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*Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery*

## **The People of India, Volume One**

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AHEER.  
(13)

An Aheer, according to Menu, is of mixed origin, the offspring of a Brahmin father and of a woman of the Ambashtha, or medical, caste. The Abhiras, however, were a pastoral tribe, who settled, about the beginning of the Christian era, on or near the lower course of the Indus, on a tract known to classical geographers as the Abiria of Ptolemy, lying north of the Sahyadic mountain, and of Syrastrène. From the pastoral habits of the tribe, its name, in a more or less corrupted form, came to be generally applied to the shepherds and cowherds of Hindostan. They form a distinct caste, and are especially numerous in the north-western provinces, where they are distinguished as three races, acknowledging no other connection than the name of Ahir, which is common to all. The three races are the Nand-bansa (race), Jad- or Yadu-bansa, and Gwal- (Gowala, cowherd) bansa. The first are most numerous in the Central Doab, the second in the Upper Doab and west of the Jumna, the last in the Lower Doab and in the province of Benares. The two first are numerous subdivided, and bear distinctive appellations, taken generally from the place where they reside. Some of the Jad-bansis have embraced Islam, and, in common with certain other tribes, are known as Rángars. Tribes of Ahirs are also numerous in Rajpootana and the Punjab. In the Delhi territory the Ahirs eat, drink, and smoke with Jats and Goojurs, and in some cases with Rajpoots. The several subdivisions intermarry, avoiding only the four families nearest in affinity; and when they are much intermixed, as in the Delhi district, with Goojurs and Jats, they conform to the usage of those tribes in the marriage of the widow of an elder brother to the next in seniority. In some parts of the Bengal territories they are still called Abhirs.

The Ahir tribes extended to the centre and south of India. They are believed to have once possessed considerable power as independent princes, in the Deccan and Telingana, and the period of the "shepherd kings" is often referred to in local tradition, as that which preceded the establishment of regular monarchies by Hindu princes. Hill forts are frequently found to bear names traceable to these shepherd

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