kharch karma padta hai, sayani ladki ko ham jaldi shaadi kar dete hain nahin to ladki ke bhag jane ka khatra hota hai, phir police thana hota hai, biradari ki badnami hoti ha.” (whether the girl is educated or not we have to give dowry, if it is not given then the life of the girl is made worst by her in-laws, tounting become frequent, moter bike is almost compulsory, those who can not afford still try to make for it and have to spend good amount in a marriage, we prefer early marriage of adolescent girls otherwise there is a risk of elopement and then police-thana, and dishonour to our biradary (gotras).

The response of a young woman, Zahida, of the same village is as following,

“Yahan ladkiyon ki koi izzat nahi hai, zabardasti karna ,aurat ko peetna ek aam baat hai, bachche paida karne mai bhi zabardasti hai, kisi doosre se baat karna bahut bura samjha jata hai, kahin ja nahin sakte, ghar main bhi koi azadi nahi hai, sirf kaam ,kaam yahan ayr kutch nahin” (the Meos do not respect girls or women, wife beating is common, we are forced to produce more children, we can not talk to any outsider, we are not allowed to go anywhere alone. There is no freedom even in our houses; work and work is the simple rule, no rest, or entertainment).

She further said,

'though I am an educated women and hold Masters Degree in English from Hyderabad University, unfortunately married to an uneducated Meo man, now I lost my freedom, my life is spoiled. It was my mother's folly she got me trapped into this relation because of poverty. At present, I have two children and expecting the third, my husband does not work and did not understand me properly; he is not even concerned with the education of these children. I am teaching in the SOS village school and I will have to take the full responsibility of my children with no freedom to move'.

When asked why they do not consider their girls faithful when go out for study, almost all the respondents (Men and Women) said that they do not want their girls to be given freehand to go outside to study with boys because there are maximum chances of indulging in unethical behaviour. They cited different cases as evidences For example, it is said that a girl of the village studing in classVIII fall in love with a boy of *Sakka biradari*(caste) which is considered a lower caste among the Meo Muslims. They eloped, got married, and were living at some unknown place. But the village community searched them out and the boy was forced to divorce the girl and she was again married to an old Meo man. The incident is ridiculed in the village and sometimes girls are warned indirectly about the consequences of marrying a man of other biradari or lower castes. However, it is well recognised that education is important. As Yunus Khan, a Meo school teacher observes,

"We know that education is important but the facilities in our villages are inadequate. So we prefer sending our girls to the village mosque where she is taught reading the Quran and, to some extent, Urdu. It is very important for girls to be aware of the basics of deen. Atleast, if nothing, she learns something in the Maktab. Apart from that, in the village school, primary

education is available. If she is able to study up to class V, it is considered sufficient. In our society, education beyond this is not considered good”.

Further, he observed,

“Zyada padhna achha nahin samjha jata hai” (education more than what is available in the village is not considered good). Because if girls get more education they have to go out to the towns and study in a co-education school with boys. We do not think it right. Moreover, girls are not supposed to go for jobs. Who does not know boys are bad in these schools. They spoil most of the girls. Even teachers in these schools are generally men. Female teachers are only a few. How can we leave our girls in such an environment?”

These are some of the views expressed by the village community. However, the children have their own desires and liking. Girl students in the village love to study and play whatever limited time they have at their disposal. One little girl ‘Nafisa’ love her school, she said:

“Mujhe sakool achcha lagta hai, padhna chahten hain ji, Sakool ke maidan main khelna achcha lag ta hai” (I like my school, I want to study and school ground is good, I like playing there).

Mumtaz⁷, a class VIII student shared her feelings on girls with the researcher and beautifully expressed the same in her poem ‘Faryad: Dehat ki Beti’ (*Request from the daughters of the village*):

*Ilm, ghyan ki bhookhi hoon main
Bhookhi qalam dawat ki
Ka, kha, ga tei karoon dosti*

⁷ Mumtaz’s pen name is Sanyogita, a class VIII student of the village.

Main Beti dehat ki

(I am hungry of knowledge

Hungry of pen and ink!

I want to be friend with ka, kha, ga

I am a daughter of the village)

Ghar kheta main chaubis ghante

Pashooan dhal kamaoon main

Sab tei bhonda aodhoon pahnoon

Sab se paache khaoon main

Na mahnat ki koi qadar meri

Na qeemat meri baat ki

Ka, kha, ga tei karoon dosti

Mai beti dehat ki

(I work twenty-four hour at home

I churn like animals

I wear the worst

I eat in the end

For no value of my labour

Nor of my words

I want to be friend with ka, kha, ga

I am a daughter of the village)

Sun meri ammi teri Beti

Tre nam Pei kare dohai

Mera manne Qasoor bata

Meri keon na hooi padhai

Daftar ke main hukm karai

So wah bhi mere saath ki

Ka, kha, ga...

(Listen O my mother! your daughter

Requesting you with your name

Tell me my faults

Why you did not educate me?

Some orders in the office

They were with me, once!

I want to be friend with ka, kha, ga ...)

Naukar jaisi haalat ho gai

Mere ghar me maa meri

Ghar bahar ke mamloon pai

Na leta koi salah meri

Meri pasand ki parwah hai na

Qadar mere jazbaat ki

Ka, kha, ga...

(I became like slave

O my mother! In my own home

In matters of daily affairs

No one take my advice

No one respect my emotions

I want to be friend with ka, kha, ga ...)

Beti ka padhna bahut zaroori

Who hai kal ki mahtari

Ma ke padhan likhan ka matlab

Padhi likhi peedhi saari

Kah Sanyog bakhat na samjho

Qeemat meri baat ki

ka, kha, ga...

(Education of daughter is compulsory

She is the mother of tomorrow

Educated mother means

Generation Educated!

Let say snnyog , this is the time

Value my words).

During the fieldwork, nearly all the children of the village came into contact with the researcher. The researcher gave tuitions to the children daily in the evening. Around twenty children regularly came for the class. It is observed that they are interested in studies, the girls of the showed more interest than the boys. The children are observed to be punctual, they love to wear school uniform and attend school regularly. They are interested in school activities and perform well in annual school function especially girls were excellent in stage dance and other cultural activities. However, on the academic sphere, the performance was not very encouraging. It is noted that the language skill is poor, writing was also not satisfactory, knowledge of mathematics of class VIII students was very poor, and they were lacking in general awareness. Homework is not done. Shamim Ahmad, a class VIII student who remained with the researcher most of the time and helped understanding the local dialects, says,

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“Sir main padhna chahta hoon, mere maa- baap garib hain phir bhi main kosis karoonga puri padhai karne ki. Lekin baat ye hai ke hamare gaon me facility theek nahin hai aur fees bhi jiyada hai 52 rupia harm ah dena padta hai jo goan ke log apne sare bachon ke liye de nahin sakte isliye wo apne bachon ko sarkari sakool main bhej dete hain,jahan koi padhai nahin hoti,bas pass kar dete hain,baad me sab board me fail ho jaate hain, phir koi nahin padhna chahta hai”(Sir, I want to study

even if my parents are poor. I would like to continue my studies. But the fact is that, in our village facilities are not good. School fees are high. It is Rs.52 per month which many parents can not afford for all of their children. Hence, they send their children to the Government Primary School, where children do not show interest in studies. The teachers are not regular in the Government School. Classes are seldom held and the children are promoted to higher classes without proper examination. Therefore they face difficulty in understanding the syllabus, no one in our home is capable of helping us in studies. There is none in the village who could teach. The result is that a majority of children are declared failed in the Board examination of class VIII. Thereafter no one wants to study).

Despite all these limitations what is notable according to Mohammadi a Meo women postgraduate and project officer in Mewat Development Agency (MDA) is the exposure children are getting. She notes this is going to change the Meo society in future. The change can even be seen in the women's group in Tabligh. Eventhough a majority of them are non- literate but they move around to make the village women aware about namaz and other rituals. Since, Tabligh is difficult without education, it is realised that women should come forward and be educated so that they are at able to recite the *Quran*, read Sunni *Behesti Jewar and Fazail -i- Aamal*, and become able to write a letter. She further added that the change is very slow. The women in Mewat want that their men should share the work responsibilities so that they could spare some time for learning and for relaxation. But she expressed her surprised over the attitude of the clerics in the following words,

“Mujhe yah baat samajh mein nahi aati hai ke hamare moulvi,aalim ,khud to bahut aaram se rahte hain-gadi main ghoomte hainaur jannati hone ka daawa karte hainaur unke saathwoh kisaan ,anpadh,gharib aadmijo deen raat mahnat

karne ke baad apna pet bharta hai-moulvi ke nazdeek koi haisiat nahin rakhta,uski koi izzat nahiaur wo jahannami qarar pata hai-kiya gharib ,anpadh logon ki koi izzat nahin hai”(I could not understand one thing. Our moulvis and aalim spend their life luxuriously, move around in moter cycle feel they are the resident of paradise, but those poor people, farmers who work the whole day to fulfill his two squire meal did not have any value before them. He is seen as if he is a resident of hell. Are not the poor deserve our respect?”

M.K.Ali, Project Officer in Mewat Development Agency (MDA) also noted that,

“Meo women are very sensitive for development but they are not given any chance, in fact they have not been exposed for any development in the community”.

He even suggested that one should not worry about the state of affairs in Meo community rather do something for them. He seems to be quite happy with the progress made by the Meo women under Self Help Groups (SHGs) micro-finance scheme.

Oral Traditions of Literacy among Meo Women

Earlier in the chapter, it is pointed out that the Meos were traditionally non-literate people. Awareness about literacy in the community is a recent phenomenon. The women’s situation in the community is governed by customs and traditions. Hence, limited options are available to them in education. It is also stated that women are also participating in the Tabligh activities. This has raised the need of literacy for women. However, limited it may be, the community is willing to educate their women. However, it is mainly related to three important areas of life that Meo women get oral transmission of knowledge. The three areas are religious traditions, health and hygiene and poetic and artistic expressions.

(a) Transacting Religious Traditions as Literacy Practices

Apart from the recitation of the Quran, women are expected to read other religious materials. For example, booklets in Urdu of *Tablighi Nisab* to gain guidance and information about the code and performance of various rituals like *Namaz, Roza, Zakat, Hajj*, etc. which form the basics of Islamic faith. Hence, the women in the villages try to learn these ritual literacy. The young girls are taught these in the village Maktab. But, older women can hardly read anything. They memorise verses from the Quran. The young girls help older women by reading verses from the Quran for them. This kind of oral literacy practice is encouraged and those who involved are respected in the community.

(b) Transacting Health and Hygiene as Literacy Practices

Besides religious knowledge, women in Meo community are traditionally aware of their basic health and hygiene. However, Chandrakanta, a women social worker of 'Barli Development Institute' in the village Palla, noted that their knowledge of sex, pregnancy, birth control, and methods of family planning is found to be inadequate. The motivation to family planning is negative. In Meo society, large number of children are preferred. They see it as divine gift. They believe that procreation of children is a natural phenomenon and human agency should not be instrumental as it interferes with the God's will. Thinking about family planning or stopping birth of children is looked as a sin. Using birth control measures are also seen in the same spirit. The women in the village also argue that modern medicine and the procedure for operation are dangerous and it may lead to severe consequences such as bleeding, fever, cancer and impotency or death. They prefer traditional methods of healing. She further observed that these kinds of traditional beliefs in the community often lead to complications in women's health. Maternal mortality is said to be high in the villages. Socio-cultural practices that are largely responsible for poor health condition of most women and for maternal mortality are noted to be:

- (a) Marriage and pregnancy at an early age, when the reproductive organs are not yet properly developed.

(b) Higher fertility rate leading to recurrent pregnancy and unwanted pregnancy when the fetuses are aborted crudely most often at home.

There was one case explained by Chandrakanta as an example for the gravity of the problem in the Meo villages,

“When a mid-wife (Dai) of the village cuts the umbilical cord, but leave the placenta intact. The mother at the risk of post-partum haemorrhage, complication was later solved only with emergency medical intervention.”

(C) Poetic and Artistic Expressions of Meo Women as Literacy Practices

Music, arts and poetry is another area where Meo women transact the traditional knowledge. They are sensitive to expressing the delicate feelings in poetic forms. They sing these stanzas in beautiful lyrics. The learned poets of Mewat such as Usman Fauji expressed his surprise at how these women compose poems orally with perfect meters. For example, he narrated the following stanzas sung by the village women, which are full of social sensitivity and also how a woman feel in matters of love and pain-

*Beta soo beti bhali je kul vanti howe
Beta ujale hai ek kul ki beti ujale kul doe
(Daughters are better than sons, she enlighten family
Sons are light for one and daughters brings it to two)*

*Aurat soo duniya chali, aurat jaat bhali
Ya turya ki kokh soo paida ho ya wali
(Through women the world move, women are gentle
Her womb give birth to saints and prophets)*

*Badal sobhs bijli ghata ki sobha ghor
Nar ki sobha kamini, bagan sobha mor
(Thunderstorms beautify cloud
Women beautify men like peacock add glamour to the garden)*

*Main tero bharta rahoon, tu meri Nari
Moku tu aisi lage jaise misri soo piyari
Jab tu moo soo hans pade main dookh sookh jawoon bhool
Tui dekh aise khiloon jaise khile kamal ko phool*

*(You are my wife and I your husband
I feel as if you are sweet honey
When you smile, I forget all the sorrows
When I see you, I bloom as lotus).*

The poetic expressions of Meo women are oral which clearly indicate their social sensitivity and knowledge. However, they cannot pen them down. Apart from the above-mentioned forms of literacy practices, women also spend time embroidering and teaching their girls to embroider. The 'Barli Development Institute' an NGO is providing space for the young girls to express their skills and improve it. The training also includes knitting, tailoring, painting, cooking, and child-care and awareness of health and family matters. The community welcomes such kinds of vocational training because they feel that this will make their women more useful economically. Mewat Development Agency (MDA) has also provided help to women through Self Help Groups (SHGs) to promote marketing to women's crafts and embroideries.

Gender Relations and Literacy Practices

Men and women occupy and function in different domains in Meo community. Women's world is primarily the private domain of home, whereas men occupy and function in the public domains. This is also reflected in their literacy practices. Men mostly use their literacy skills to accomplish practical goals of life. For example, payment of bills of irrigation to the government, reading agricultural manuals, instructions on pesticides and names on a ration card or names in voter's lists, etc. Some of them also read local newspapers to keep themselves well informed about the trends in politics or market. Men in the Meo community watch television news and other

informative programmes but women generally do not find time or they are expected not to enter into the room when men are watching the programmes. Thus women are socially restricted to their private domains. Socialization of young girls is also geared in the same direction. The social space for literacy is seen to be expanding in the community. Although women, in particular, still have little opportunity, they realised the need to read and write in the course of their daily life and work. They sometimes feel that limited literacy is not going to make their lives better.

III. Modern vis-a-vis Madrassa Notions of Literacy

The notions of literacy among Meos of Mewat may be understood further by exploring them in the context of Islamic notions of literacy. In any Muslim society, Madrassas are the institutions of higher learning, which evolved among the Arabs in the middle ages. In India, it is introduced during the Sultanat period. Since then, Madrassas are in existence. They are primarily meant for religious education. However, secular education is also encouraged but only to a limited extent. Ideologically, Madrassas are not uniform. Rather they are divided and influenced by different schools of Islamic jurisprudence. However, in Madrassa model of education, knowledge (*Ilm*) is held in unity⁸, embedded in principles of Islamic philosophy. The fundamental faith is that:

“The Quran is the constitution revealed by Allah to regulate and govern human life. It is the book which educated the Islamic nation until it attained the standard, which earned it the title ‘the nation which fulfils the best in mankind’ ”.

Light should, therefore, may be thrown on it from two angles. The first is the angle of education, this shows how the Quran at the level of the individual, the family, the community and the nation leads a man to achieve the highest degree of moral and spiritual nobility possible in this life. The other angle is that of the practical code which regulates human life in its noblest form and in all its spheres political, economic, social, intellectual and moral, that is a life which is befitting to man whom *Allah* has ennobled

⁸ The source of all knowledge is Allah; he is regarded Alim-ul-Hakim (Who knows every thing).



JAMA MASJID, NUH



YASIN MEO DEGREE COLLEGE, NUH

and raised above all species of this creation and entrusted with the task the heavens, the earth and the mountains have all dreaded to shoulder”⁹.

The pursuit of such knowledge could be nourished by an education system, which considers full understanding of the Quran and *Sunnah*¹⁰ as its core curriculum. This is so comprehensive, inter-dependent, and inter-woven that it would cover all aspects of human life. Hence, no proper distinction in education and literacy is made in the formal sense of the terms. It is observed during the interviews with the *Muftis* of Mewat, that they understand both ‘education’ and ‘literacy’ by the single word ‘*tarbia*’ meaning thereby to grow or increase. This also implies ‘socialization’. This idea has acquired wide acceptance among the intellectuals and clerics in the Meos. It is however based on *Sharia al aqida al timawiya*¹¹, a book on Islamic doctrine, which define *tarbia* as the gradual bringing of something to completeness (perfection or maturity i.e. *kamal*). It also stands for refinement and discipline. The same is also explained in the *Quran* in its verbal form in two places: ***In Surat al Isra, where Allah says:***

“Say, My Lord! Have mercy on them both, even as they brought me up (rabba) as a child, (17:24)”.

And in Surat Ash- Shu ‘araa, “He (Pharaoh) said ‘did we not bring thee up (rabba) as a child among us, and didst thou not stay in our midst many years of thy life? (26:18)’ ”.

Mufti M. Zahid of *Jamia Arabia Moinul Islam*¹² at Nuh observes that education has two purposes: One, the education of the ‘individual’ and the second, education of the ‘society’. The Madrassa (Islamic system, he emphasized) is concerned with both, therefore, education means,

⁹ Mohammad Qutub: Introduction to his brother, Sayyid Qutub’s book, *In the shade of the Quran*, vol 30, tr. M.A Salabi and A.A Shamsi (1979), Muslim welfare House, London.

¹⁰ The traditions and practices of Prophet Mohammad (p.b.u.h) contained in the books Bokhari and Muslim.

¹¹ Cited in an article “Islamic education: Its principle and aims by Abul-Wafa al Ghuneimi al Taftazani published in ‘Muslim education quarterly’ Autumn Issue p. 67 vol 4 no. 1, 1986. The Islamic Academy CAMBRIDGE

¹² *Jamia Arabia Moinul Islam*, is the first educational institution in Mewat established in 1924 by Maulana Mohammad Ilyas, a respected centre of learning in the region,

“The nurture of the various gifts and abilities of the individual so that he may attain his full stature both psychologically and intellectually, as well as the development, by various means of the capabilities of society with the aim of bringing about a better form of progress and moral development in accordance with the values of Islam”.

Further, he explained, it is not correct within Islam to limit education to a man's acquisition of information and technical skills (As it is happening in modern English education system, he added). It's aim goes far beyond this to the refinement of the moral behaviour of both the individual and the society. He repeatedly emphasized moral (*akhlaqi*) education and said that some of the values of modern society conflicts with the ideas of Islam, hence, Madrassa opposes them, and will not allow it to be part of the curriculum.

This may be the ideal construction of the notion of literacy or education for a Meo Muslim. It is explicit in its emphasis on good moral behaviour, which is influenced by the teachings of Islam and the Quran. However, the actual condition of education in the same Madrassa did not come upto that level and it is heavily criticised in the modern educated circle among the Meos who disagree with the ideal construction of education. They say, the method adopted is obsolete and the curriculum is limited to the instructions contained in *Dars-i-Nizami*¹³. No further innovation is ever made; but they hardly agree with the reality. When asked about women's education, Mufti sahib remained calm for sometime and responded that modern education for women is going to be '*namubarak*' for their '*akhlaq*' that is, ominous and harmful for morality.

The same kinds of tendencies are visible even among the Meo men in the villages. It is observed in the village *Palla* that men do not put trust on their women. They usually shrugged it with '*jada padhne se ladki bigad jati hai*' (more education spoils girls' behaviour). Hence, no separate Madrassa exists (except one in the recent years) for women. As Siddique Ahmad Meo, the author of the book '*Mewat ek Khoj*', noted,

¹³ Course curriculum developed by Mullah Nizamuddeen Sahalwi, who taught at Firangi Mahal, Lucknow until his death in 1748. The course included *hadis* (traditions of Prophet) and *tafsir* (traditional studies of Quran) but put more emphasis on *mantiq* (logic) and *hikmat* (metaphysics). The course is still followed in Madrassa education in Mewat.



A MAKTAB, IN PALLA



MADRASSA STUDENTS, NUH

“Madrassa remained the most effective instrument in the hands of people with vested interests. They resorted to restricted learning, mainly focused on religion. No one is supposed to doubt or question the authority of the Imams and Ulmas in matters of education, which is taken to be a matter of religion, which is deeply rooted in the psyche of the people”.

He also narrated, that he had called a seminar of the *ulemas* (Islamic Scholars) and intellectuals of the community during their campaign for literacy under ‘Mewat Sakcharta Samiti’ in 1994 and had all round discussions, what is notable, he observed, is that none among the *ulemas* opposed the modern school education, but, made their point that ‘what they are teaching in Madrassa is the true knowledge (*Haqiqi Ilm*) and modern education is only a skill (*huner*)’. Islam did not oppose acquiring any skill whatsoever, hence, all are free to go for it. However, when requested that such *huner* be also introduced in the Madrassas on which they disagreed and said,

*“Ham haqiqi Ilm ko khalat malat karma nahin chahte hain”
(We don’t want to dilute our holy knowledge with any other).*

On the other hand, Dr. Qamruddeen Zakir, a Jamat-i-Tabligh activist and author of a book ‘*Mewat se Tablighi Kaam Ki Ibtida,*’ questioned that,

*“Ham gairon ka ilm apne maderse main kyon layen, wo hamare ilm sakool main kyon nahin shroo karwate hain”?
(Why our Madrassa should introduce modern education, why not Madrassa education be included in the modern school education).*

It is noted during the interviews with the people of *Tablighi Jamaat* who visited the village, that they put more emphasis on rituals, promising lots of sawab (blessings) in the other world for every ritual performed. The unlettered Meos are taught the *Tablighi Nisab* that includes books on virtues of performing rituals of *Namaz, Hajj, and Ramdhan* and other religious duties. They emphasised on the traditions of Prophet, without citing any contexts and references. In the village Palla, it is also observed that people who are regular in prayers have absolute faith in their fate, observe *Sabr-o-qanat* (*restraints*)

despite poverty, and have unfailing faith of a better life after death. They take any state of affairs as from God. They spend most of their time counting *tasbih* or (*rosary*) in the Mosque or in the field. Thus, it appears that the Meo community is made to be more inclined to the religious rituals.

In this context, it would be appropriate to look at the *Quran* and what it says about 'knowledge' (*Ilm*) in order to understand the paradox in the conceptions of the Meo community vis-a- vis the *ulemas* and *Tablighi Jamaat*. The *Quran* extols knowledge in the widest possible sense of the term. The revelation of the *Quran* starts with the word *Iqraa*¹⁴; It commands Prophet Mohammad to,

***“Proclaim! (Or read) In the name of thy Lord and cherisher,
who created- Created man, out of A leech-like clot (96:1, 2).***

***In the same spirit the Quran says “He who taught (the use of
the pen¹⁵, Taught men that which he knew not (96:4, 5)”.***

***It also says, “Say Are those equal, those who know and those
who do not know?” (39:9).***

And “say: O my Lord! Advance me in knowledge^{16” (20:114).}

The last verse is of profound significance. It indicates that knowledge does not end at a particular point, and that man must ask for it to be increased (or try to increase it) day-by-day. Another principle of education explicitly dealt with is freedom of thought, which is against blind traditions or intellectual rigidity. The *Quran* forbids believers from imitating (a tradition) simply for the sake of it. It says:

¹⁴ which may mean “read” or “recite or rehearse” or “proclaim aloud” the object understood being Allah’s Message, Surs *Iqraa* or *Al- Alaq*(96:1)

¹⁵ The pen and the record are the symbolical foundations of the revelations to man. The adjuration by the pen disposes of the flippant charge that Allah’s Messenger was mad or possessed. For he spoke words of power, not incoherent, but full of meaning, and through the record of the pen, that meaning unfolds itself, in innumerable aspects to countless generations. Mohammad was the living Grace and Mercy of Allah and his very nature exalted him above abuse and persecution(68:1 note 5593 p.1792)

¹⁶ Islam believes that all our knowledge and capacities come as gifts from Allah. The gifts may be strength or beauty, wealth, position or power or the more subtle gifts of knowledge or talents in individuals, -or Science, or Arts, or Government, or Organization for mankind in general(96:6 note 6208 p.1981)

“When it is said to them: ‘Follow what God hath revealed,’ they say: ‘Nay! We shall follow the ways of our fathers’. What! Eventhough theirs fathers were void of wisdom and guidance” (2:170).

The Quran also condemns those who do not use their senses or their minds and rely blindly on tradition, saying they are like cattle or worse.

“They have hearts wherewith they understand not, eyes wherewith they see not, and ears wherewith they hear not. They are like cattle, nay more misguided: for they are heedless.” (7:179).

Further, the Quran also makes knowledge alone, not traditions, the way by which man discovers what to believe and adopt as guide for behaviour. The verse says:

“And pursue not that of which thou has no knowledge; for every act of hearing or of seeing, or of (feeling in) the heart will be enquired into” (17:36).

All the above verses cited from the Quran explicitly put Knowledge and learning at the top of human rationality. It did not differentiate based on gender or sex. Spirit of inquiry is given highest regard. The Quran’s frequent use of the words *tafakkur* and *tadabbur* (observation and thinking), *faham* (understanding) and *ta’aqul* (rationality) signifies the value of teaching, research and knowledge.

The Arabic word for ‘teach’ and ‘knowledge’ are from the same root. Therefore, it is difficult to produce in a translation the complete orchestral harmony of the words for ‘read’, ‘teach’, ‘pen’ which implies reading, writing, books, study, research, and ‘knowledge’ including science, self-knowledge, spiritual understanding. However, the perceptions in this regard among the Meo community or the *ulemas and tablighi jamaat* are if not in contrast, may not fully confirm to the spirit of Islam, though they are the claimed followers of the faith and have highest regard for it. The dominance of Madrassa and lack of interests in modern education among the Meos may be partially due to this paradox.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Literacy is seen both as an integral element in the developmental process and a tool to create awareness in the society. Illiteracy, on the other hand, is looked at as a barrier and cause of underdevelopment. Maddox argued, 'illiteracy is regularly evoked as a barrier to economic and social progress'¹. However, the conceptual understanding of literacy remained imprecise. They were mainly inspired by the logic that literacy leads to new knowledge and hence development. It was assumed that there is an inherent link between literacy and development. But, the literacy studies inspired by ethnographic approach, examined literacy in a different perspective. It is now seen as an integral part of the communicative practices, not as a single set of competencies, but as different practices specific to a cultural context. Hence, the traditional assumption of literacy as being a uniform skill is questioned. The present study is undertaken based on this theoretical development that views literacy as a social practice (Street, 1984). According to this view, literacy and illiteracy are social constructs which vary from context to context. Hence, not every society takes literacy in the same way.

The present exploratory ethnographic study was conducted in the village Palla, among the Meos of Mewat. It provided an opportunity to understand the notions of literacy among the Meos in their specific socio-cultural context. The study took into account the cultural context of the community in its regional milieu and in different learning contexts such as the family, the Maktabs and the Madrassas or Islamic concept of literacy along with the modern secular school education. The main thrust is to identify the deep-rooted cultural factors that shaped the notions of literacy in the community and to explore the possible reasons for their social and educational backwardness in general and women in particular. The researcher lived in the village Palla for almost two months and undertook Participant Observation as a method of data collection. Genealogies were

¹Cited in Street. B.V (ed.) 'literacy and development' Ethnographic perspectives, Routledge, London and New York, 2001 p.137.

collected through a household survey and a field diary was maintained to record the in-depth group and individual interviews and observations. The researcher lived as a teacher in the community during the period of stay in the field so as to gain acceptance of the community and children.

The Meos of Mewat claims to be the oldest Rajput Kshatriya community of the region and belongs to the Aryan race. They claim to be the first Indian community to have fought wars against Muslim invaders as early as eighth Century A.D, when Mohammad bin Qasim attacked Sindh and occupied parts of the territory. But, because of the high morals of the enemies they were overwhelmed, which inspired them to embrace the religion of their opponents. People of Tomar gotra among the Meos were said to have embraced Islam first. Later Sufism entered into their lives. It was during the Sultanat period in 14th Century, the Meos came into the fold of Islam in large numbers. However, the cultural encounters for hundreds of years did not alter the age long traditions of the Meo community. The social structure is still largely found to be intact. It is based on their traditional Gotra-Pal organisation. The Meo community is divided into 52 gotras and 12 Pals which regulate their social, political and economic life. The inhabitation of the Meos and the village community structure confirm to the traditional social norms. Each Meo village is inhabited by a particular Gotra and is connected to others through marriage and kin alliances. The entire system of gotra-pal organisation is functioning through unwritten social laws, which make the Meos a distinct and well-knit community. However, over the years, the system has been losing its traditional hold. The Meos are Muslims and their religious faith is undisputedly confirmed to Islam. But what is notable is that their social structure, particularly marriage and kin alliances are largely based on Hindu Rajput social system.

The institution of marriage is unique among the Meos. Nikah ceremony is performed according to Islam, however, many rituals are observed during the marriage, which are uniquely from Hindu Rajput traditions. Moreover, observing these rituals is regarded essential. Selection of marriage partner is governed by the traditional system of Gotra- Pal organisation. Its violation is condemned and often led to social boycott and community ostracism. The other interesting finding is that they regard the values of Islam and the Quran as revealed by Allah, but at the same time respect their traditional values

and rituals as gifted by their ancestors and hence, are valuable. The dowry and extravaganza in marriage and festivals are other notable features observed in the community.

Despite efforts made by *Tabligh* activities, it seems that the traditional value structure has changed little. The other unique aspect of the Meo community is that of the identity. They identify themselves with both Islam and Hinduism. It is a historical fact that the Meos were Rajput Hindus, later embraced Islam and became Musalman. They accepted Islam because of its simple, logical world views. However, it is argued by some in the community that their social tradition is in no way inferior to others. They rever it and practice it because it is the question of their identity. Thus, the mixed cultural practices are observed to be the unique characteristics of the Meo community.

The context of modern literacy and education in the community is said be a recent phenomenon. Only in the 1990s, the desire for literacy and education is discernable. Traditionally, members of the community were never attracted to education. However, the oral traditions of the community are observed to be quite rich and strong. The oral literary traditions of the Meonis (Meo women) illustrate this fact. It is in this context, the notions of literacy among the community is understood. The women's situation in the community may also be viewed from this perspective.

The literacy environment in the village Palla revealed imbalance in the patterns of literacy practices. The difference is observed between the literacy environment of the home and outside where the literacy events take place i.e. Maktab or Madrassa and the School. These places provide some conducive environment for reading and writing. Reading and writing is rare in Meo homes. Hardly, any literacy materials are seen in the homes. Even the Quran which is expected to be necessarily kept in each Muslim home is observed to be missing. This finding seems to be important in the sense that such home environment of literacy reflect that the Meo community hardly engage themselves in any form of reading and writing. They spend more time working in the field than at home. Further, Maktab is allowed only for girls below the age of 12. This suggests that the girls' restricted schooling in the village Palla would have very little effect in transforming the literacy environment of the homes in ways that would create social space for women to engage actively in reading and writing. This also proves that the social structure of the

rural Meos reinforces the existing gender bias in the provision of equality of educational opportunity and hence the division of labour in the community and household.

The women of the Meo society are found to be vocal and poetic. The poetic expressions are oral which clearly indicate their social sensitivity and knowledge. But, they cannot pen them down. If 'oracy' is included in the conception of literacy as Wilkinson (1965) has emphasised, for any oral society 'speaking and listening' are prominent features rather than reading and writing. It may be then argued that speaking and listening styles may also be included in the conception of literacy. This idea applies very well in the case of women in Meo society. However, such conceptualisation does not seem to provide answers to illiteracy and socio-economic backwardness of the community.

In any modern society, to be literate entails far more than the possession of basic reading and writing and computation skills and to be considered illiterate implies far more than simple lack of these skills. In fact, in Meo society, illiteracy is an index of social marginality - an attribute that has removed them from active engagement in the national economy and polity. Despite efforts made by the Government through Mewat Development Agency (MDA) to arrest the problems illiteracy and of non-enrolment and drop-out in Mewat, it remained the most acute problem among the Meo community. The most commonly cited reasons non-enrolment and dropout are traditions of early marriage and large family size. Girls are retained in the home for sibling care, poverty, and lack of single sex school or female teachers in the village. The other notable observation that may be cited as a possible reason for the state of affairs is the time mismanagement in the maktab and the school. The Maktab takes three sittings daily i.e. morning (6.30 to 9.00), afternoon (2.30 to 4.00) and evening (after sunset to 8.30). In such a condition, children do not get enough time for self-study, and they spend most of their time in the Maktab. Here, co-ordination between Parents and School is noted to be absent. Because of inadequate awareness of the value of education and its process parents did not say anything to the Moulvis of the Maktab. The tradition of early marriage, particularly for girls, forces them to dropout after class V. However, the combination of these problems is leading the Meos to recognise their relative social backwardness. They realise that

because of illiteracy and their traditional Madrassa model of education, It is no longer sufficient to help them flourish in the contemporary society.

The study also reveals the conflicting ideologies and perceptions of literacy in the community. The women though pivotal in the Meo economy and almost engage all the time with work, view literacy as empowering and expressed a desire for secular or school literacy. However, Men particularly, the clerics of the community, feel that the religious (Maktab) literacy is necessary and sufficient for them. Hence, the uses and conceptions of literacy found to be caught up in a web of power dynamics in the family and in the community. Within the community, there are contestations between various groups of clerics and individuals, between husband and wife, father and daughter, sister and brother. These reflect the notions of women's literacy and education highly contested in the community and that literacy is a major site of power struggle and resistance. Therefore, the conceptualisation of literacy appears to be not uniform.

Religious aspects of literacy are given preference in the community. It is conceived as holistic and includes physical and metaphysical world linked to moral code. Inherited wisdom is trusted and the person having such knowledge becomes respected. Hence, ulemas, and saints are respected in the Meo society. The oral literacy traditions of the Meos also reflect the communication of metaphor and story connected to life, values and proper behaviour, which emphasise an integrated common life for the community and applied to daily living. The qualitative oral record of the community is found to be unique in this sense. Therefore, the Meos expect that their children must get acquainted with the ancestral wisdom. This is respected by the community elders and also among Gotras and Pals. The elements that are found to be important and emphasised by the Meos are knowledge of one's paternal and maternal Gotras, groupings and relationships and history associated with one's Gotras along with the responsibilities to other respective groups. In the oral traditions of the Meos, the knowledge of the nature is also narrated, the songs related to seasons and weather conditions, farming, plants and animals are described in full detail. Such folk narratives may reveal interesting facts of the Meo society and hence community perceptions. Further, it may be noted that despite no tradition of formal education, the Meos are found to be interested in educating their children. They want more facilities for schooling in their village. They also prefer single

sex Urdu medium schools with women teachers for their daughters. They want school and Madrassa education simultaneously. However, they do not see merit in higher education because they strongly feel that they are not going to get jobs.

Madrassa notion of the literacy among the Meo community seems to be more an ideal than it is actually practiced. The paradigm of Madrassa or Islamic education is based on faith. As presented by the Quran, 'faith is not merely a word to be uttered and then forgotten as man goes about his diverse practical affairs. Faith is the pivot around which all life turns: the conscience, the intellect and the practical sense all alike'². However, the views expressed by the clerics in Mewat seem to have not taken full consideration of the Islamic concept of education. In Madrassa of Mewat the method of teaching is based on rote learning of the traditional religious knowledge. The Quran and Hadith (prophetic traditions) are taught following the above method. The students of Madrassa were found to be lacking in the general awareness. Even they did not answer simple questions related to the names of Indian states. They were surprised to know that earth rotates in its axis. This kind of unawareness about the universal facts, however, is not common among the Madrassa students but the intellectuals of the community are observed to be unhappy with the prevailing methods as well as curriculum of Madrassa education. They want to introduce modern knowledge into the Madrassas in Mewat. The clerics, though did not oppose modern secular knowledge, are unwilling to introduce the same in Madrassa education system, citing the pretext that they do not want to dilute holy knowledge with any other form of what they call temporary knowledge. This may reflect the rigidities on the part of the clerics of Mewat about what constitutes literacy.

From the preceedig discussion, it becomes clear that literacy is not only the simple ability to read and write. Rather it encompasses multiple contexts and institutional structures, social relationships, economic conditions, religious and social ideologies, as also the historical processes. In fact, the discourses on literacy among the Meos are complex, the community appears to be uncertain about what kinds of literacy and education is useful for them. They seem to be caught in the dilemma between the so called 'Madrassa' verses the 'traditional' literacies, between the written and the oral

² Cited in Islamic education and the maintained school system, seminar paper presented by Akram khan Cheema on 29 -30 sept.1984 organised by the Islamic academy in co-operation with the Cambridge University department of Education and published in 'Muslim education Quarterly, nov. 1984 p.5).

transactions of what they consider as literacy and knowledge. Whatever is the context, the Meos are found to be inclined towards modern literacy practices as it would give them a social status in the contemporary society, notwithstanding their preference for traditional religious literacy. This may remark an important issue in understanding why Meos still are the most backward in terms of the modern understanding of what counts as literacy. However, from a social-anthropological sense, the community transmits literacies down the generations through the tradition of oracy and informal education. We may not call them officially literate, but certainly they are not illiterate either.

Limitations and Future Areas of Research

The present study attempted to capture the richness of literacy practices among the Meos in the village Palla. What it tried is to bring out certain perceptions of the community pertaining to the notions of literacy. However, the rich oral traditions of the community require an elaborate in-depth ethnographic research with an extended stay in the field. The present study could not cover these dimensions of the Meo life, because of the time constraint as well as lack of proper understanding of the local language. The time spent in the field, namely two months, is not sufficient to understand or give full account of Meo culture and society. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study effectively explored the notions of literacy as a social practice among a community which is the most educationally backward in the country. It brought out an interplay of factors that may explain the dilemmas of literacy among the traditional communities from the social-anthropological perspectives. However, some interesting areas may be identified for future research at the doctoral level. They are:

1. Oral literacy traditions of the community and their compilation
2. Understanding the history of the community apart from folk stories
3. Impact of partition and subsequent migration and inter-community relations
4. Literacy and education of the Meo community in the larger context of minority education in general and women in particular
5. Understanding the conflicts of modern secular education vis-a- vis Madrassa or Islamic concept of education

All these areas may help in understanding the deeper cultural notions of literacy among the Meo community and its educational backwardness in the modern sense of the term.

GLOSSARY

<i>Aalim</i>	Islamic scholar
<i>Akhlaqui</i>	moral
<i>Biradari</i>	caste like social hierarchy
<i>Buzurg</i>	respected elders
<i>Dargah</i>	a shrine
<i>Darse Nezami</i>	curriculum followed in madarsa education
<i>Darvesh</i>	saints
<i>Deen</i>	the religious way of life
<i>Deeni Talim</i>	religious education
<i>Faham</i>	understanding
<i>Fajjar</i>	pre-dawn
<i>Fiqr</i>	thought
<i>Hajj</i>	pilgrimage to Makka
<i>Hakim</i>	governor
<i>Hamd</i>	praise of Allah
<i>Haqiqi Ilm</i>	true knowledge
<i>Haram</i>	forbidden
<i>Hazrat</i>	respected terms used for learned elders
<i>Hekayaat</i>	fables and story
<i>Hifz</i>	to memorise
<i>Hunar</i>	skills
<i>Huqqa</i>	traditional puff made of wood and bronz
<i>Id-ul-Azha</i>	Islamic festival of sacrifice
<i>Id-ul-Fitr</i>	Islamic festival on the completion of holly month of fasting (Ramadan)
<i>Ilm</i>	knowledge
<i>Imam</i>	A leader who lead the congregational prayer
<i>Iqraa</i>	to read, name of the first verse reveald on Prophet Mohammad

<i>Izzat</i>	pride or ego
<i>Kamaal</i>	perfection
<i>Khalifa</i>	leader
<i>Khulah</i>	redemption the women's right to initiate a Divorce
<i>Khutba</i>	proclamation
<i>Madarsa</i>	Islamic institution of higher learning
<i>Maktab</i>	primary stage of madarsa education
<i>Manhoos</i>	inauspicious
<i>Mehar</i>	a fixed amount given to the bride as bride wealth
<i>Mehram</i>	a person who is related to a woman with whom marriage is prohibited
<i>Mufti</i>	Interpreter of Islamic law and jurisprudence
<i>Murid</i>	disciples
<i>Na Mubarak</i>	inauspicious
<i>Naa't</i>	the poetry in praise of Prophet Mohammad
<i>Namaz</i>	daily ritual prayer
<i>Namaz-i-Shukrana</i>	prayer for thanks
<i>Nikah</i>	marriage
<i>Pardah</i>	screen; segregation of sexes at puberty
<i>Peer</i>	a religious leader and saint
<i>Qaazi</i>	a judge
<i>Qaida Baghdadi</i>	a book on Arabic alphabet
<i>Qibla</i>	the direction towards Kaaba
<i>Quran</i>	the holy book of Islam
<i>Rakat</i>	unit of ritual prayer
<i>Roza</i>	fasting
<i>Sabr-o- qenat</i>	patience and restraint
<i>Samajh –o-kherad</i>	understanding
<i>Sawab</i>	charity

<i>Shariat</i>	Islamic code of life
<i>Sheikh</i>	a learned scholar
<i>Sunnat</i>	practice of Prophet Mohammad
<i>Ta' aqqul</i>	rationality
<i>Tabligh</i>	preaching
<i>Tadabbur</i>	deep thought
<i>Talaq</i>	divorce
<i>Tarbiat</i>	socialisation
<i>Tasbih</i>	rosary
<i>Taweez</i>	an amulet
<i>Ulema</i>	group of Islamic scholar
<i>Vakil</i>	an advocate
<i>Zakat</i>	alms a fixed amount given to the poor and needy
<i>Zamindari</i>	feudalism

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