

bairagi mandals

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The word *mandal* is Sanskrit in origin and has passed into the north Indian languages meaning a halo of light or circle. The word is also used in the sense of a circle of colleagues or people who pursue similar (such as literary) interests and are linked together in a loosely knit yet formally constituted organization. Devotees of the various Vaisnavite sects form kirtan (devotional hymns) mandals and meet regularly in their homes or in temples to sing these devotional hymns for pleasure, merit, and occasionally for hire. The sadhus (Hindu ascetics) of the sect of Vaisnavites founded by Swami Ramanand in the fourteenth century, known as Ramanandi or bairagi (the desireless), are also organized into regionally based mandals. The Ramanandi sect of is spread across most of northern and central India, the Nepalese Terai, and possesses a few isolated temples in the Himalayas and the Nepal valley. I have no information whether or not mandals exist also in all these regions, but in Mithila and Bhojpur (Sirha, Dhanusa, Mahottri, Sarlahi, Rautahat, and Bara jillas of Nepal; and Darbhanga, Muzaffarpur, Champaran, and Monghyr jillas of northern Bihar, India) the mandal is commonly found. Each mandal might cover a region of one hundred square miles or more, but it is based in the village where the elected head of the mandal lives. A partial list of mandals would include those based at Janakpurdham and Madhwapur in Dhanusa jilla; at Dhruvkund, Sripur, Raghonathpur, Sundarpur, and Bhagawatipur in Mahottri jilla; at Parsoni in Champaran jilla; and at Suja, Rampur, and Bhawanipur in northern Monghyr jilla. Mandals are formed voluntarily by the resident bairagis of the region. The bairagis of any particular mandal do not hold in common any rights to the land, nor do they possess any enduring mutually owned physical structure, such as a meeting place. Thus the mandal only exists insofar as the local bairagis take interest in maintaining it. While some mandals may be found in occasional states of activity, others are in a state of atrophy, and indeed some mandals have died out in all but name as the sadhus who provided the impetus for their formation and continuance have also passed away. Apart from such variations which one encounters in the level of activity of a mandal, one also encounters other differences between mandals concerning the rules of hospitality which were established at the time of the formation of the mandal and also in the limits to the authority (often based upon rights to the land) which the elected head of the mandal holds. It would be unnecessarily confusing to describe all these differences, yet to obliterate these differences and to describe instead a "typical mandal", one would fail to understand the particular reason for the limits of the mandal's effectiveness. Thus I have chosen to present as a unity the common features of a "typical mandal" and

then follow with a description of three mandals; the first of which is of the type commonly found, and the second and third which are somewhat unique variations of the common type.

1.1. Officers of the Mandal. The officers of the mandal are patterned after those of the sthan (monastery). In brief, the four main officers of the sthan are the mahant, adhikari, pujari and kothari. The mahant is both the spiritual and temporal head of the sthan. The adhikari relieves the mahant of the day to day responsibility of managing the estate, although the mahant oversees the work of the adhikari and takes all final decisions concerning management¹. It is the adhikari who ensures that the tenant farmers on the temple lands deliver half their harvest to the sthan, and that the field hands perform their work and are remunerated. If the mahant should depart on a pilgrimage the adhikari acts as temporary head of the sthan. The pujari performs puja (worship) to Lord Ram and Sita in the temple and cooks the food which is first offered to the deities and then eaten by the sadhus in residence. The kothari keeps charge of the storeroom and issues the grain, pulse etc., every day to the pujari for use in puja. He also pays (in grain) the field hands and temple servants. In a large sthan these roles will be further differentiated: a manager will assist the adhikari in collection rent from the tenant farmers, a rasoiya (cook) and jalbhariya (water carrier) will relieve the pujari of the duty of cooking the food offered to Ram and Sita and a tahlu will relieve the rasoiya of the task of scrubbing the pots and cleaning the kitchen. A diwan (treasurer) will keep the daily records of income and expenditure for the kothari. The mahant will probably also retain someone to tend to the cows in the gosala (cow-shed) the horses and elephants in the stables and someone to guard the temple gate. In addition to these servants the Mahant will retain any number of personal servants to fetch his bath water, to wash his clothes, bring his tooth stick, oil and massage his body, to fan him during the hot season and so forth, as well as private soldiers to act as his bodyguard.

The officers of the mandal are the Sri Mahant, adhikari, rasoiya, jalbhariya and kotwal. The Sri Mahant is elected to this office by the sadhus of the mandal, and this is one essential difference the mahant of the sthan and the Sri Mahant of the mandal. The mahant of the sthan is the spiritual head of the sthan in the sense that he is in the direct line of guru-disciple succession with the founding mahant of the temple, and also in the sense that for the younger sadhus of the sthan he is their diksa guru (the guru who imparted the mantra at the time of initiation) and spiritual teacher. The Sri Mahant does not possess this unique authority over the mandal, nor does the Sri Mahant possess the temporal authority of the mahant in the sense that there is no common mandal property to manage. Thus the mahant rules over the sthan by his own legal right (hak); the

Sri Mahant rules over the mandal by consensus (panchayat). Both the mahant and the Sri Mahant sit on a throne which creates an aura of royal authority to their offices, but the mahant possesses both the aura and the authority; the Sri Mahant must make do with the aura.

The mandal usually meets on the occasion of a bhandara (feast), and the duties of the other officers of the mandal usually relate to the preparation of the bhandara. The mandal adhikari will ensure that all the arrangements for the bhandara are in order. He will also execute the orders of the Sri Mahant. The rasoiya cooks the food, the jalbhariya brings the water for drinking purposes and for washing the rice, pulse, and vegetables. The rasoiya must be either Brahman or Ksatriya and the jalbhariya of Brahman, Ksatriya, Vaisya, or any of the pure sudra castes, from whom Brahmans will accept water. The kotwal is the messenger of the mandal. Apart from the above considerations of caste (the Sri Mahant by the way may be of any caste) the Sri Mahant may appoint whom ever he likes to fill these offices given the approval of the mandal.

1.2. Election of the Sri Mahant.

दया दामा और शीलता गुण गाहेक गुणवन्त ।
साधु सेवा हरी भजन ताको नाम महन्त ॥

"He who is kind, merciful and modest, appreciates good qualities and possesses good qualities /

Serves other sadhus, and worships the Lord - that man is called mahant //

Sadhus state that these are the qualities of a good mahant and it is even more essential that the Sri Mahant should possess these qualities for he "rules" the mandal only insofar as the mahants of the mandal respect him, i.e., permit him to rule. The basis for this respect is twofold; sadhus will respect another sadhu for his spiritual attainments and devotion (his knowledge of the Ram Carita Manusa, his yogic powers, the extent of his pilgrimages, etc.) and for his "sadhu seva", in other words, the hospitality he offers to other sadhus. Thus the Sri Mahant should be wealthy enough to offer hospitality to other sadhus and if he's not wealthy he should have a sufficiently famous reputation so that there is never any difficulty in receiving alms from householders in order to offer hospitality to sadhus.

The Sri Mahantship is an elected office, but there is no election in any formal sense of the term. When the Sri Mahant of a mandal dies, any sadhu of the mandal is eligible to become the next Sri Mahant. One is not proposed for candidature by another sadhu; rather one proposes oneself by going to each kuti of the

mandal and sounding out the opinions of the other mahants as to whether or not they will support one's candidature. If most of the sadhus are willing to support the candidate then the candidate will invite all the sadhus of the mandal and possibly also the Sri Mahants of neighbouring mandals to a bhandara at his kuti. At the bhandara there is no need to propose that one be elected the Sri Mahant, for all the sadhus are aware that this is the reason for the invitation. If for any reason some of the mandali sadhus are not in favour of having the candidate as Sri Mahant, then they would have suggested to the candidate previously to delay the bhandara until he has more support. On the day of the bhandara the sadhus will discuss informally the merits of the candidate, although it is practically a foregone conclusion that the candidate will become the Sri Mahant. If all are in favour, or at least none are strenuously opposed, then they will install their host as Sri Mahant. Unfortunately no one could tell me of any case in which two mahants stood for election, so I do not know what would happen in this case. Perhaps the mandal would split into two mandals, or perhaps the mandal would cease to function until consensus was reached with the possibility that if consensus was never attained the mandal would die from neglect.

As was mentioned in section 1.1, the Sri Mahant possesses an aura of royal authority. The installation ceremony is patterned after the ceremony for the coronation of a king. There are no Vedic rites, however, nor are the services of a purohit required. The kuti courtyard is purified by smearing a paste of cowdung upon the ground and a chair called the gaddi (throne) is brought and placed there. Then the mahants of the mandal and the Sri Mahants of neighbouring mandals individually place a tilak forehead marking of candan paste on the forehead of the Sri Mahant. Then all the Sri Mahants and the more important mahants of the mandal each wrap a turban around the head of the Sri Mahant. The Sri Mahant is then garlanded with flowers and all the sadhus present toss aksat (a mixture of rice, barley, and sesame) and dub (a kind of grass) onto the mahant as a symbol of blessing. Finally each sadhu places some money at the feet of the Sri Mahant.

After the installation ceremony, the Sri Mahant offers the bhandara. After the bhandara the Sri Mahant gives a bidai (gift at the time of parting) to the sadhus. In addition to the bidai, he must also give to each sadhu twice the amount of money which that sadhu laid at his feet during his installation.

1.3. The Bhandara. The most frequent occasion which brings the sadhus of the mandal together is that of the bhandara (feast) and the importance which sadhus invest in the bhandara is obvious from the rules each mandal establishes concerning the bhandara menu (see 3.2., for example). One may distinguish between two kinds of bhandara. The first kind of bhandara is that offered by grihasthya (householders) to the mandal. Bairagis, by virtue of their renouncement from householder life consider themselves to

of a fifth varna called the sukla varna which is superior to the four varna of the grihasthya. Each varna is hierarchically based according to its relative purity vis-a-vis the other varnas. For members of the lower varnas to offer a bhandara to the highest varna of grihasthya, the Brahmans, is an act of merit, the fruit of which the host will obtain in a future rebirth (besides acquiring a reputation of piety in this life). Similarly it is an act of merit to offer a bhandara to sadhus². Householders may also offer a bhandara to the mandal in gratitude for some service which a sadhu performed to the householder. In one village about twelve miles west of Janakpurdham the villagers had always been plagued by fires which destroyed their thatched homes during the late spring when a stiff dry wind blows from the east. A bairagi who lived in the region led the villagers in a circumambulation of their village while chanting Ram's name. That year (and ever since then) the village has been protected from fires. In gratitude the villagers offered a bhandara to the sadhu's mandal. In another case (see 4.4 c.) villagers offered a bhandara to a mandal in gratitude to a female sadhu who stopped the cholera epidemic raging in the village at that time.

The second type of bhandara is that offered by a sadhu to the bairagis of the mandal, the purpose of which is the recognition of the new status of a bairagi within the mandal or the acceptance of a sadhu as a member in full standing of the mandal. This recognition or acceptance is symbolized by the fact that the sadhu of the mandal will accept the host's food. Thus unlike the first kind of bhandara which implies the superiority of bairagis vis-a-vis their host, the second kind of bhandara implies the equality of the bairagis vis-a-vis their host. The motif is the acceptance of food from the host's hand; it is not the idea of "breaking bread together", for the host does not eat with the guests. Rather he serves them food and then second and third and fourth helpings and so on until the guests literally beg him to stop. The guests then leave to rinse their mouths and wash their hands, and the host sits down to eat. Such bhandara may occur in the following such situations; installation of the Sri Mahant of the mandal, succession to the mahantship of a kuti by deceased mahant's disciple, acceptance of a new kuti as member of the mandal, and the reinstatement within the mandal of a "fallen bairagi" who had broken some rule of the sect.

Any sadhu or householder who decides to offer a bhandara to the mandal first of all notifies the Sri Mahant. The Sri Mahant ensures that the host is prepared to offer the bhandara according to the rules of the mandal and then he fixes the date of the bhandara. The Sri Mahant then gives a number of supari (betel nut) to the kotwal who visits all the kutis of the mandal, offering to each mahant a portion of supari and announcing the date and place of the bhandara. On the day prior to the bhandara, the adhikari will visit the host to make sure that the food, money, cloth, etc., required for the bhandara are at hand. Early

in the morning of the day of the bandara the rasoiya and jalbhariya will arrive and begin to prepare the meal. The host brings rice from the granary and pours it into a basket before the rasoiya. This is called Ganesa puja although in fact no puja or aarti is actually performed to Ganesa, the elephant god. Rather as Vighnavinasak "the destroyer of obstacles", Ganesa is invoked to ensure the success of the bhandara. The host then offers the rasoiya a certain stipulated length of cotton cloth (upon which later the rasoiya ladles the cooked rice and which the rasoiya keeps at the end of the bhandara) and a stipulated amount of money, rice, and dal. This is the rasoiya's fee for lighting the fire (cula phukai). The rasoiya lights the fire and tosses into the flames a handful of rice and dal. This is called Visnu puja or sometimes Agni puja. The host then gives money and a stipulated length of cloth to the jalbhariya with which he will strain the water from the well and which he also may keep at the conclusion of the bhandara. The rasoiya and jalbhariya then begin to wash the rice, dal, and vegetables and to cook the food.

When all the food is cooked the rasoiya spreads the cloth upon the ground and ladles the rice upon the cloth. The kotwal calls all the sadhus to their places and distributes leaf plates. The sadhus begin chanting praises to their tutelary deities, Lord Ram and Sita. The pujari of the host's kuti (or if a householder is host, the pujari of the kuti in which the bhandara takes place) arranges a little of each item of food on a brass plate and offers this food to Ram and Sita in the temple. When Ram and Sita have taken of the food, the pujari brings the food leavings of Ram and Sita (the food leavings are called prasād) to the kitchen and returns each item of food to its respective pot and the rice to the pile of rice on the cloth. The prasād is then mixed with the rest of the food which was not offered to the deities thus making the prasād into mahaprasād. The host then serves the food (mahaprasād) to all the sadhus. When all the sadhus have been served, they stop chanting and the Sri Mahant or any respected sadhu of the mandal calls out the jai (jai bōlna). He begins by calling out Ram and Krishna's name to which all cry "jai" (hail, victory). Then he calls out the four Vaisnavite sects to which all repeat the jai and then the name of the adi guru of the bairagi sect, the four dhams, the name of the host parents, the host relatives, and so forth³. After shouting the final jai, all the sadhus of the mandal begin to eat at the same time.

At the conclusion of the bhandara the host must offer a bidai to all the sadhus. The amount of the bidai is fixed according to the rules of the mandal. Each sadhu receives his own personal bidai of several rupees and perhaps also a dhoti. The officers of the mandal receive a special bidai. The amount of the bidai varies from mandal to mandal but the proportions remain approximately the same between the various officers in a ratio of solah ānā 16/16, ath ānā: 8/16, char ānā: 4/16, do ānā: 2/16,

and ek ānā: 1/16. For example, if the bidai of the Sri Mahant were 51 rupees, the bidai of the adhikari will be approximately 26 rupees, that of the rasoiya 12 rupees, the jalbhariya: 6 rupees, and the kotwal: 3 rupees. In addition to this all uninvited sadhus will receive a bidai and if any Naga (bairagi who are members of the military unit of the sect based at Hanuman Garhi, Ayodhya) is present bearing with him the banner of Hanuman Garhi, he will in addition to his personal bidai also receive a bidai for the monkey god Hanuman which he does not keep for himself but must give to the mahant of Hanuman Garhi.

1.4 The privileges of the Sri Mahant and the function of the mandal. The functions of the mandal relate to four different spheres of action: the conduct of the bairagi as an individual, the internal affairs of any kuti (a "hermitage" a small temple in which only one or two sadhus live) of the mandal the affairs of a kuti of the mandal vis-a-vis householders, and finally, the affairs of the mandal as a group. Not all mandals assume responsibility for all these spheres of action; moreover, in all these spheres there are recognized limits to the mandal's authority as well as practical limits to the influence which the mandal can exert in any particular situation given the authority and power of other divergent interests (villagers, the state, factions within the mandal, etc.). One cannot generalize about the functions of the mandal. Thus, what follows is a summary of various spheres of action I have found in different mandals and which may possibly exist in any mandal.

Bairagis are members of the mandal by virtue of their kuti or sthan being part of the mandal. Any bairagi who should engage in personal misconduct, such as lying, stealing, sexual incontinency, drinking toddy, eating meat, etc., would be dealt with by the mahant of the kuti or sthan in which he lives. But if the mahant engages in such misconduct, the mahant may be punished by the mandal. The mandal cannot legally drive the mahant out of the kuti unless some other sadhu who has rights to the land should agree to do so. Nor can the mandal or any bairagi for that matter, not even one's guru, excommunicate another bairagi from the sect. In such cases of misconduct the mandal might punish the guilty sadhu through some kind of personal humiliation; viz, by beating him, shaving off his hair and/or smearing his head with cow dung (such punishment would probably not be meted out on any of the more wealthy mahants of the mandal.), and then by either temporarily excluding the mahant from the mandal until he offers a bhandara or by permanent exclusion. Temporary exclusion of the guilty party with the view of reinstating him later is not always an effective means of punishment. The terms of exclusion are quite similar to the exclusion of a householder from his caste for having committed some offense against the caste. In both cases exclusion from the mandal and exclusion from the caste, the guilty party is denied food, fire and water from his peers until he offers them a bhandara. But a temporarily excluded caste

member has a certain interest in offering the bhandara to regain his caste status which becomes pressingly evident if anyone of his lineage (khandan) should die or become of marriagable age. The bairagi, however, does not depend upon the mandal in this way. It is only his reputation which is at stake. If he doesn't value his reputation, he may not seek to rejoin the mandal and if he does value his reputation he may leave the region and try to make a fresh start elsewhere. Nor can one say that the bairagis are obliged to exclude a fallen bairagi from the mandal in order to preserve their own purity. A fallen caste member is of ambivalent status. If others of his caste accept food and water from him, they may also be treated as degraded and lose their caste status for some length of time. But this is not the case with bairagi. There is no ritual imperative which would prevent them from taking food from a fallen bairagi. It is only their reputation vis-a-vis other bairagis and other mandals which is at stake, and if they value that reputation enough they may decide to exclude the fallen bairagi from their midst.

The mandal has no right to intervene in the internal affairs of any kuti, but thirteen days after the death of any mahant of the mandal the Sri Mahant recognizes and blesses that bairagi from among the deceased mahant's disciples who will become the new mahant. On the thirteenth day after the old mahant's death the funeral rituals are completed and the disciple who has performed these rituals bathes and calls the barber to cut-off his hair and thus becomes pure again. The mahants of the mandal along with the Sri Mahant arrive and the disciple who performed the funeral rituals and who will become the new mahant takes his seat upon the gaddi (or in the case of a small kuti he will sit on a blanket). The ceremony is similar to that of the installation of the Sri Mahant. The disciple cups his hands and holds them out in front of him and into which the Sri Mahant offers betel leaf and supari. Then the Sri Mahant wraps a turban around the disciple's head thus conferring the mahantship upon him. All the sadhus of the mandal gather around and toss akshat and dub onto the new mahant as symbol of their blessing. Then a basket containing flowers, rice, dub, supari, etc. called the doli najrana is laid at the new mahant's feet and into the basket, the mahant's of the mandal deposit money. The adhikari notes the amount each mahant has given, for the new mahant must give double that amount to the respective mahants at the time of bidai. The new mahant then goes to the temple and offers his obeisance to Ram and Sita and then to the Sri Mahant and then to the mahants of the mandal. After this the bhandara is served. During the course of the bhandara the new mahant will take a little food from each mahant's plate in the name of the deceased mahant, his guru. This food is then taken to the edge of the kuti and tossed over the fence where the crows will find it.

When a bairagi living alone in a kuti dies, the neighbouring villagers will not remove his body for just as only the members of a deceased person's caste remove and prepare the body for cremation so also only bairagis prepare the body of a deceased bairagi. A

neighbouring bairagi from the mandal therefore will remove the body and perform the funeral rites. If this bairagi should want to install himself in the deceased mahant's kuti as the new mahant then he will offer a bhandara to the mandal on the thirteenth day. Before his installation as mahant, however, the Sri Mahant will with candan apply the deceased mahant's tilak to the new mahant⁴. Then he will take a new tulsi kanthi (necklace), touch it to the deceased mahant's kanthi and then put it around the new mahant's neck. Then he will take a new langoti (loin cloth), touch it to the deceased mahant's langoti and then give it to the new mahant to wear. After this preliminary ceremony the installation to the mahantship will occur⁵. The mandal has no right to intervene in the affairs of any kuti within the mandal, but if there is a dispute for the succession to the mahantship, the Sri Mahant has some influence since it is he, by wrapping the turban on the successor's head, who confers the mahantship. According to tradition the most senior of all the deceased mahant's disciples becomes the new mahant, but if the mahant should find a more junior disciple to be the capable one, he may indicate prior to his decease who from among his disciples will become the next mahant. If this is not written on paper and signed by all parties concerned, a dispute for the succession may occur. Also, if a mahant dies after a brief tenure in office, his disciple may be only a small child, in which case the deceased mahant's guru bhai (bairagis initiated by by the same guru) may claim the mahantship arguing that the child disciple is not capable of managing the kuti. When such disputes occur the other sadhus of the kuti, the mahants, as well as the neighbouring villagers may all try to influence the settlement. If the Sri Mahant comes from a wealthy sthan he may try to impose a settlement by force using his own resources. But if the Sri Mahant cannot impose his will, he will call a panchayat of respected mahants from within the mandal to settle the dispute. If the panchayat is unable to settle the dispute or if one of parties to the dispute refuses to respect the decision of the panchayat, then the dispute will no doubt be taken to the district court. In such a case the Sri Mahant will defer the wrapping of the turban about the next mahant's head until the court has reached its decision.

The mandal may also serve as a kind of defense group or counterweight in any dispute involving a kuti of the mandal and the villagers in which the kuti lies. Several years ago, in a village in Muzaffarpur jilla close to the Nepal border lived an old mahant of the Kabir Panthi sect. His kuti possessed several bighas of land. A local landowner of that village drove the sadhu off the land, obliterated the samadhis (burial sites), dismantled the temple, and began to build his own house there. With the conniving of the local keeper of the land records, he had the kuti land registered in his name. The old mahant went to the Sri Mahant of a mahatyagi khalsa (a branch of the sect which renounces the householder life to the greatest extent. They smear ashes on their body, wear no cotton clothing, and always travel).

The Sri Mahant of the mandal sent word to his guru bhai who arrived several weeks later with about two hundred nearly naked mahatyagis. Together with the mahatyagis, the sadhus of the mandal went to the Kabir Panthi mahant's village armed with lathis (bamboo staffs) and captured the local landowner. They then destroyed his half-built house, rebuilt the temple and delivered the landowner to the police. The case is in the still in the courts. Another example of a mandal defending a sadhu's interests vis-a-vis householders will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

Finally the mandal regulates its own internal affairs. It will formulate rules concerning the standard bhandara and bidai of the mandal. It will decide on the application for membership into the mandal by a new kuti. The application is not formally made. Rather, when a sadhu builds a new kuti in the area, on the day of the installation of the deity in the temple, he will invite the mandal and offer them a bhandara. By accepting food from the mahant of the new kuti, the new kuti becomes a member of the mandal and the mahant will be invited to all future bhandaras of the mandal. The mandal may also meet to organize a festival or a sacrifice or the installation of a Hanuman banner to which all the kutis of the mandal will contribute. Finally, as was described in section 1.2, the mandal meets to elect a new Sri Mahant upon the decease of the former one.

2.1 The Nilpur Mandal. The situation in Nilpur is tense and the position of the Sri Mahant is precarious. Since the Sri Mahant of the Nilpur Mandal took me in his confidence in providing me with some of this information, I shall not betray that confidence by mentioning names and places. Nilpur is thus a fictitious name.

2.2 The origin of the Nilpur Mandal. Nilpur is a village hardly more than twenty years old. Prior to that time the land was mostly jungle, approximately one thousand bighas of which was held as birta (royal land grant usually tax free, to a noble, Brahmin, or mahant) by a zamindar. The zamindar built a house in the jungle and lived there with his son, domestic servants, a blacksmith, and a few agricultural workers. One day a bairagi passed through the area on his way to somewhere else. The bairagi with his matted hair and ash smeared body sat down under a tree and recited the Ram Carita Manusa during the next nine days. The zamindar was impressed by the bairagi and asked him to stay. One bigha of farmland surrounded on four sides by jungle was alienated in the name of Ram and Sita and the bairagi built his kuti there. As land became scarce elsewhere, people of a farming caste emigrated to the region, cleared large tracts of jungle and tilled the land as tenant farmers for the zamindar. Later the old zamindar died. His son, who lived in the city, appointed a manager for the estate and came to Nilpur twice annually in the spring and fall to oversee the work of the manager. Thus, at present in the village of Nilpur dwell the zamindar's manager and domestic servants, the

blacksmith, one pandit, one bairagi, and the members of this one particular farming caste who comprise nearly eighty per cent of the village population.

The situation is not untypical of elsewhere in the region where sadhus had gone to live in the jungle of the Nepalese Terai and with the recent scarcity of land began to find themselves surrounded by neighbours. The Nilpur mandal dates from the time of the abolition of the zamindari (1959 A.D.) and the creation of the village panchayat system (1962 A.D). The zamindar's son sold off most of the land. He had been investing in real estate in the city, and the villagers anticipated that he would sell of the remainder of his land. Meanwhile with the introduction of the "one man one vote" the farmer caste controlled the village panchayat. The bairagi and the farmers never took well to each other. If a householder invites a sadhu to a dinner on the occasion of a marriage, sacred thread ceremony, Satynarayan puja, etc., it is customary to give to the sadhu at the time of parting a bidai of several rupees, or grain or a dhoti. The farmers didn't. The sadhu accused the farmers of meanness of spirit. The farmers accused the sadhu of greediness. Curiously enough, in Nilpur more than half the farmers are Vaisnavites, but of the Kabir Panthi sect which maintains that celibacy is not requisite for being a sadhu. When the bairagi took up a collection for the annual installation of the Hanuman banner in the kuti courtyard, the farmers neither contributed nor appeared at the ceremony. One day a farmer, who owned the field bordering on the kuti land, was washing his towel by the kuti well. The towel accidentally fell into the well. A heated exchange ensued with mutual accusations. The bairagi wielding a lathi (a bamboo staff) drove the farmer off the kuti land and forbid him to use the well. A half-hour later the farmer with his brothers arrived and beat the sadhu with their lathis. A few weeks later the sadhu went away to his guru's sthan. When he returned to Nilpur, he found his kuti looted and five katta of his land, whereupon grew banana trees, had been captured. The banana trees had been cut down, the soil ploughed over, and the earthen dyke bordering his and his neighbour's field had been extended to enclose the five katta within the neighbouring farmer's plot.

The bairagi went to the house of the zamindar's son who happened to be in the village at the time. The zamindar's son decided to call a meeting of the village panchayat. At the time of the zamindari the zamindar had settled many village disputes, but with the abolition of the zamindari and the creation of the village panchayat system, political power passed into the hands of the farmers. The zamindar's son could no longer impose his will on the farmers, nor were the farmers strong enough to impose their will on the zamindar, who with one hundred bighas of land was still the largest landholder in the village. The pradhan panch of the village, who was a farmer, agreed before the zamindar's son to call a meeting of the panchayat, but he later procrastinated. Only two days later when he saw the sadhu walking

off in the direction of the police post in another village did he call back the sadhu and set the date for the meeting of the panchayat. The sadhu knew that the panchayat would comprise the zamindar's son and the village pandit, both of whom he could count upon, and the pradhan panch and two other members, all of whom were farmers and upon whom he could not count. He had also heard rumours that his neighbour had been telling people in the village that the five katta of land in question were actually his and not the sadhu's. He claimed that the sadhu had cut down the five katta from the jungle outside the kuti boundary at the time before the farmers arrived in the region. When the farmer bought the land up to the kuti boundary, these five katta became the property of the farmer. Thus the five katta which the sadhu had cultivated in the absence of neighbours and under the benign neglect of the zamindar actually belonged to the farmer. Prior to the panchayat meeting, the zamindar met with the sadhu. According to the zamindar's son the five katta were part of the kuti land, but the issue could only be settled by calling in a surveyor. The sadhu agreed to this, but the zamindar's son suggested otherwise. Since the farmers control the village and he (the zamindar's son) does not live in the village, a just settlement would be untenable. Even if the panchayat should decide to return the land to the sadhu there is no guarantee for the sadhu's protection. As soon as the zamindar's son leaves for the city the farmers by force could recapture the land. Village harmony is more important than justice. A stable cool injustice is preferable to an unstable hot justice. The sadhu saw the logic of the zamindar's son argument, but he preferred the coolness to the injustice. When the panchayat convened, the bairagi conceded the land to the farmer, but gave false testimony by inflating the value of the goods stolen from the kuti. The farmer disputed the amount of grain, tools, and money that he had looted. It was the sadhu's word against the farmer's. The farmer lost. He was ordered to pay a two hundred rupee fine for having beaten the sadhu and to compensate in cash for the stolen money and goods. With the compensation the sadhu purchased several katta of land elsewhere and with the two hundred rupees he formed the mandal.

2.3. Formation of the Nilpur Mandal. After the decision of the panchayat, the bairagi visited all the kutis in the neighbouring area and invited the mahants to a bhandara at his kuti in one week's time. On the day of the bhandara twenty-three mahants arrived twenty-two of whom were Ramanandi sadhus and one of whom was a Kabir Panthi of farmer caste from Nilpur, who had not taken sides in the recent dispute and who was celibate more by fate than by choice. Of the twenty-three kutis one had a pakka brick mandir (temple) with five bighas of land. All the others were similar to the Nilpur kuti ---- a thatched hut with between several kattas and two bighas of land; in other words, they all depended to some extent on the cooperation of villagers and the charity of patrons. Each kuti contained one and occasionally two sadhus but no more than that.

When the sadhus arrived that day cilams (clay pipes in which hemp is smoked) were passed around and the Nilpur bairagi mentioned the insult of not receiving a bidai from the immigrant farmer caste. He also informed them of the outcome of the recent dispute over the five katta of land, and he suggested that all the sadhus of the region should band together and establish a rule for the minimum bidai that they would accept from householders. He also suggested that a mandal should be formed. The sadhus saw the need for this, but when the Nilpur sadhu began a discussion of who should be selected as the Sri Mahant, there was some uneasiness. The Nilpur sadhu reassured them by saying that there are big sadhus and little sadhus, but like the leaves of the thulsi plant, they are all pure. When the Nilpur sadhu left to prepare the bhandara in the kitchen, the other sadhus discussed the candidature of their host. The Nilpur sadhu had been trained at a large and respected sthan. He could read and write. He had gone on pilgrimage to three of the four dham. He was also a tyagi with long matted hair that reached to the ground and tyagi sadhus are considered to be at a higher stage of renouncement than "bastra dhari" sadhus who have their hair shaved and wear sewn clothing. Moreover, because of his appearance a tyagi shadhu is usually more successful than bastra dhari in receiving alms. With the total inadequacy of landed wealth within the mandal, a Sri Mahant capable of raising substantial amounts of alms is a definite advantage, if not a necessity.

A chair was brought to the courtyard and the Nilpur sadhu sat down upon it as if it were his gaddi. The sadhus of the twenty-three other kutis offered the tilak, wrapped a turban about his head, and placed garlands of flowers around his neck. Then each sadhu placed some money at the feet of the Nilpur sadhu. The amount each sadhu offered was carefully noted.

The Sri Mahant decided with the consent of the mandali sadhus who should be appointed adhikari, rasoiya, jalbhariya, and kotwal. It was further decided that if any sadhu of the mandal should offer a bhandara, all the sadhus of the mandal must be invited, and at any bhandara offered by either householders or sadhus, the minimum bidai which they would accept would be two rupees. In addition to this, the special bidai for the Sri Mahant would be 11 rupees, the adhikari's badai would be 5.50 rupees, that of the rasoiya would be 2.50 rupees plus 1.25 ser of rice and ten hand-lengths of cloth, for the jalbhariya 2.50 rupees bidai and 1.25 hand-lengths of cloth and for the kutwal one rupee. When the mandali sadhus agreed to all these proposals, the food was served by the Sri Mahant as host. After the bhandara the Sri Mahant gave a two rupee bidai to each of the sadhus plus twice the amount which they had laid at his feet at the time of the cumawan. Everyone departed home.

2.4 The activities of the Nilpur Mandal. No doubt there are factions within the farmer casts which divide the village panchayat and render it incapable of taking certain decisions, but via-a-vis the bairagi, all the farmers were united in opposition. With the anticipated departure of the zamindar's son from the village, the sadhu had only the village pandit to protect his legitimate interests. The village pandit was hopelessly outnumbered in the panchayat and the sadhu knew the first rule of village politics: "जिस की लाठी इसकी भैंस" (whoever wields the stick, claims the buffalo). Without any doubt this was the main reason behind the sadhu's sudden interest in forming the mandal. The sadhu sought to organize his neighbouring sadhus to support him in any future encounter with the farmers. For the sadhu the mandal took the place of the zamindar's son.

Since the time of the land dispute, the situation in Nilpur has been one of mutual avoidance and non-cooperation. The sadhu has had to make some adjustments. The farmer in the village who owns a mill and used to mill the sadhu's grain will no longer provide this service. The sadhu must carry his rice and wheat to a bazaar two miles away to do this. Previously a farmer might loan a plough for day to the sadhu or supply a little ghee or milk if the sadhu needed it for a festival, but they no longer do this. Although one may succeed in begging from wealthy landowners and from neighbours to whom one passes the cillum and offers prasad, one is less successful in begging from distant shopkeepers and service castes with whom one does not meet informally. Now the sadhu needs money to pay the mill operator, to buy ghee or to repair a tool. When the sadhu's bucket fell into his well, he did not possess the iron hook (like a fish hook) which is lowered down into the well by a rope in order to fish the bucket from the well. A farmer had such a hook, but refused to loan it to the sadhu for a half-hour. The sadhu was obliged to purchase one at the bazar for five rupees. Thus the sadhu needs money. Before, he could live off the fat of the land and the zamindar and depend upon the occasional grudging services of the farmers; now he sell his fruits and vegetables at the twice weekly bazaar in a neighbouring village to earn the money to purchase oil, ghee, incense or to mill the rice and wheat, or to repair his gardening implements.

This in part explains the lack of activity of the Nilpur mandal. The mandal was formed predominantly in the sadhu's self-interest to defend by force if necessary his legitimate interests vis-a-vis the farmers. The situation has not yet come to a head, so the mandal remains in the wings. There was one tense moment several years ago when the Nilpur mandal decided to hold a day long festival on the occasion of the installation of a special Hanuman banner, replete with gold foil and pictures of Ram and Sita. The banner was to be installed at the Nilpur kuti. The farmers banded together and decided to install their own Hanuman banner on the very same day only two hundred yards away. They also decided to call a band and dancers to their festival, which

if not by intention at least in fact would attract the visitors from the sadhu's Hanuman banner to their own Hanuman banner. At that time the mandal decided to revoke the membership of the Kabir Panthi farmer from Nilpur. The reason for this was that the Kabir Panthis, being householders, were not really sadhus. Or at least that is how it was explained to me. But one cannot help but suspect that the Sri Mahant wanted also to expel someone who was at best a fence sitter, at worst a fifth columnist.

Being neighbours, the sadhus of the Nilpur mandal visit one another frequently, but as a group the mandal has met formally only on three occasions in the last ten years ---- once on the occasion of the installation of the Hanuman banner and twice on the occasions of the bhandaras for a deceased sadhu of the mandal. It costs approximately 200 rupees to offer a bhandara within the mandal --- a sum which the Sri Mahant cannot easily afford. If he had more land he could offer more bhandaras to consolidate the mandal. On the other hand, if he had more land he would have more power in the village and hence less need for the mandal. Concerning the two sadhus who died, the nearest neighbouring sadhu performed the funeral rites and the Sri Mahant roamed the region begging rice, pulse, yoghurt, etc. to hold the bhandara. Since neither sadhu had a disciple, there was no question of the Sri Mahant approving the succession to the mahantship of the kuti. The kutis fell vacant. One sadhu gave shelter to a mairam and later had a child by her. The Sri Mahant took no action to expel the sadhu from the mandal. The reason might have been the particular companionship between these two sadhus. Or it might have been that the sadhu did not want to initiate any divisive movement within the mandal at a time when its unity was more important to him. If the Sri Mahant was more interested in the reputation of the mandal vis-a-vis other sadhus and other mandals he might have felt it in his interests to expel the fallen bairagi. Thus the Nilpur mandal now contains twenty-one kutis and it will no doubt continue to exist as long as the Sri Mahant and farmers live at Nilpur and the Sri Mahant takes the effort to maintain the mandal. The Sri Mahant's disciple died of dysentery several years ago. If the Sri Mahant cannot find another disciple then his kuti will fall vacant upon his death. The Nilpur mandal will probably then also cease to exist and the neighbouring farmers will capture the vacated kuti land.

3.1 The Suja Mandal. I know little about the Suja Mandal and all that I do know was told to me by a single informant. Because Suja is not at all close to my base for fieldwork, I have not been able to visit the sthan to corroborate any of this information. If it were not for the fact that this is the only information I have suggesting a possible variant of the mandal, I would not present the information at all.

3.2 The internal organization of the Suja mandal. Bodh Bali Ji lived about two hundred years ago and was the disciple of Murukh Das who founded Sirsiya sthan. Later, when the mahantship of Sirsiya sthan fell to Bodh Bali Ji, the local nawab made a generous land grant to the sthan and Bodh Bali Ji left to travel. In the course of his travels, he founded two other sthans in north Bihar --- Jorapura and Suja (located about twenty miles from Baroni in northern Monghyr jilla, Bihar). He died at Suja and since his samadhi is there, Suja sthan became considered the gaddi (throne) and Sirsiya and Jorapura became baithaks (meeting places) of the Suja gaddi. The Suja sthan was wealthy from the start. I was told that it used to possess 4000 bighas of land and 90,000 rupees tahsil (land revenue). This may be an exaggeration, since exaggeration is a legitimate form of praise in Nepal and India, but there is no denying the wealth of Suja. The Sri Mahant travels to a bhandara on an elephant, preceded by flag-bearers and kettle drum beaters and followed by bullock carts of food, firewood, and cooking utensils. The bhandara lasts three days. The evening of the first day is kacca: rice, pulse and vegetable. The second day is pakka, in the early morning lassi is offered to drink to all the sadhus for which 160 kilograms of milk and 80 kilograms of sugar are required. At mid-morning, a light meal of ciura (parched flattened rice), dahi (yoghurt), vegetable curry, and sweets is served. In the afternoon, the main feast is offered comprising puri (unleavened bread fried in ghee), tasmei (rice pudding), vegetable curry, dahi, and sweets. At mid-morning of the third day, kacca food is served: rice, vegetable curry, and kari-bari (a rich soup prepared with pulse flour, dahi, neem leaves, and other spices). After the meal of the third day the bidai is given. There are three categories of membership in the mandal which are determined by the landed wealth of the kuti. A kuti with more than 15 bighas must give in all a bidai of 1,051 rupees to be divided among the Sri Mahant, the other officers of the mandal, and the members of the mandal. A kuti possessing between six and fifteen bighas must give a bidai of 551 rupees. A kuti with less than six bighas must give a bidai of 251 rupees. For all of these cases the bidai of the Sri Mahant remains constant at 51 rupees.

The Suja Mandal is unique in that the mahant of the Suja sthan always holds the office of the Sri Mahant of the Suja mandal. With "4,000 bighas of land and 90,000 rupees tahsil" the Suja mahant was obviously the most powerful person in the region --- this power is due not only to the fact that many of the Sadhus in the vicinity trace their origins back to Suja sthan, but also and more important because the Suja mahant was the zamindar of the region and could influence mandal affairs through his control of the land. Thus the Suja mahant ruled more by right (hak) than by consultation. This interpretation is confirmed also by the presence of Rampur sthan and Bhawanipur sthan about twenty miles distant in the northern part of the jilla. These two sthans were almost as wealthy as Suja. Since these two sthans had their own

mandals, it indicates that Suja's peers lay outside the mandal and so within the Suja mandal, Suja sthan could rule by hak.

The authority of the Suja Sri Mahant, however, has its limits as may be learned from the following story. Unfortunately the person who told me this story did not witness any of the following events, but heard about it later as a "story". By the time I heard the tale, it had become more a lesson in morals than in sociology. Eliminating the moral conclusions and the list of characters, the following events occurred at Suja. In the eighth generation of Suja mahants, the mahant found himself with very little land at all, due to no fault of his own. Wanting to rebuild the financial basis of the sthan, he appealed to the mandal for help. The various mahants of the mandal made contributions so that the Suja Mahant could purchase land in the name of Suja sthan. In this way, about sixty-five bighas were acquired. Later, in the eleventh generation of mahants of Suja sthan, there was a mahant who smoked enormous quantities of ganja and offered lavish hospitality to others without giving any thought to how much wealth the sthan actually possessed. The mahant eventually found himself in debt to another sadhu within the mandal. This sadhu traced his spiritual lineage back to Suja, but he was not the Suja mahant's guru bhai nor was his guru dwara (the sthan where he received initiation) Suja sthan. Later, an agreement was signed between the mahant and the sadhu to the effect that the sadhu would take over management of the sthan. The sadhu used his managerial powers to place himself on the throne of Suja sthan. The sadhus of the mandal arrived to enquire how the sadhu had usurped the throne. When the deposed mahant and the usurper both presented their cases, the mandal by panchayat decided to back the usurper. The usurper thus prepared a bhandara for all the sadhus of the mandal as well as for the Rampur and Bhawanipur mandals. On the day of the bhandara the mandali sadhus and the Sri Mahants of Rampur mandal and Bhawanipur mandal wrapped the turban and offered the tilak to the usurper, who thus became the legitimate mahant of Suja sthan and the legitimate Sri Mahant of Suja mandal.

4.1. The Janakpur Bhavan (Fifty-two) Kuti Mandal. Events which lie beyond the reach of living memory have a way of being accelerated into the distant past and invested with an aura of antiquity and timelessness which they may not possess. Moreover, one tends to invest the past with those qualities which the present lacks. The Janakpur Bavan Kuti mandal is invested with such an air of antiquity and sanctity, that when one is confronted with its present disarray and ineffectiveness, one naturally wonders what the past was really like and what were the causes of the decline of the mandal. Of course, all the time one must keep in the back of one's mind the possibility that the mandal was never really effective and it is only the absence of facts and a natural predilection for nostalgia which have made the present Kali Yuga seem to be less than fifty years old. With the help of two bairagis who

are nearly ninety years old and the cooperation of several mahants who showed me some of their temple records I shall describe what I have learned about the history of the Janakpur Bavan Kuti Mandal.

4.2. The Composition of the Bavan Kuti Mandal.

बावन कुटी बहतर कुण्ड
सुर नर मुनि सब नावहि मुण्ड

"Fifty-two kutis, seventy-two ponds,
Devta, men, saints ---- all bow their heads"

Sri Vaidehi Saran

The seventy-two ponds refer to the seventy-two ponds of ancient Janakpur as listed in the Sri Mithila Mahatyam, III, 7-20. Ancient Janakpur was the capital of Mithila during the Treta Yuga, when the Vaidehi dynasty ruled the land bounded on the north by the Himalayas, on the south by the Ganga, on the east by the Kosi, and on the west by Gandaki. It was Raja Janak (Sirdhwaj) of the Vaidehi dynasty who found the goddess Sita as a baby, raised her as his daughter in Janakpur, and married her to Ram Chandra of Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, India. In those days, the capital of Mithila at Janakpur was circular in form and approximately twenty miles in diameter, with its centre at the present Janki Mandir of Janakpurdhan. Along the circumference of that circle stood the four gates of the city defended by Mahadeva Mithileswarnath in the east (which no longer exists and had been replaced by Dhanusa as a Pilgrimage site for devotees), Kalyaneswarnath in the south, Jaleswarnath in the west, and Ksireswarnath in the north, and it is along this outer perimeter that sadhus and pilgrims walk during the Madhya Parikrama circumambulation of Janakpur during the bright lunar fortnight of Phalgun. It is within this Madhya Parikrama, therefore, covering an area of approximately 300 square miles that the Janakpur Bavan kuti mandal lies. Some sadhus claim that at the time of Raja Janak there were fifty-two kutis. Most sadhus say that at the time of the formation of the mandal there were fifty-two kutis. At any rate, there are well over two hundred kutis at present in the mandal, of which no more than forty can be of the original fifty-two. That no one knows the exact number of kutis at present in the mandal is indicative of its present disorganization, although most sadhus do not see the matter this way. For them the number of kutis in the mandal is countless, which is in turn a reflection of its own glory. Concerning which sadhus were instrumental in forming the mandal and when that occurred, I have not found any definitive information. Nor can I list with any degree of certainty the names of those kutis which comprised the original fifty-two. Indeed it may be possible that there were somewhat more or less than fifty-two at the beginning, for there are fifty-two spiritual clans (dwara) of the Vaisnavites sects and fifty-two spiritual clans (marhi) of the Sannyasi sect. There are

also, according to tradition fifty-two sons of Indra (king of the gods), whose palace is situated atop Mount Meru. Thus the number fifty-two may have been chosen for its spiritual appeal rather than mathematical accuracy. Quite definitely some of the original kutis, such as that of Prem Das on the banks of the Dudhmati river of the Bhura Bhatt paramahansa, no longer exist. But Prem Das is remembered by his disciples and a mound of brick strewn earth and a disused well in an aubergine field enabled me to track down the all but forgotten existence of the Bhura Bhatt paramahansa. How many other kutis lapsed without a trace cannot be known. Thus a list of the original fifty-two kutis (assuming there were fifty-two) will most likely remain incomplete. The value of trying to form such a list lies not with the names of the kutis but with the kinds of kutis which then existed.

Within the mandal were seven sthans (Ram Mandir, Janki Mandir, Laksman Mandir, Hanuman Nagar Sthan, Basahiya Sthan, Simardehi Sthan, and Matihani Sthan) which received Kus birta bitalab land grants from the Makwanpur Rajas during the eighteenth century prior to the conquest of Nepal by Pritivi Narayan Shah⁶. In addition three other sthans (Barahi Sthan, Biararak Sthan, and Birpur Sthan) located just across the border in northern Bihar received similar land grants during the eighteenth century, and during the mid-nineteenth century they built branch kutis in Janakpur. These ten sthans possessed entire mauja (a village as administrative unit) containing both raikar and birta land. On the raikar land, the mahants acted as zamindar responsible for collecting the malpot (land revenue) from the tenant farmers. Malpot was approximately 10 rupees per bigha of land, which at that time was the equivalent of ten maund of rice, (i.e. approximately half the paddy harvest). The mahant forwarded the malpot onto the Sarkar Guthi Mal office deducting a one ānā (1/16th) commission. The birta land was tax free and usually cultivated under the batai system whereby the tenant farmer gave one-half of all produce of land (rice, wheat, pulse, straw, etc.) to the mahant. In addition to the rights to the land which the mahant held, the kus birta bitalab grant also conferred upon the mahant the right to exact unpaid labour, to collect certain levies on marriage, remarriage, sale of toddy, hides and bones, vegetable oil, etc., and to tax the shopkeepers in the bazar. In legal cases not involving capital punishment, banishment, or excommunication from caste as the penalty, the mahant could administer justice and collect the fines and keep them. Moreover certain royal levies, such as gaddi mamarakh on the occasion of the coronation of the king which symbolized one's fealty to the sovereign, the mahant was exempted from paying. The land so granted was inheritable, inalienable, and held in perpetuity. The Makwanpur Raja seemed even to have foregone his right to eminent domain for at the conclusion of these land grants it is written that whoever should deprive Ram and Sita of this land shall be reborn as a worm living in excrement for sixty-thousand years. With their immense land and tax free holdings, their

private soldiers, judicial authority, land held in perpetuity, and the absence of governmental supervision these large sthans were like little kingdoms within the kingdom of Makwanpur.

Prithvi Narayan Shah and his successors seemed less inclined to grant entire mauja to bairagi. The above land grants which were issued by the Makwanpur Rajas were confirmed by King Girban Yuddha Bikram Shah in Samvat 1867 (1811 A.D.) but no such grants were given to new sthans in the region by the Shah dynasty. Instead they preferred to grant kus birta grants of sufficient land (five to thirty bighas) to bairagis upon which they could build their kutis. In Janakpur, such grants were given to Ratna Sagar Sthan, Agni Kunda Sthan, and Sita Kund Kuti during the early nineteenth century. Most of the kutis within the mandal which received such land grants are located in the Pirari Kharol mauja on the west side of town. Scattered between these small birta land holdings were plots of raikar land upon which other bairagis built their kutis.

Concerning these kutis which were built on raikar land, it must be mentioned that the present town of Janakpur is built upon three contiguous mauja of kus birta bitalab land belonging to Ram Mandir, Janki Mandir, and Laksman Mandir. A fourth contiguous mauja, the Pirarai Kharol mauja, belongs to a number of sthans such as Ram Mandir, Ratna Sagar, Agni Kund, and Sita Kund. Thus, for the bairagis who came to Janakpur and built their kutis on raikar land the zamindar from whom they received land was also a sadhu.

The earliest reference I have found to the Bavan Kuti Mandal is in a binti patra (entreaty) which Mahavir Das of Sita Kund kuti wrote to an unnamed Rana in Samvat 1952 (1895 A.D.). Using this as a cut-off point one may eliminate all the caste based and zamindar kutis in present Janakpur from ever having been a member of the original fifty-two kutis of the mandal. (These are kutis in which there is no mahant. The bairagi acts as pujari, and the functions of the adhikari and kotwal are controlled by the caste panchayat or by the zamindar and his descendants). The only kuti managed by a zamindar which was of the original fifty-two is the Pipra Kuti of Dhanuka which was established not by a zamindar alienating his own land in favour of Ram and Sita, but by a kus birta grant of 200 bighas of land by Raja Surendra Bir Bikram Shah in Samvat 1900 (1843 A.D.) to Girija Datt Misra, the then Subba governor of the old Majottri jilla, to be managed by Girija Datt Misra and his descendants.

Concerning the composition of the mandal we may note then three features. First, most of the sthans and kutis were concentrated in one locality which was later to become the town of Janakpur. Second, there was a great inequality of wealth within the mandal between those sthans possessing kus birta bitalab grants and the small kutis on raikar land. Third, in spite of the disparity of wealth within the mandal, all but one of the kutis and

sthans had one major feature in common and which constitutes one major difference between the past and the present. Except for Pipra Kuti, Dhanuka, all the sthan and kutis were managed directly by sadhus without any control by Sri Tin Sarkar or Sri Panc Sarkar, by caste councils or zamindars. And for those kutis which sadhus built on raikar land the zamindar was in most cases also a sadhu.

4.3. Internal Organization of the Mandal. There is no Sri Mahant of the Bavan Kuti aandal at present and my oldest informants cannot recall there ever having been a Sri Mahant. When I asked who the Sri Mahant was, I was told that it was the tokna (large brass cooking pot) which in a way is true since it is the rice cooked at the time of the bhandara which brings the mandal together. Nor is there an adhikari. The functions of both the Sri Mahant and adhikari are entrusted to a panchayat of mahants. In addition to the panchayat there are four rasoiya, two jalbhariya, and two kotwal. None of the above mentioned thirteen officers are elected in any formal sense of the term; i.e., by ballot or show of hands. The officer occupies his office as long as he is capable. If he should leave Janakpur for any great length of time, or should he fall ill or become feeble in old age, he will propose a successor to his office. The panchayat will discuss the merits of the candidate in an informal way and perhaps sound the opinions of some other sadhus in the mandal. If there is no reason to reject the candidate, he will be accepted. No formal ceremony marks the occasion nor must the new officer offer a bhandara. Any respected and capable sadhu is eligible for office as long as he lives in a kuti within the territory of the mandal. Wealth is not necessarily a consideration. For example, Vaidehi Saran (whose couplet marks the beginning of section 4.2) was largely responsible for expanding the fifteen day circumabulation of Janakpur from a mela involving a thousand sadhus to one involving nearly fifteen thousand sadhus and householders. He was a member of the panchayat and his influence on the mandal was totally out of proportion to the several kattha of land his disposal. But some of the seats of the panchayat may be considered reserved in the sense that several sthans always held a seat in the panchayat. These sthans were Matihani (since Matihani is located ten miles from Janakpur, the Matihani mahant might be represented on the panchayat by a sadhu living in Janakpur and loyal to the Matihani mahant's interests), Ram Mandir (until 1911 A.D.), Janki Mandir, and Ratna Sagar. In order to understand the functioning of the mandal, some mention must be made of the special authority and / or influence which these sthans with "reserved seats" possessed.

Matihani Sthan, the weathiest sthan in the mandal, is located three miles southeast of Jaleswar just within the Nepal-Bihar border and approximately ten miles from Janakpur. In 1886 A.D. Raja Prithvi Bir Bikram Shah conferred unique authority upon the Matihani Sthan Mahant. Unfortunately I have not found the original lal mohar granting this authority but it is mentioned in a later lal mohar of 1913 A.D.

"We have registered the title of Man Mahant and bestowed it upon Matihani Sthan. In all Nepal, excepting Sankh Mol, Thapathali, and Pacali (three bairagi sthans located along the Bagmati river between Kathmandu and Patan) the Matihani Man Mahant is the overseer of the bairagi sect. At each bairagi kuti when the mahant dies, his disciple shall offer a bhandara and you may take up to one rupee⁷ (as fee at the time when the Man Mahant wraps the turban around the disciple's head thus conferring the mahantship upon him.). At any kuti where a bairagi should die without a disciple install your own bairagi (as mahant). Do not leave the kuti empty, ensure that the kuti fields are cultivated, place the kuti lands under the new mahant's name and collect the land revenue (malpot). If any tenant (i.e., the bairagi whom the Man Mahant has appointed as mahant) should default in payment (of malpot) you must pay from your own resources. In cases involving mahants you may collect fines and keep them. (This authority) we bestowed upon the former Matihani Mahant Lalit Das on the Thirteenth day of the dark fortnight of Asarh in Samvat 1943 (1886 A.D.).

From the point of view of the Nepalese Sarkar, the main motive behind the granting of this authority appears to be the ensurance that the collection of malpot would not be disrupted. The Matihani Man Mahant in Samvat 1951 (1894 A.D.) built Dasrath temple by Dasrath Talab in Janakpur and that became his baithak (used both in the sense of meeting place and also session, such as a session of House of Parliament). Every year he would arrive by elephant in the month of Jestha at Dasrath temple to settle disputes announce and collect fines, and then return to Matihani. Unfortunately I have found very little information concerning specific cases presented at this baithak.

The Nepalese Sarkar did not take to oversee the authority of the Matihani Man Mahant. With the wealth, private soldiers, horses and elephants of the sthan at his disposal, one may readily imagine how a mahant guided by his own personal interests could abuse this authority by forcibly "emptying" a kuti and then, because the kuti is empty, appoint a bairagi who was subservient to the Man Mahant's interests as the new mahant. Such a mahant was Deva Das, the disciple of Lalit Das, to whom is attributed the saying, "If there is my equal anywhere in Nepal, it can only be the King". His arrogance was matched by the fear he inspired in the other sadhus of the Bavan Kuti Mandal (see section 4.4.b.), and eventually led him up against the Rana Sarkar. Sri Tin Sarkar issued a warrant for his arrest and Deva Das fled to India. A few years later Deva Das disciple, Lakhnan Narayan Das, also fled to India. Convinced that the entire lineage of sadhus at Matihani had become corrupted, Prime Minister Chandra Samser in Samvat 1970 (1913 A.D.) appointed a bairagi from an entirely different spiritual clan as the new Matihani Man Mahant and issued a lal mohar which while confirming the original authority of the Man Mahant to appoint bairagis to

kutis which fall vacant, made several important changes in order to prevent future abuses of authority. First, the management of Matihani sthan's income and expenditure was placed under direct government control through the creation of the Matihani Amanat Office and settled at the Aminin Adalat court at Jaleswar rather than by the Man Mahant. Third, there is no mention of Man Mahant's right to collect either fines or the one rupee fee at the time of the installation of the new mahant. In cases involving the decease of a mahant who does not have a disciple, the Man Mahant was to pay the costs of the funeral rites from the deceased mahant's wealth. Whatever remained of that wealth after the rites were completed the Man Mahant could keep for himself. This authority remains with the Matihani Man Mahant to this day, and thus though the Bavan Kuti Mandal lacks a Sri Mahant, one important privilege of the Sri Mahant has been delegated to Matihani Sthan.

Ram Mandir was founded by Chaturbhuj Giri, a sannyasi (Saivite), but puja is performed to Ram Chandra in the temple. It is the oldest temple in Janakpur, and the only non-Vaisnavite sthan within the mandal. The Ram Mandir Mahant possessed no unique authority like the Matihani Man Mahant, but with the sthan's tax free land and 42,000 rupees tahsil it was second only to Matihani for wealth within the mandal. Every year on the occasion of Vijay Dasami, the Ram Mandir Mahant invited all the bairagis of the mandal to a bhandara at Ram Mandir. The bhandara was kacca (rice, pulse and vegetables), and since bairagis do not accept kacca food from sannyasi, the Ram Mandir Mahant would give to each bairagi mahant sufficient rice, pulse, vegetables, ghee, yoghurt, etc., which the bairagis would cook in their respective sthans and kutis. Each bairagi also received a bidai of a dhoti and one rupee. The Ram Mandir Mahant could exert influence upon the mandal by virtue of the fact that many of the bairagi kutis of the mandal were built on raikar land for which the Ram Mandir mahant was zamindar. Requests for land, disputes over land boundaries, appeal for delay in payment of malpot --- such decisions were made by the Ram Mandir mahant. Tenants who defaulted in payment of malpot were brought to Ram Mandir and made to lie in the sun, stand on one leg, or locked in a pillory until the malpot was paid. Except by the special favour of the mahant, bairagis were not exempted from such punishment. From his many graneries containing rice, wheat, pulse, etc., the mahant could supply the daily expenses of the virtually landless kutis if he so desired. Moreover as the largest landowner in the immediate area, no decision of the mandal could be effective without the approval or at least the tacit consent of the Ram Mandir mahant. Thus Ram Mandir was the second baithak of the mandal.

Ratna Sagar possessed only twelve bighas of land during the early nineteenth century. It had no mauja and hence none of the rights which the mahants with kus birta bitalab grants possessed. Ratna Sagar Sthan became important during the mahantship of Narayan Das a bairagi to whom is attributed a number of miraculous powers such as walking on water, turning water into ghee, and plucking mangos from a tree while seated in a chair one

hundred yards away. Because of Narayan Das' reputation as a yogi and the hospitality which Ratna Sagar sthan offered to all sadhus, many bairagis flocked to Ratna Sagar. As many as one hundred sadhus lived there permanently and hundreds more came from outerlying regions during the time of a mela. In one sense Rana Sagar was the most important Vaisnavite sthan in the region, for there are literally hundreds of kutis in the Terai which trace their spiritual descent back to Narayan Das and Narayan Das' disciple, Bhagwan Das. Thus the influence of Ratna Sagar on the mandal was based not upon any special authority or rights to the land which the sthan possessed, but the respect all sadhus had of Narayan Das and the hospitality which he offered to other sadhus (conferring with it the right to revoke that hospitality), Ratna Sagar was thus the third baithak for bairagis of the mandal and in fact it was the Ratna Sagar baithak where the panchayat met and whose decisions carried the authority of the mandal. Janki Mandir was founded by Sri Sur Kisor Ji in the early eighteenth century A.D., and is the oldest bairagi sthan within Janakpur. In the introduction to Sri Mithila Bilas, a collection of poems written by Sri Sur Kisor Ji, Ram Snehi Das gives a brief account of Sri Sur Kisor Ji's arrival in Janakpur:

You (Sri Sur Kisor Ji) were the pujari of Sri Yugal Sarkar (Lord Ram and Sita) at the temple of Lohagarh in Central India and from the start you worshipped Sri Kisor Ji (the child Sita) as if she were your daughter. One day lost in reflection a powerful desire awoke in you to behold Sri Mithila Ji (Janakpur), but where was the place? There was no longer any trace of it. You became restless. Sri Kisor Ji (the idol of the Child Sita in the temple) unable to bear your agitated state of mind said, "Father, Go, Sri Mithila Ji lies in eastern Bharat between the Kosi and the Gandaki rivers, between the Ganga and the Himalaya mountains. There, wherever I become manifest to you in this form is the site of Raja Janak's (palace) at Janakpur".

When Swami Ji heard the order of his supreme Sakti daughter, his heart shone and he set out for Sri Mithila Ji. Passing by the way of Mathihani he arrived at Janakpur. He bathed at Ganga Sagar and then beheld Sri Kisor Ji together with Ram and his three brothers (at the site of Ram Mandir) and then proceeded further. There where he felt supreme bliss in his heart he stopped to rest under a neem (margosa) tree. At that very place the Sri Kisor Ji of Lohagarh appeared out of the ground before him. This then was his blissful destination. He built a small thatched hut and began to worship.

In Samvat 1784 (1727 A.D.), the Makwanpur Raja, Manik Sen, granted a mauja of land within Janakpur to the Janki Mandir, but it is only since the mahantship of Naval Kisor Das, the guru of the present mahant, that Janki Mandir let out plots of land on a

mankap basis to sadhus, householders, and merchants for residential purposes. Prior to Naval Kisor Das, nearly all of the Janki Mandir's land was fields or orchards. Thus as zamindar the Janki Mandir's mahant could not exert the kind of influence over the bairagis of the mandal as the Ram Mandir mahant. Bairagis consider the idol of Sri Kisori Ji which appeared out of the ground near the neem tree to be more than an idol; it is instead a living siddhi (manifestation) of Sri Kisori Ji herself. Disputes and accusations concerning the misconduct of a bairagi which could not be settled at the Ratna Sagar baithak were taken to Janki Mandir, where in the presence of Sri Kisori Ji the panchayat separated the truth from the falsehood ("the milk from the water") and determined the innocence or guilt of the accused party.

4.4. Regulating the internal affairs of the mandal. There is very little specific information as to what was ever discussed at the Dasrath Mandir baithak, the Ram Mandir baithak, or the Ratna Sagar baithak. One may state generally however the kinds of discussions and cases which each baithak handled. Disputes concerning the secession to a mahantship could be discussed at any baithak, but since the Man Mahant of Matihani held the ultimate authority in the respect, the dispute ultimately had to be brought before the Dasrath Mandir baithak. At this baithak the Man Mahant ruled by hak. Appeals and disputes relating to those dwelling on Ram Mandir's mauja were brought before the Ram Mandir baithak where the mahant settled them by hak. Ratna Sagar was more properly the baithak of the entire mandal, since at that baithak decisions were taken by consensus (panchayat). There were four kinds of cases which were brought before the Ratna Sagar baithak. The first involved decisions of the sect concerning the organization of melas. For example, it was a Ratna Sagar baithak which gave the right to Ram Das Acharya of Sita Kund Kuti to lead the procession of sadhus and pilgrims carrying the Mithila Bihari at the time of the circumambulation of Janakpur. When a later mahant of Sita Kund Kuti reverted to householder status, a Ratna Sagar baithak gave the right to lead the circumambulation to a disciple of Ram Das Acharya who had left Sita Kund to build his kuti in Kacauri village. This authority rests with the Kacauri Kuti to this day. The second kind of decisions made by the Ratna Sagar baithak concerned the arrangements for meetings of the mandal at a bhandara, the proposed membership of a new kuti in the mandal, the timing of a bhandara which any sadhu or householder wished to offer, and so forth. The third kind of cases brought before the Ratna Sagar baithak were when most of the sadhus of the mandal found themselves opposed on some issue to the will of the Matihani Man Mahant and in which the Ratna Sagar baithak acted as a faction to fight by force, or by appeal to the Rana Sarkar the decision of the Man Mahant. The fourth kind of cases brought before the Ratna Sagar baithak were those involving a offenses against the sect, such as lying, stealing, eating meat, drinking toddy, or sexual incontinency. Three brief case studies will serve to illustrate the limits of the effectiveness of the mandal:

4.4.a. The ban on killing birds, fish, and mammals within the inner Circumambulation route of Janakpur.

What follows is a translation of the text inscribed on a long plank of wood which is kept in Ram Mandir:

From: Sri Major General Amar Jang Ku (?)r Rana on behalf of Sri 3 Maharaja Jang Bahadur Rana.

To : Revenue Office Major, Amini Adalat (court) Major, saints, mahants, revenue collectors, zamindars, and commoners. On all land fields, orchards, ponds and canals within the inner circumambulation route of Janakpur it is prohibited to kill fish and to kill birds. If anyone killing fish, birds, or mammals should be seen, then bring that person along with the slaughtered animal to the thana (police post) where a fine will be imposed of 2 Nepalese rupees for every killed fish, 2 Nepalese rupees for every killed bird, and 5 Nepalese rupees for every killed mammal. Having collected the fine (the thanadar) will give one-fourth of the amount as reward to the person responsible for the arrest. The remainder of the fine will be deposited with the mahants of Ram Mandir and Janki Mandir who will retain the amounts through out the course of the year and use the money so collected to feed the fakirs who come to Janakpur on the occasion of Ram Navmi (the birthday of Lord Ram Chandra on the ninth day of the bright fortnight of Chaitra). Anyone who sees, hears, or knows of someone who has killed a bird, fish, or mammal and who fails to report this to the thana will also be considered guilty and will be fined half the aforewritten amounts.

Within the five kos madhya parikrama route (the fifteen day circumambulation route), do not irrigate fields with water from sacred (tirtha) ponds. Within the inner circumambulation route of Janakpur do not wash clothes, bathe buffalo in the ponds or contaminate the water with food leavings or wash pots and pans in any of the sacred ponds. Do not urinate nor move one's bowels near the ponds. Do not perform one's abolutions in the ponds. Do not irrigate fields with water from the ponds. Anyone guilty of the above offenses, who is brought to the thana by the hakim, revenue collectors, zamindar, will be fined according to the legal code.

One copy of the above written kasth patra will be kept at Ram Mandir and one copy at Janki Mandir. Samvat 1933, the eleventh day of the dark fortnight of Magh".

There is no mention of the Bavan Kuti Mandal in this kasth patra, although there is no doubt that the bairagis of Janakpur were the party which appealed to the Sri 3 Sarkar to give legal status to the internal rules of the sect which forbid the slaying and eating of meat, fowl and fish. I cite this document because in all probability it was sometime around 1933 Samvat (1877 A.D.) that the mandal was formed. From what I have learned, the driving force of the mandal was Narayan Das and by Samvat 1933 Narayan Das was the mahant of Ratna Sagar. Moreover, it would have been impossible for the mandal to be effective without the full or at least quasi-membership of the Ram Mandir mahant. The sannyasis of the region have traditionally been meat-eaters, however. That the sannyasis of Ram Mandir (probably during the mahantship of Visveswar Giri) abandoned their meat-eating habits and fell in line with the bairagi rule concerning the abstention of eating meat, suggests that at this time there was a sufficient underlying unity of all the sadhus of Janakpur regardless of sect, which would permit the establishment of the mandal. Perhaps during the mahantship of his successor, Iswar Giri, the offering of blood (slaughtered goats) to the Raj Devi within Ram Mandir on Durgastmi (8th day of bright footnight of Asam) was stopped. The Raj Devi was offered laddu (a kind sweet) instead.

4.4.b. Dispute over the succession to the mahantship of Sita Kund Kuti. That there was an underlying spiritual unity to the Bavan Kuti Mandal does not imply that the mandal was devoid of factions. There is also unity in opposition, and during the mahantship of Deva Das at Matihani Sthan a majority of the sadhus in Janakpur were united under the leadership of Narayan Das of Ratna Sagar to oppose the will of the Matihani Man Mahant. The Ratna Sagar baithak by itself, however, was not able to control the activities of Deva Das. During this time, high ranked Ranas often travelled through the Terai on tours of inspection. At Janakpur they established their camp on Ranga Bhūmi, just northwest of Janki Mandir. The bairagis first gathered at Ratna Sagar where they prepared flower malas and prasad to offer to the Ranas and then they walked in a group to Ranga Bhumi. On such occasions the sadhus individually or on behalf of the mandal appealed to the Ranas to settle a dispute, convert their raikar land to tax-free birta land, and so forth.

The dispute concerning the succession to the mahantship to Sita Kund kuti is noted in a lengthy binti patra entreaty which Mahavir Das of Sita Kund submitted to an unnamed Rana while on tour in the Terai. The binti patra presents the case of the plaintiff only and one cannot be assured that the material is unbiased. But from a later sanad letter of appointment issued in the name Mithila Das it is clear that the Rana settled the dispute in the favour of Mahavir Das, thus suggesting there is an element of truth to the allegations made in the entreaty. The binti patra is lengthy, therefore I shall only summarize its contents. In the third generation of mahants at Sita Kund Janki Das was the mahant

and he had a disciple, Mahavir Das by name, who was only a child. In Samvat 1938 (1881 A.D.) Janki Das wanted to leave on a long pilgrimage and being uncertain of his eventual return he invited another bairagi, Kamla Saran to assume the duties of the mahant until his disciple, Mahavir Das, came of age. Kamala Saran agreed to this. An agreement was signed to this effect by all three parties and one copy was sent to Sri 3 Sarkar (most likely to the Goswara at Jaleswar). On the month of Bhadra 1952 (1895 A.D.) Kamala Saran died and Mahavir Das performed the final rites. At that time a travelling bairagi named Thakur Das who came from somewhere in Bhojpur, Bihar arrived at Sita Kund and noted that the Mahant Kamla Saran had recently died and that Kamala Saran had no disciple. Thakur Das went to Matihani and allegedly proposed to the then Man Mahant Deva Das, "since Kamala Saran had no disciple, take the kuti under your control and place me there as mahant. As long as I am alive I will remain mahant. You may claim the kuti and appoint whom you like upon my death. Even if I should have a disciple, he will have no claim to the kuti". Deva Das accompanied by his private soldiers came to Janakpur and ordered Mahavir Das out of the kuti. Mahavir Das from inside the kuti read aloud the agreement signed by him, Kamala Saran, and his guru Janki Das. Deva Das, however, refused to accept the document. He said, "If you do not come out of the kuti, I shall cut you down with my sword". Mahavir Das stepped out of the kuti and Deva Das's soldiers occupied the kuti and seized the fields, granery, and livestock. Deva Das then installed Thakur Das as mahant. In the binti patra, Mahavir Das notes at the end the documents submitted in support of his case and writes that except for those sadhus of Matihani's faction, the sadhus of the Bavan kuti mandal will support my testimony. Notable among the three names listed as being in the Matihani faction is Hari Bhajan Das, the mahant of Janki Mandir. In the settlement Sri 3 Sarkar drove Thakur Das from the kuti and appointed Mahavir Das as mahant.

4.4.c. The first mairam (female sadhu) to live in Janakpur. A man of Keyot (ferryman) caste lived in the village of Lotwa about twelve miles southeast of Janakpur along with his wife who was also a dhami and who could summon by mantra the goddess Bhagawati. After several years of marriage, the Keyot became a bairagi and was given the name Janki Das. His wife became his disciple and lived in the kuti with him as a celibate mairam. Ram Das was Rajput by caste and was initiated by Narayan Das, the mahant of Ratna Sagar sthan. He lived in a thatched hut by Ratna Sagar and took his meals daily at the sthan, Ram Das was also on friendly terms with Visweswar Giri, the Mahant of Ram Mandir, and the two of them often spent the late afternoon chatting and smoking cilams at Ram Mandir. Prior to coming to Janakpur Ram Das had passed some time at Lotwa, and thus knew Janki Das. When Janki Das died, his male disciple inherited the kuti and his wife came to Janakpur. She knew of Ram Das through her deceased husband, and, having nowhere to stay, she approached Ram Das who offered her hospitality. When Narayan Das heard of this he became furious and had everything

looted from Ram Das' kuti. When the mairam refused to be intimidated, he drove both of them off Ratna Sagar land and told Ram Das that "No sadhu of my khandan [lineage] will live with a mairam". Henceforth Ram Das and the mairam were denied fire, water, and cooked and uncooked food from Ratna Sagar. They were not permitted to worship at Ratna Sagar temple, nor bathe in Ratna Sagar pond, nor use any of the footpaths which cross Ratna Sagar land.

Ram Das went to Ram Mandir where Visheswar Giri offered puri and rice pudding. When the very next day Ram Das returned to Ram Mandir to eat puri, Visheswar Giri asked him why he was no longer eating at Ratna Sagar. Ram Das related what happened. Ram Mandir held raikar land only two hundred yards south of Ratna Sagar. The following day at dawn, Visheswar Giri riding atop an elephant and preceded by bodyguards and followed by craftsmen and servants and several bullock carts of bamboo, thatch, grain, and tools, arrived at the plot of ground and within one day built a new kuti and stocked it with supplies. Ram Das and the mairam moved in.

Later that year, there was a cholera epidemic in the villages just west of Janakpur. As soon as the villagers hauled off one dead body for cremation by the Dudhmati, there was another dead body in the village waiting to be carried away. One villager recalled that the wife of Janki Das was a dhami who had power to summon Bhagawati (cholera is caused by the goddess Bhagawati in a fit of anger or hunger). The villager found Janki Das' wife in Janakpur and asked her to come to his village. The mairam did so and by mantra summoned Bhagawati and told her that she had fed enough on the lives of these villagers and it was time to move on somewhere else. From that moment, no one else died of cholera in the village and those who had fever became well. The villagers wanted to express their gratitude to the mairam and the mairam suggested that they offer a bhandara to the Bavan Kuti Mandal. The bhandara was arranged and the date fixed. Narayan Das refused to accept the invitation. The day before the bhandara, the mairam went to the pond at Ratna Sagar and bathed in the water. Narayan Das saw her from the temple and was furious. He ordered her to leave the pond at once. The mairam replied that no one named Narayan Das has the right to order anyone off land which belongs to the goddess Sita. Leaving the pond the mairam shouted in a loud voice for all to hear, "If Narayan Das does not come to the bhandara tomorrow, then at the time when the food is served we shall all see the smoke of his funeral pyre on the banks of Ratna Sagar". Hearing this, Narayan Das became afraid knowing that the mairam could invoke has control the goddess Bhagawati. The following day, Narayan Das took food at the bhandara. Thus Ram Das and the mairam were accepted as members of the mandal.

At the time this incident occurred nearly eighty years ago, there were only two other female sadhus living in Janakpur and in both cases they were living with their husband who was a sadhu. Most celibate sadhus consider this to be a more inferior state of

renouncement than if the man were to break the marriage bond, but they also recognize the obligations a man accepts at the time of marriage to provide for the welfare of his wife. It is not an offense against the sect if a pious householder and his wife receive initiation into the sect and become sadhus practising celibacy in marriage. Nor is it an offense if a bairagi reverts to householder status with his guru's permission. For example, occasionally a bairagi's brothers may die without male issue, in which case the bairagi's natal family would urge him to marry and produce a son in order to keep the lineage alive. Any bairagi, however, who takes the vow of celibacy and then begins to live with a mairam without his guru's permission commits a crime against the sect, for it is assumed that he has broken the vow of celibacy. In fact, accusations of sexual incontinency are rarely ever proved. It is considered impossible for a man and woman who are not kin to live together and not engage in sexual intercourse. In cases of sexual incontinency, the sadhu is usually proved guilty by association. In the Ramayana, for example, Ravana, the demon king, abducted Sita and removed her to his kingdom at Lanka. Many months later Ram and Laksman arrived with an army of monkeys killed Ravana in battle, and rescued Sita from the asoka grove where she was kept prisoner. But before Ram accepted Sita back as his wife, he made her pass the fire ordeal in order to prove that she had remained virtuous during the time she remained under Ravana's custody. Even the successful passing of the fire ordeal did not put to rest the suspicions of some of the residents of Ayodhya (Ram's capital). These suspicions eventually created unrest in Ram's kingdom and in order to maintain rule Ram was reluctantly obliged to exile Sita to the jungle.

Offenses against the sect, such as lying, stealing, eating meat, or sexual incontinency, were settled by the Ratna Sagar baithak. Although a sadhu might go to Janki Mandir to proclaim his innocence before Sri Kisorji Ji. The punishment usually meted out was the denial of food, fire, and water from all kutis and sthans of the mandal until one offered a bhandara to the mandal. Concerning cases of sexual incontinency bairagis were also punished by having their hair shaved, head smeared with cow dung, their loin cloth untied and used to bind their hands behind their back, and then they would be beaten and taken on a "tour" of Janakpur. I was told that if a sadhu had landed wealth, he would also be fined 55 rupees, but I never heard of such a case. Nor, in fact, did I ever hear of any case in which the baithak met to discuss an accusation of sexual incontinency. Such a situation was so volatile, that punishment was meted out before the baithak could assemble. As is illustrated by the case of Ram Das and the mairam, Narayan Das had their kuti looted instead of calling the panchayat. And even if he would have called the panchayat, the excommunication of Ram Das from the mandal would have been ineffective because such a decision lacked the consent of the largest land holder in the town, the Ram Mandir Mahant.

4.5. Factors contributing to the decline of the Bavan Kuti Mandal. Rather than describe how the situation has changed in Janakpur during the past eighty years, I shall mention only a few important differences between the Janakpur of then and now, and then I shall relate these change to the present situation of the mandal. First, since Samwat 1968 (1911 A.D.) during the time of Prime Minister Gandra Samsar, Sri Tin Sarkar gradually assumed direct control over the income and expenditure of the wealthy sthans. The reason for this was to prevent the mismanagement of temple funds thereby maximizing the revenue from the temple raikar lands which accrued to the Guthi Mal Office at Kathmandu and which the Ranas used to build schools, hospitals, bridges, resthouses and such projects for the welfare of the general public⁸. (Untouchables were not always considered members of the "general public". Resthouses and schools were often built for the use of Twice-born Hindus only). This policy of gradually taking over the management of sthans which were granted land by the King has been continued by Sri Panc Sarkar since the overthrow of the Rana regime. The Guthi Mal Office has been replaced by the Guthisansthan, which allocates sufficient funds to the sthans for their daily management, for the worship of the deity in the temple, and there are special allocations for religious festivals. All such items of expenditure from the salary of the mahant down to the purchase of chilli peppers in the bazar are fixed according to a schedule of expenses issued by the Guthisansthan. On the one hand, this policy prevented potentially corrupt mahants from deriving personal benefit from the temple wealth. For example, such a mahant might use the income from temple lands to purchase land in the name of his uterine brother. On the other hand, this policy crippled the activities of a potentially good mahant, who might use such income to attract sadhus to Janakpur and to strengthen the mandal through the offering of hospitality. Since some time now, the bhandara which the Ram Mandir mahant offered to the Bavan kuti mandal on the occasion of Vijay Dasami has ceased to exist, and the Ram Mandir mahant at present could not patronize another sadhu in the way Visveswar Giri patronized Ram Das.

Most sadhus, unlike householders, take pride in their independence, and if they are not independent they bemoan their situation. A householder would find it a matter of personal prestige and power to be in the employ of the state, but sadhus do not. Sadhus are their own Raja, and hence many sadhus resent or belittle the control which the Guthisansthan exercises over the mahants of the sthans. When I ask sadhus about the mahant of a sthan managed by the the Guthisansthan, a typical reply would be: "He is not a mahant; he is a nokar (servant)"⁹. The first sthan in the region of which Sri 3 Sarkar took over the management was Ram Mandir. Rather than have his sthan managed by the government and somewhat fearing the Rana government's motives the then mahant, Iswar Giri, fled to India taking a considerable amount of Ram Mandir's wealth with him. For the Bavan Kuti mandal

the result of this was that government administrators rather than a sadhu collected the revenue from those sadhus on Ram Mandir's raikar land. Sri 3 Sarkar appointed a sannyasi from Narphora Sthan (several miles west of Jaleswar in Muzzafurpur jilla, Bihar) as the new Ram Mandir mahant. The sannyasi of this sthan are meat-eaters, so that spiritual unity which existed for some time between the sannyasis of Ram Mandir and the bairagis was broken. Since then the Ram Mandir mahant has had little influence over the mandal.

Another reason for the decline of the mandal is that eighty years ago, a tenant on raikar land delivered to the zamindar of his mauja approximately ten maund of paddy (the equivalent of ten rupees) per bigha of land as land revenue (malpot). The zamindar retained 1/16th of the ten maund as his commission and forwarded the remainder onto the Sarkar Mal office. Ten maund of paddy was the equivalent of approximately one-third to one-half of the paddy harvest. Since then, the government commuted payment of malpot in kind to payment in cash, but the price of paddy in the bazar increased disproportionately to the increase in land revenue stipulated in cash. Today, on land the tenant pays 51 rupees per bigha as malpot, and the value of ten maund of rice in the bazar is approximately 1300 rupees. This has resulted in a process of subinfeudation whereby the tenant who was previously obliged to cultivate the land himself, can now sublet his land to another under the batai system, whereby the actual cultivator retains one-half of all produce of the land and delivers one-half to the tenant. The tenant from his half-share pays the malpot to the government and lives quite comfortably on the remainder¹⁰. Eighty years ago a bairagi could not take out raikar land for agricultural purposes because bairagis are not supposed to engage in agricultural work. Nor could a bairagi take out raikar land with the intention of subletting it to a cultivator under the batai system because the cultivator would claim one-half of the harvest and the zamindar would claim between one-third and one-half of the paddy harvest leaving the bairagi with practically nothing. In those days, bairagis were obliged either to live in a sthan or they could take small plot (about one kattha) of raikar land on which to build a kuti and then depend on alms to pay the malpot. They maintained themselves by begging from landowners or or by depending on the hospitality of the sthans possessing tax-free land. Eighty years ago, at Ratna Sagar and Janki Mandir, several hundred sadhus would gather daily to take their meal. Thus, in the case of the misconduct of a bairagi, the revoking of fire, food, and water by the sthans of the mandal was more than an idle threat. A bairagi ostracized from the mandal was more or less obliged to leave the town. Nowadays most kutis have their own raikar land which they let out on the batai system and thus these kutis are not dependent on the sthans.

Many of the new kutis of Janakpurdham are caste kutis and family kutis in which a caste council or a family manages the kuti income and expenditure. These kutis were built primarily as places of worship for members of the caste or the family concerned. As householders, they are less sensitive to the rules and institutions of the bairagi sect and unwilling to bear expenses which lay in the sadhu's interests rather than their own. A recent incident illustrates this point. Some time ago a thief stole an asth dhātu mūrti (an idol made of an alloy of eight different metals) from a family kuti. The thief removed the silver necklace and bangles from the idol and then, tossing the idol into a nearby pond, made his escape in the night. A day later a child bathing in the pond came upon the idol and gave it to the police who returned it the next day to the pujari of the kuti. The rules are quite specific in this case. An asth dhātu mūrti of a deity becomes that deity in a Vedic rite called prān pratistha in which a purohit installs the prān (soul of the deity) in the murti. If the deity is not fed food during a period of twenty-four hours, the pran leaves the idol, and the deity "dies". In such cases a purohit must be called to reinstall the prān in the mūrti. Until that happens the mūrti is merely a piece of metal. At the installation of the pran in the murti the sadhu must offer a bhandara to the mandal. It should be mentioned that many sadhus develop a very personal attachment to the idol which they worship. For those sadhus who are well advanced in their spiritual discipline, the idol comes to life in their presence and smiles upon them or speaks to them. Such sadhus only eat the prasad of their idol, and there is no point in offering food to a 'dead' (whose pran has departed) idol. So the pujari of this family kuti had not eaten cooked food for three days since the time of the theft. When the police returned the idol to the kuti, the pujari went to the householder who owned the kuti and told him the idol would require new clothes, a pran pratistha ceremony, and bhandara to the mandal. The householder saw no point to the bhandara, but did agree to purchase new clothes and call the purohit for the pran pratistha. The householder arrived at the kuti on the following day and recalcitrated even on the pran pratistha. He bought ten rupees of new clothes and told the pujari to dress the idol and put it back in the temple. The pujari, by begging from other sadhus, put together enough money to have the pran pratistha and then he returned the idol to the temple.

A fourth reason for the decline of the mandal is its increase in size. The mandal usually meets at a bhandara and today a kacca bhandara to feed the entire mandal requires 480 kilograms of rice, 280 kilograms of vegetables, and 120 kilograms of pulse. Adding to this the bidai of money and dhoti, a bhandara will cost the host at least 5000 rupees. There are very few sadhus in Janakpur who can afford to put together such a bhandara. Previously the Bavan Kuti mandal used to have highly differentiated rules for the bhandara each with its particular menu based upon

the kind of membership (solah ānnā, barah ānnā, ath ānnā) which the particular kuti held. These rules no longer exist today. Thus the mandal as a whole, meets rarely. Many new kutis in Janakpur have not even offered a bhandara to gain formal membership within the mandal.

A final reason is that one hundred years ago, only sadhus lived in Janakpur plus the servants, scribes, purohits, etc., who served in the temples and the agricultural labourers who tilled the temple land. There was no industry, there was abundant land, and there was no idea of socio-economic development. One could accumulate surplus wealth if one had land, but there were very few opportunities for investing that wealth. At present Janakpur is the rapidly growing capital of Dhanusa jilla and an important market centre for the eastern Terai and northern Bihar. The residential area of the town has swelled and secular interests (commercial, administrative, and industrial) predominate over the religious interests. Since sadhus controlled all the land within the present boundaries of the town, the recent socio-economic development of the town could only occur at the expense of the control which sadhus had over the land. For example, the mahant of Ratna Sagar, Narayan Das, (4.4.c) could deny Ram Das and the mairam the right to bathe in the pond beside Ratna Sagar sthan. The ponds of Janakpur belong to the sthans upon whose land they lie. But the sthans property is now managed by the Guthisansthan which has its royal charter. Meanwhile in 1962 by royal order the town pancayat was created which also was granted authority over the land and ponds of the town. The shopkeepers of the small market stalls which line some of the ponds pay land rent to the town pancayat rather than to the sthan or to the Guthisansthan. Until there is some court ruling or national law passed one cannot really say who "owns" the ponds, but the multiplicity of interests are such, that no mahant of a sthan could deny access to anyone, sadhu or householder, to a pond on his property.

4.6. The Bavan Kuti Mandal at present. Returning to the topic of section 4.4, regulating the internal affairs of the mandal, one may compare the past situation with the present with regard to the three baithaks and to the kinds of cases brought before the baithak. Since Samvat 1968 (1911 A.D.) the Ram Mandir baithak does not exist. The Ram Mandir mahant presided over that baithak by virtue of his rights to the land. It was precisely that right which Sri 3 Sarkar removed from the mahant by creating the Amanat Managery Office (rather they recognized Ram Mandir's rights to the land, but took away the right to manage that land). Tenants who defaulted in their payment were punished by the Managery Office (sadhus were not exempt from such punishment), and disputes concerning the land were settled by the Managery Office or by the court. Moreover with the arrival of sannyasi from Narphora Sthan

who ate meat, most bairagis ceased to respect the Ram Mandir Mahant, and thus the Ram Mandir Mahant exerted little, if any, personal or moral influence over the mandal.

Since Samvat 1970 (1913 A.D.) the Dasrath Mandir baithak has ceased to exist. The Matihani Man Mahant still possesses the authority to take over kutis which fall vacant but if there is any dispute, such as a sadhu claiming that he is the deceased mahant's disciple and thus the kuti is not vacant, the authority to settle this dispute resides with the court and not with the Man Mahant at the Dasrath Mandir baithak.

The Ratna Sagar baithak still exists, or rather the memory of the baithak exists because the tokna of the mandal is stored at Ratna Sagar. Any sadhu who wants to offer a bhandara must go to Ratna Sagar to settle the date with the pancayat and to borrow the tokna. But I have not heard of any disputes in recent years being brought before the Ratna Sagar baithak. Previously the Ratna Sagar baithak gave the authority to carry the Mithila Bihari murti and lead the madhya parikrama to Ram Das Acarya of Sita Kund Kuti and later the baithak withdrew that right and gave it to Kacauri Kuti. The mahant of a kuti in Janakpur recently tried to acquire the right to lead the parikrama with the Mithila Bihari murti, but he launched his attempt (which proved unsuccessful) through the court rather than through the Ratna Sagar baithak. Since the death of Ram Jiwan Das of Birarak Kuti and Bhagawan Das of Ratna Sagar I have not heard of any cases involving sexual incontinency, drinking of liquor, etc., brought before the baithak. It has been shown (4.4.6.) that in the past when the mandal as a group proved ineffective in regulating such matters all that could be done was for the mahants individually to regulate the matter. At present these offenses are self-regulated rather than mandal regulated.

Concerning the officers of the mandal there are still five panc, four rasoiya, two jalbhariya, and two kotwal. Their functions are more or less limited to the arrangement and preparation of a bhandara. Within the past two years there have been several bhandaras on the occasions of the deaths of a mahant. The Kumhar (potter) caste council offered a bhandara after sponsoring a Ramarca puja at their caste kuti. The Sri Mahant of the Sirsiya mandal who traces his spiritual descent back to Ratna Sagar, held a nine day sacrifice and invited the Bavan Kuti Mandal. But in view of the great expense involved in these bhandaras, the host is no longer obliged to invite the entire mandal. He informs the pancayat as to how much rice and money he has at his disposal and then the pancayat decides how many invitations to offer and who shall be invited. Poor kutis, however, do not even bother with this procedure. The quantity of rice in their granery could never even begin to fill the twelve paseri (60 kg.) tokna of the mandal so there is no point in going to Ratna Sagar. The

disciple of the deceased mahant will put together as much rice and dal as he can and then will prepare a bhandara and invite the neighbouring kutis.

In sum, what one might call the honorary functions of the mandal still exist although these functions are constrained by the financial resources of the sthans and kutis. The regulatory functions of the mandal, however, have more or less ceased to exist. Disputes concerning the succession of a mahantship usually go directly to the courts in the case of kutis and to the Guthisansthan in the case of the sthans without prior attempt at a settlement by the Ratna Sagar baithak. If a sadhu commits a crime against the sect, such as theft, which is also a civil offense, than redress may be sought through the courts. The mandal as a group is powerless to regulate offenses against the sect which are not a civil offenses. Each mahant in his turn will regulate the matter himself by ostracizing the fallen bairagi from his kuti.

GLOSSARY

Certain words, such as guru, nawab, dhoti, pancayat, etc., should be familiar to English readers. Otherwise all Nepali, Hindi, or Sanskrit words have been defined and written with proper diacritical marks at their first appearance within the essay. In order to refresh one's memory, words used more than once are defined once more below:

adālat	district court of justice
adhikārī	officer of the sthan, mandal, or khalsa who is responsible for managing the temple estate and executing the orders of the mahant.
akṣat	a mixture of rice, barley, and sesame seeds which is a symbol of blessing.
ānā	a coin whose value is 1/16th of the old rupee and which is used to express fractions. For example, someone recovering from an infected wound might say "four ana of the wound remains" meaning that all but 4/16th of the wound has healed.
baithak	meeting place; session, as in session of the House of Parliament.
bairāgī	desireless; epithet of a Vaisnavite sadhu.
bastra dhārī	a sadhu who wears clothes.
baṭāī	system of land tenure in which the cultivator pays one-half of all produce of the land to the owner. All costs of production are born by the cultivator. The land revenue, however, is paid by the owner to the state.

bhaṇḍāra	feast
bidāī	gift given by the host to the guest at the time of the guest's parting.
bighā	unit of land measurement in the Terai which is equivalent to 1.6 acres.
bintī patra	entreaty submitted by plaintiff to the court or to anyone whose authority it is to settle the dispute.
birtā	rights to land granted by the Raja or Rana to nobles, Brahmans, and mahants.
candan	sandlewood or certain types of claylike earth the paste of which is used by bairagis to apply the tilak to their forehead.
cilam	clay pipe
dhām	a word meaning place, dwelling, etc. For sadhus there are four dhams each lying in one of the four cardinal directions: Jagannath Puri in the east (Orissa), Rameswaram in the south (Tamil Nadu), Dwarika in the west (Gujarat), and Bhadrinath in the north (Uttar Pradesh). It is the goal of all sadhus, both bairagis and sannyasis, to make a pilgrimage to the four dhams at least once in their lifetime.
ḍūb	a kind of grass used on auspicious occasions as a symbol of blessing.
gādi, gaddī	throne
gurū dwāra	the sthan where one's guru dwells; i.e, where a bairagi was initiated into the sect.
gurū bhāī	sadhus initiated by the same guru.
hak	authority, right, claim.
jalbhariyā	officer of the sthan, mandal, or khalsa whose duty it is to fetch water for drinking and cooking purposes.
kaccā	raw, unripe, unpaved, imperfect.
kāṣṭha patra	inscription on wood.
kaṭṭhā	unit of land easurement equivalent to 1/20th of a bigha.
khālsā	used instead of sthan to refer to the organization of a group of travelling bairagis. Like the sthan the khalsa also has its mahant, adhikari, pujari, etc.
koṭwāl	messenger, temple guard.

koṭhārī	keeper of the storeroom and granery.
kutī	a cottage or hermitage, a small temple often no more than a simple thatched hut in which one or two bairagis dwell.
lāl mohar	the royal seal affixed on orders eissued by the king; such an order as issued by the king.
lāthī	a stout bamboo staff used to drive cattle, knock fruit from trees, defend oneself, etc.
mahant	the temporal and spiritual head of a sthan or khalsa.
mahātyāgī	"great renouncers" bairagis who renounce one step further from the tyagi stage. They wear no cotton clothing (a loincloth of the inner bark of banana tree is used instead) and do not live in any fixed place. Instead they pertetually travel across India and Nepal in groups called khalsa.
mālpot	land revenue paid to the state
mandir	temple
maujā	village as a revenue or administrative unit.
maund	a measure of weight equivalent to forty ser, or approximatelly forty kilograms.
pakkā	refined, ripe, paved, perfect.
parikrama	circumambulation.
prāṇ	one of the ten vital airs within the body and what gives life to all sentient beings. It is the pran which departs at the moment of death.
prāṇ pratiṣṭhā	the Vedic rite in which a purohit installs the pran in the idol of a deity.
prasād	food leavings of the deity which are eaten by sadhus and devotees.
pūjā	worship ceremony.
pūjārī	the officer of the sthan or khalsa who performs the worship ceremony and who offers cooked food to the deity.
raikar	a kind of land tenure in which the king retained the title to the land but rented out the right to cultivation to tenant farmers upon payment of malpot
rasoiyā	a cook
sādhu	anyone who follows a spiritual discipline [sadhna]; an ascetic.

sanad	a letter issued by Sri Panc or Sri Tin Sarkar appointing a sadhu to the mahantship of a sthan.
Śrī Pāñc Sarkār	the government of His Majesty the King.
Śrī Tīn Sarkār	the government of Nepal during the years when the Ranas usurped political power from the King.
sthān	place; the organization of a group of sadhus who live in a fixed place; a monastery.
supārī	betel nut.
ṭahlū	servant who assists in the kitchen.
tahsil	land revenue.
tilak	the forehead markings of a sadhu.
ṭoknā	a large brass cooking pot.
tulsī	the basil plant sacred to Vaisnavites.
tyāgī	a bairagi who has renounced the bastra dhari stage. He wears only a small cotton loincloth, smears his body with ashes, and keeps long matted hair.
varṇa	colour, class; the division of Hindu society into four categories based on relative purity; viz., Brahman, Ksatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra.

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FOOTNOTES

1/ In fact, the functions of the mahant and the adhikari vary according to the personality of the mahant. Some mahants take a great interest in the management of the temple lands in which case the adhikari is an officer with very few responsibilities. Other mahants pass their entire day in meditation, worship, and the reading of sacred texts in which case he abdicates entirely the task of managing the temple to the adhikari.

2/ The situation is not quite so straightforward as this because both bairagis and householders continue to observe the caste rules of commensuality. Neither a householder of Brahman caste nor a bairagi of Brahman birth will accept kacca food (rice for example) from a bairagi of barber caste birth. On the other hand, no bairagi regardless of his caste at birth will accept kacca food from a householder regardless of the householder's caste. Even if a Brahman householder offers a bhandara to the mandal, the Sri Mahant will send the mandal rasoiya to cook the food. The situation is thus ambivalent. As an act of merit such a bhandara implies the bairagi's superior purity yet a Brahman will not accept kacca food from a sudra bairagi because of the bairagi's inferior purity.

This situation exists primarily with the Vaisnavites for they admit householders of all castes into the sect. In principle sannyasi and Kanphata Yogis only accept twice-born Hindus into the sect and so I have been told they do not observe caste rules of commensuality within the sect. A fallen bairagi returns to his caste at birth. A fallen sannyasi or Kanphata Yogi is relegated to a caste called sannyasi and yogi and is treated as a pure Sudra by householders.

3/ Even though a bairagi renounces his family ties if he should offer a bhandara, his parents and relatives will be hailed by the assembled sadhus.

4/ There are a number of different forehead markings (tilak) within the sect. The four kinds of tilak most commonly found are lal sri, laskri, bendi, and caturbhujii. A bairagi acquires the same tilak as of his guru. If a sadhu should become the mahant of a kuti which is not his guru dwara it may be possible therefore that his tilak is of a different kind than the deceased mahant in which case the Sri Mahant applies the deceased mahant's tilak to the new mahant's forehead.

5/ I heard of three such situations as this. This ceremony happened in only one of them. In the other two the sadhus dispensed with any such ceremony. These two kutis are both located in Janakpur and the sadhu from outside who assumed the mahantship was too poor to offer a bhandara to the mandal. Thus there was no installation ceremony either.

6/ Makwanpur is located approximately half-way between Kathmandu and the Terai, west of the Bagmati and east of Hitauda.

7/ In 1886 A.D. one rupee could buy one maund of rice. In 1975 A.D. 130 rupees will buy one maund of rice.

8/ Regmi 1968: 77 - 78.

9/ The pujari of Ram Mandir reports to work like any other government fonctionnaire signing the daily book at the Guthi office before going to the temple.

10/ Anyone familiar with Mahesh Regmi's exhaustive study of land tenure and taxation in Nepal will be aware of my debt to him here.

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