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India's TRIBES

In the name of tribal development, are we going off-course?

Defining a tribe

The sanctity of space

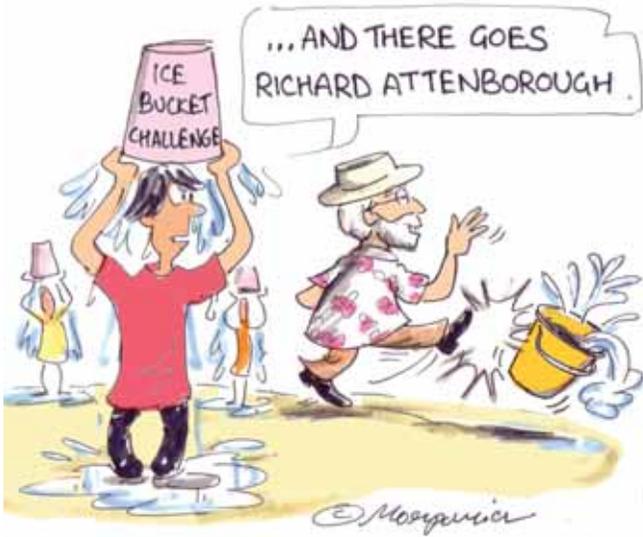
KNOW INDIA BETTER

The Magic of Pushkar

FACE TO FACE

Soumitra Chatterjee

MORPARIA'S PAGE



THE FOUR STAGES OF BJP LIFE.



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OCTOBER 2014

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Printed & Published by
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One India One People Foundation,
Mahalaxmi Chambers, 4th floor,
22, Bhulabhai Desai Road,
Mumbai - 400 026
Tel: 022-2353 4400
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e-mail: oiopfoundation@gmail.com /
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Printed at:
Graphtone (India) Pvt. Ltd.
A1 /319, Shah & Nahar
Industrial Estate. S. J. Marg,
Lower Parel (W)
Mumbai - 400 013
www.oneindiaonepeople.com
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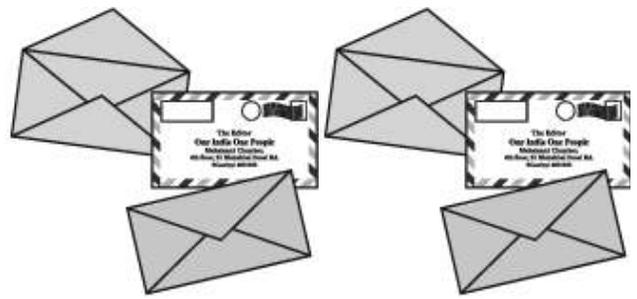
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We need a referendum on reservation

This is with reference to the article published in your esteemed monthly magazine of August 2014, 'Quotas - an electoral gimmick' by Dr. P M Kamath. Reservation is linked to casteism in our Indian society. I don't agree with Mr. Kamath that reservation has divided the society. Caste existed in ancient India. 'Annihilation of Caste' by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar is the best book for anyone who wants to know more on this topic. Reservation was maybe for 10 years Mr. Kamath.

But so long as the caste system and social inequality prevails in our society, reservation must continue. Reservation has benefitted the dalits and other backward classes who were oppressed and suppressed. Whether to continue reservation or discontinue it, the people of this country have to decide. The people are supreme in a democracy. Let there be a referendum on this issue.

– Sanjay Jayakumar Patravali
Dharwad.



Where the past and present meet

I really enjoyed reading the Know India Better article on Hyderabad by Gustasp and Jeroo Irani in your September issue. It was a really enjoyable article, written lucidly, with many anecdotes and details. The shenanigans of the Nawabs of Hyderabad never cease to amaze and the world they occupied is gone forever! The article has touched on all aspects of Hyderabad, including its delectable cuisine. There may be another more modern version of Hyderabad today, but the past nostalgically, continues to linger. Kudos to OIOP for highlighting such timeless cities. I hope to read more such features in your interesting magazine.

– Sreevalsan Menon, Mumbai

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Tribe, Tribal and Tribal Cricket

For all the fuss we make over our tribes and tribals, there was a time when they figured prominently in our cricket agenda, discovers V Gangadhar.

INDEPENDENT India had many problems to face from its infancy. These created tensions which led to divisions, sometimes leading to bloodshed, and figured prominently in the political agenda and in the Indian Constitution. But there was considerable goodwill for India. Many nations extended their hand in friendship and offered co-operation and economic aid. A huge, poor, over-populated, and newly-independent India suffered shortages of all kinds – food, fuel, technology, transport facilities, schools, roads, materials for primary education, in short, every essential component of life.

Yet, India battled on. Her sheer physical size, population and inspiring independence struggle under Gandhiji caught public attention. Despite poverty and other problems, poor India did not withdraw from the sports arena nor from international sporting events. Though not fully independent, our national cricket team undertook a full tour of England in 1946, and despite pangs of Partition, toured Australia in 1947-48. No one bothered that we were thrashed by Don Bradman's powerful team. The world admired how we rose to these challenges. In 1948-49, we hosted the West Indies team for a full tour.

Tours by foreign teams even then attracted huge crowds, but no tour was planned for 1949-50. Indian and foreign cricket authorities did not want to miss out on the financial bonanza of a 1949-50 winter tour. But with the international tour calendar full, no foreign country could tour India. The English winter was going barren and its cricketers were all set to lose a lucrative official foreign tour. English cricket brains came together and under former England wicketkeeper and Lancashire player, George Duckworth, planned a three-month unofficial Indian tour with players from cricket playing nations who were free and not committed to official matches. Though some of the top ranking English and Australian professionals were resting, there was a lot of talent available from these two nations (including former test players), besides star players from West Indies, New Zealand and so on. A powerful 17-member team was chosen with Duckworth as manager. 'Jock' Livingstone, former Australian

opener who played for Northamptonshire in English county cricket was made captain, the great West Indian batsman Frankie Worrell was the vice-captain and the team had enough variety and all round brilliance.

But for one name, George Tribe, an Australian all-rounder who had played three or four test matches for his country. The Indian cricket Board was puzzled at Tribe's inclusion because they did not know anything about him. Intrigued by his name 'Tribe', Indian Board officials wondered what kind of a tribal he was. Was he an Australian tribal, an untouchable, who would not be welcome in India? Was he a genuine Aborigine and kept out of Australian mainstream? How would he integrate with the rest of the Indian and Australian teams? Cricket, especially English cricket always had such divisions, like the "Players" and "Gentlemen", where the former played cricket for a livelihood and had to put up with an inferior status, while the 'gentlemen' played cricket for pleasure, were treated as royals and always led England. This led to strange anomalies.

The nation's top cricketers like Hutton, Compton or Alec Bedser (No. 1 bowler) could not share hotel accommodation with 'gentlemen' like Peter May, Norman Yardley, who were addressed as 'Sir' by the professionals. They had different entrances and exits from the ground.

It was clearly a caste system which existed well into the 1960's. A shadow of this was revealed in the 'Tribe' affair in India during the Commonwealth team's tour. But India was more tolerant. India's princes got along well with Tribe who returned to India with the next Commonwealth team. Tribe was not isolated, he visited palaces, monuments and other sights without any problems and performed brilliantly for his

team, which won the series. He was not interviewed by the Tribal authorities of the Government of India, nor taken to visit tribal colonies. It was clear he was a 'Tribe', but not a 'tribal'. That is INDIA FOR YOU! ■



The writer is a well-known satirist.

Defining a tribe

The number of scheduled tribes in India has grown from 212 in the 1950s to about 650 today. While more groups are clamouring to be classified as tribals to take advantage of the special status accorded to them, no group wants to be declassified. Many tribes today have successfully assimilated with the general population while preserving their unique identity. Then, should they still be accorded special status? asks Prof. Yogesh Atal.

GONE are the days when India was neatly classified into three geographical zones: Tribal, Rural, and Urban. Such classification is no longer tenable. While rural and urban are designations signifying the geographical habitat and the mode of economy, the word tribal is basically an ethnic category. The so-called 'tribals' live today both in rural and in urban areas. Of course, some of them still continue to live in remote areas that are distant both in terms of accessibility and connectivity. But, they too are no longer total isolates. Such people live both in their past and in the ever-changing present.

Social welfare agencies – both government and non-government – continue to lump all the tribes together. Tribes in India differ in terms of racial characteristics, ways of living, standards of life, literacy, and level of economic and political development. Even within the same tribe, one may find noticeable differences. North-East India which is known for its tribal heterogeneity is also the one that has more signs of modernity. People in the state of Arunachal Pradesh speak fluent Hindi and are most familiar with Indian cinema. On festive occasions they may wear their traditional attire but in their daily lives, people belonging to different tribal communities wear clothes similar to the rest of India.

The growing tribes

The list of tribes that are included in the Schedule, as per the Indian Constitution, was compiled way back in the 1950s on the basis of their listing in the 1931 Census. But there too, one finds a significant departure. The censuses of 1921 and 1931, conducted during the British regime, classified each named tribal community by the religion into which the members had converted and termed the rest

as 'Tribals'. They were also generally referred to as 'animists'. In their enthusiasm to compile the list of Scheduled Tribes (ST), however, the Indian officialdom ignored that vital distinction of conversion and merged the entire populace bearing the common name into one tribe.

That original list carried 212 names of tribes constituting 6.8 percent of India's population. Today, that number has burgeoned; the official list now numbers around 650 tribes. The new additions are the result of: (i) state wise recognition of tribes – the same tribal group spread over three adjacent states is classified as three tribes; (ii) granting of tribal status to groups who successfully agitated their cause and got reclassified as tribes. Even today, there are several groups clamouring for a tribal status and are willing to go down the 'hierarchy' from where their ancestors rose to an upper caste status in the Hindu caste system. This is an "unintended" consequence of the policy of special privileges and reservation. While no group wishes to be struck out from the ST list, more and more communities are craving for a 'low' status. With tongue firmly in cheek, the agitationists publicly claim that they are fighting the cause of their down-trodden brethren.

The government has so far failed to provide a good definition of Tribe and has come up with the following criteria to judge the candidature of a group seeking the tribal status: *primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact, and backwardness.*

It may be noted that these criteria are not employed for those who are already listed as ST. If applied, many of them, to be sure, will have to be de-scheduled. Similarly, the new

It seems paradoxical that while the treatment of tribes as "anthropological zoos" was rejected way back in the 1950s, anthropologists still continue to highlight their 'exotic' character and museumise their cultural products. We become advocates of "preservation", almost as if we have vested interest in their alleged 'backwardness'.

groups seeking ST status are stretching the intent of these criteria in claiming a ST status for themselves. In doing so, they refer to their similarities to the existing ST groups to prove that their situation is the same. Some even go to the extent of seeking the ouster of the current groups from the ST category: they maintain, “*if we do not qualify with similar characteristics, then they should also be ousted.*” The Gujjars of Rajasthan in their 2007 agitation made such an argument against the Meena community.

The point is: these official criteria are too vague to judge the candidature of any group as a tribe. Anthropologists, however, unquestioningly accepted the official definition. This is rather unfortunate. The implication is clear: academic research is carried out along political lines without raising crucial issues of theoretical significance.

In this regard, it is important to mention the recommendation of the Lokur Committee which pointed out that “in 1931 and 1935, as well as in 1950 and 1956, it was acknowledged that every tribe need not be regarded as requiring special treatment; the list of 1931 was of “primitive tribes” while the list of 1935 was of “backward tribes”. The Committee was firmly of the view that “... tribes whose members have by and large mixed up with the general population are not eligible to be in the list of Scheduled Tribes”.

Tradition vs Modernity debate should end

We need to remind ourselves that while early anthropologists studied tribes as non-changing phenomena, there was an underlying assumption that these are already a part of the evolutionary ladder and are likely to move away to a different destination up in the ladder. A tribal status is, thus, a transitional status in the same manner as, for example, youth is. In due course of time, a group has to give up the tribal status and assume the status waiting for it on the next rung. In other words, we need to ask the pertinent question: *When does a Tribe cease to be a Tribe?*

If we took recourse to history, each one of us can claim to have belonged to one tribe or the other even after enjoying the status of a Hindu or a Muslim caste for several generations. We need to insist that there cannot be a path-reversal, of moving backward. It is wrong to assume that once a tribal, always a tribal.

It is in this sense, that the clubbing together of all statistics for the now eight percent of the population designated as “tribal” serves little purpose. How can we, as students of



Tribal Sumi women in traditional attire

culture, accept such merger into an administratively convenient category? Are we not still thinking in terms of preserving anthropological zoos?

Whenever we talk of issues related to tribal development in academic seminars we adopt the tone of preservation and highlight the so-called evil effects of modernisation, and now of globalisation. I am of the view that there is a need to differentiate between the two concerns, namely that of recording for our posterity the prevailing patterns of behaviour and elements of material culture as part of human history, and that of documenting the process of change and transformation that various communities are undergoing. As cultural relativists, we must abstain from giving judgment about what is good and what is bad. Our study of the indigenous knowledge – be it about the stars and the clouds, or about herbs and medicines, or the skills of cultivating land – should not be done with the intent of its glorification and claiming it to be superior to scientific knowledge of the modern times. Where it is indeed superior, it must be widely adopted and universalised, but where it is mundane, it needs to be replaced. If a tribal patient is suffering from a malady that can be successfully cured by an outside intervention, it will be fruitless to propagate an ineffective indigenous treatment. As researchers, we should neither be the protagonists of tradition, nor adversaries of modernity.

Historians of knowledge generally fall into two categories: the *adumbrationists* who attribute everything to the past, to tradition, and do not acknowledge any novelty of innovation; and the *palimpsests* who refuse to acknowledge the shoulders

Maxim

We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But the ocean would be less because of that missing drop.

– Mother Teresa

of the past on which the present is mounted. Time has come when the fruitless debate on tradition versus modernity needs to be closed. Let us accept that we cannot recreate our past and live in it; and also that the present and the future require the foundations of the past. It is the amalgam of the old and the new that defines our present and would fashion our future.

A politically desirable continuity of the confusion should, in my view, not become the basis for objective portrayal of the existing reality. It is time that we, as social scientists, propose the definition of tribe as a *transitional* structural unit and focus our attention on the study of the processes of its transformation into a larger society as well as its assimilation as a subset in a larger social system.

It seems paradoxical that while the treatment of tribes as "anthropological zoos" was rejected way back in the 1950s, anthropologists still continue to highlight their 'exotic' character and museumise their cultural products. We become advocates of "preservation", almost as if we have vested interest in their alleged 'backwardness'.

Recent researches have also indicated that while cultural considerations are important we must not become advocates of non-change. The key concerns regarding the future of cultures

are generally expressed in questions such as these: Will economic and technological progress destroy the cultural diversity and bastardize our cultures? Will we witness a return of intolerant chauvinism that would make cultures retreat to their shells? Will there be a judicious fit between the old and the new? Where are we going? Can we change the course? ■

The writer is an internationally acclaimed sociologist who has authored a number of books and edited nearly 40 books and monographs for UNESCO including a trilogy on Poverty. He worked with UNESCO for nearly 23 years and retired as its Dy. Assistant Director General in 1997. He is among the pioneers in the social sciences to write and publish in Hindi, and popularise social sciences through the medium of Hindi. He is also a poet and litterateur. The writer was Member of the High-Powered Committee appointed by the Government of Rajasthan to examine the demand of the Gujjars for inclusion in the ST category. He now serves as a Member of the Administrative Reform Group of the Planning Board of Rajasthan. He is also a Professor Emeritus at the Madhya Pradesh Institute of Social Science Research, Ujjain and a Member of the Indian National Commission for Co-operation with UNESCO, Ministry of Human Resource Development, GOI.



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Drafting the National Tribal Policy is half the work done

Prof. Vinay Kumar Srivastava discusses at length the definition of the word 'Tribe' and the 2006 Draft National Policy on Tribals which covers all relevant topics related to tribal welfare. All that remains he says, is for the Draft to be discussed, improved and adopted with the active involvement of the tribal community.

THE Draft of the National Policy on Tribals was released in February 2004, during the tenure of the NDA government. In the past, on many occasions, the need for a tribal policy was felt, but a properly formed policy document could never emerge. In fact, it was thought that Jawaharlal Nehru's five-point foreword to Verrier Elwin's *A Philosophy for NEFA* (1959) was nothing short of a policy document. It is well known that Nehru's foreword has been the sheet-anchor of the programmes of tribal development and welfare in India.

Then, in July 2006, under the direction of the UPA government, another Draft was circulated. The two versions of the Draft were scarcely discussed, which is an indication that tribes and their problems have always remained 'decentred', at the mercy of the State.

The second Draft, impressively written, is at least five times longer than the first. The Draft is divided into twenty-three sections, each further broken down into points. It takes care not to leave out any matter of importance to tribes. If the first Draft meted out perfunctory treatment to tribal problems, sometimes displaying its insensitivity, the second is far more sensitive and responsible. It is pivoted on the theme of inclusive and holistic development.

What is a tribe?

One of the major problems in tribal studies today pertains to the 'definition' of 'tribe'. The criteria the B.N. Lokur Committee laid down for listing Scheduled Tribes are: an ensemble of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the outside world, and backwardness. After recapitulating these, the Draft notices that 'even all these broad criteria are not applicable to Scheduled Tribes today.' It notes that tribal communities "...are known to dwell in compact areas, follow a community way of life, in harmony with nature, and have a uniqueness of culture, distinctive customs, traditions and beliefs which are simple, direct and non-acquisitive by nature."

The above quotation from the Draft presents a frozen picture

of tribes. Contrarily, empirical studies point out that no more are tribes in 'compact areas'. The 'community way of living' has also broken down. Tribal families are moving out of their areas in search of jobs. Sometimes they have to travel thousands of miles to reach a suitable location where their never-ending struggle for survival begins. Tribal territories now have residents from various shades of life and strata, who not only demean tribal practices, but also take advantage of their powerlessness and gullibility. It is pertinent to note that when developmental projects are implemented, almost 40 percent of the persons permanently displaced from their native habitats are tribal.

The Draft notices that tribes are scattered 'over all the States/Union Territories, except Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, and the Union Territories of Pondicherry and Chandigarh. While these areas do not have tribes, a large number of tribals have moved to these areas, where they work as domestic and shop servants, rickshaw-pullers, loaders and coolies, vendors of newspapers and magazines at traffic junctions. Many of them have also ended up as beggars, destitutes, sex-workers and even petty criminals. The harrowing experiences of these people – of being underpaid and ridiculed and the constant beatings and abuses from their employers and law-enforcing agencies, sexual exploitation of their women and children – are documented in newspapers and research publications.

The de-notified, nomadic and semi-nomadic communities

However, certain tribes are victims of problems emerging out of their historical existence, leading to their stigmatisation. We have here in mind the examples of de-notified communities, and nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes. Writers on tribal issues (and so does the Draft) forget de-notified communities. Their sufferings and episodes of de-humanisation are heart-rending. Being victims of the 'stigma of criminality', their community suffers as a whole for crimes committed by a few stray members or even when a crime was not committed by any one of them. The 'nomadic' and 'semi-nomadic' communities suffer from the same stigmas. The erstwhile

relations of synergism the nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists had with peasant and farming communities have now become one of hostility and antagonism. No more are they considered useful depositors of animal manure, but a nuisance to the germinating or standing fields. The result is that each year conflicts, often bloodied, take place between peregrinating pastoralists and peasants.

Who are the Primitive Tribal Groups?

Section 12 of the Draft deals with Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs), a list of 75 Scheduled Tribes, created in 1973, who are supposed to be more 'backward' than the others. The following criteria have been used for their classification, viz. pre-agricultural level, dwelling in isolated and remote habitations, small numbers, near-constant or declining population, low levels of literacy, and economic and social backwardness. Recent data on their population seems to be unavailable, which is why the figures of 1991 Census are used, when their population was 1.32 million.

Regarding the criteria for their identification, the Draft submits that there is no need to undertake such a project, since currently there is no proposal to add any more communities to the list of Primitive Tribes. Further, the Draft suggests that since the word 'primitive' is 'derogatory', it must be changed. Retaining the same acronym, PTGs, it suggests that these communities may be called 'Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups'; but it also observes that this change in name 'may be merely cosmetic'. The main idea behind Primitive Tribes is that these communities demand special attention because they lag far behind the other Scheduled Tribes in indexes of development. They are 'more vulnerable to hunger, starvation, malnutrition, and ill health.'

It has been seen that the words that replace those which have 'derogatory overtones', in course of time acquire their own sets of stereotypes and disparaging notions. For instance, when the word 'tribe' replaced the earlier words such as 'primitive' or 'savage', it was thought that the former was value-neutral, free from prejudices; but today, it has acquired its own images, like the ones that were associated with earlier terms. Ask a layperson about the images that come in mind when the word 'tribe' is used, and the answer could vary from 'people living in hills, mountains, forests and deserts, far away from the "maddening crowds" to "people who wear feather hoods and bead and shell jewellery".'

The word 'primitive' should certainly be dropped, but not replaced by any other term, because of its likelihood of acquiring the same pejorative images over time. Rather, the existing list of Primitive Tribes may simply be called as those of 'Tribes Requiring Urgent Attention from the State'. This in fact is the basic idea behind the concept of Primitive Tribes.

The Draft divides the Primitive Tribes into two categories, depending upon their respective degrees of isolation. This attempt is made to draw attention to their specific needs so that culturally-rooted and holistic programmes may be devised for them. In the first category are included those who are 'insulated from the surrounding populations and are placed in isolated ecological environments'. Its examples are the Jarawa, Sentinelese, Shompen, Cholanaicken, etc. The second category includes those tribes (such as the Birhor, Chenchu, JenuKuruba) which are "located on the fringes of 'mainstream' population and have some contact with them."

The first category of the PTGs is termed the 'heritage group'. No such succinct term has been improvised for the second category. Although captivating, the term 'heritage group' should be avoided, for it points towards their evolutionary status, as if they are remnants of the first kind of humans who inhabited the earth. In biological terms it also implies that they are carriers of the primordial (and uncontaminated) genetic stock.

Moreover, it is utopian to imagine that the 'heritage groups' are insulated from the outside world; they certainly are not an 'island unto themselves'. Studies show that communities of the Jarawa and Cholanaicken have come in contact with their neighbouring population, and gradually these contacts are increasing. Often, the Jarawa come out of their forests to the Andaman Trunk Road, demanding tobacco and items of food from the travelers. With respect to the Sentinelese and Shompen, though contacts of this type have yet not been established, they definitely know about the external world and have been periodically receiving gifts from visitors to their islands, who happen to be from administrative and research services.

Now the hope is that the Draft policy is widely-discussed and implemented. The 'targeted beneficiaries' wait ceaselessly for their lot to ameliorate. Such a state of disenchantment contributes to separatist tendencies and ethno-political movements. It is imperative, against this backdrop, that the Draft is discussed nation-wide, improved, and adopted, with the close and active involvement of the tribal people. The Draft covers a broad arena of economic, social, and political issues that confront the tribes. And the questions of what is a tribe and what is meant by this term, are central to any discourse on tribes in India. ■



The writer is Professor of Anthropology, University of Delhi. His areas of interest and specialisation include work on comparative religion, caste system, family dynamics, medical systems, and anthropological theory and methods. He has also authored a number of books, monographs and research articles on anthropology and has taught sociology at Hindu College, University of Delhi.

We, the Adivasi People of India

That the tribal communities of India have been left behind in the march of progress is a well-known fact. Prof. R.K. Mutatkar presents a case study in Maharashtra to prove that this need not be the case especially if community members and non-governmental agencies are actively involved.

THE tribal communities in India, listed in the Indian Constitution as Scheduled Tribes or STs, constitute about 8 percent of India's population. These communities listed as Indigenous People in U.N. terminology, are branded as *Adivasi*, *Vanvasi* and *Janjati* in India. Indian Constitution provides special provisions to facilitate their development and to bring them into the mainstream of society, using the principle of equity. The objective has been to fill the developmental gap caused by geographical isolation of the tribes in the forests and hills since historical times. Abundant references to *Adivasis* are found in Ramayan and Mahabharat. For instance, the epics narrate the exploitation of Eklavya, the life and times of Shabari, and Lord Rama becoming a forest dweller on exile from Ayodhya.



Dais from Gadchiroli

Tribal communities lived their lives in their small kingdoms, such as the Bhils, the Gonds and the Santhals, and in the North East, which are today known as seven sister states of India. Their lives were disturbed by expanding empires of the Mughals and later by the British. Martyrs like Birsa Munda and Tantya Bhil who fought the British were honoured by naming the respective jails in Ranchi and Khandwa after them.

Commercial exploitation of the forests by the British continued after independence by the forest departments. This disturbed the livelihood of tribal communities, forcing them

into poverty and starvation. Traditionally, tribal people have collected food only as per their need from the forests and have never been producers of marketable surplus food.

Inspiring tribal customs

It is worth examining the other, finer nuances of the tribal society. No tribal woman is ever molested or raped by a tribal man. In a reverse custom, parents of the bride are paid a 'bride

price!' A tribal woman has the freedom to divorce a man citing incompatibility, or even infertility, whereby a part of the bride price is returned, as decided by the traditional judicial Panchayat. Traditionally, cows are not milked since cow's milk is meant for the calf. Thus we can see that tribal culture is in tune with nature.

The tribal people as Indian citizens,

have equal voting rights. Legislative and statutory seats are reserved for them at all levels from village Gram Panchayat, all the way to Parliament. There is a provision for reservations in public employment and in educational institutions. As a result, attempts are often made by non-tribal communities to acquire ST status using the political bargaining techniques of vote-bank. Such attempts as frequently reported in the mass media in Maharashtra have included the claims of shepherds (Dhangars), fisherfolk (Koli), Halba Koshti (Weavers) and Gujjars in Rajasthan.



A Bhila woman with her grandchild

There is a Tribal Sub Plan to address the needs of tribal areas and communities for speedy development. The governance of tribal areas and tribal communities in the North-East and so-called 'Mainland India' are addressed differently in the Indian Constitution.

Taking examples from Maharashtra, almost 9 percent of the tribal people have been living in isolated and exclusive geographical areas in such districts as Pune, Nasik, Ahmednagar, Thane (recently on 15th August 2014, a new tribal-dominant 36th district of Palghar has been carved out), Raigarh, Nandurbar (carved out from Dhule district), Amravati, Yavatmal and Gadchiroli (carved out from Chandrapur). Nandurbar which has 75 percent tribal rural population continues to be the lowest ranked district in Maharashtra according to the Human Development Report of the government both in 2002 and 2013, inspite of the Tribal Sub Plan. Melghat area comprising Dharni and Chikhaldara taluks in Amravati district are frequently reported to be suffering from malnutrition and child deaths. Gadchiroli district in Naxal afflicted area, bordering Bastar in Chhattisgarh, and Jawhar and Mokhada tribal taluks in Thane (now Palghar), next to Mumbai megapolis, also suffer from acute malnutrition and water scarcity. Karjat taluk in Raigad district, again next to Mumbai, have tribal communities living in hamlets, surrounded by farm houses of affluent city owners. Tribal people are the most deprived people in Indian society.

The Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi had incorporated the *Adivasis* as part of his 18 constructive programmes. Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru had advocated five principles focusing on tribal development along the lines of their culture, single window administration, developing their skills and using the local human resources.

The movements for tribal amelioration

Many voluntary organisations in Maharashtra and Gujarat

spearheaded spread of education among the tribals, prominent social workers among them being Thakkar Bappa, B.G. Kher (first Chief Minister of Bombay according to 1935 Act), Acharya Bhise, Dadasaheb Bidkar, Tarabai Vartak, Anutai Wagh and so on. The communist leader Smt. Godavari Parulekar spearheaded the revolt of Warli tribes along the western coast, against their landlords. Within tribal communities in Maharashtra, there are ethnic disparities in socio-economic levels. The Mahadeo Koli, Kokna, Raj Gonds, and Andh are closer to peasant communities such as Kunbi, while the Katkari are the most deprived and educationally backward. The government has identified Madia Gonds, Kolams and Katkari as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) with a view to focus on special facilities and schemes for their development.

Despite the Tribal Sub Plan administered by the Tribal Development Department with a budgetary provision of 9 percent of State budget commensurate with the 9 percent S.T. population in Maharashtra, the major problem of malnutrition and child mortality persists. To address these issues, a joint project was offered by the Government of Maharashtra to the two voluntary organisations - Maharashtra Association of Anthropological Sciences (MAAS), Pune and Comprehensive Rural Health Project (CRHP), Jamkhed, during 2005-2013, under the leadership of Dr.R.S. Arole, Mr. Padmabhusan, and Prof. R.K.Mutatkar, anthropologist, and the author of this article.

A case study: project on tribal malnutrition

We had the privilege of undertaking an experiment in practicing anthropology through our voluntary agency, MAAS, established in 1976, to conduct interventions in about 250 tribal villages in seven districts and nine *tehsils* of Maharashtra. It covered a population of about 1,70,000 tribal people. The intervention was wholly funded by the state government and primarily aimed, as per the government order, at bringing down malnutrition of tribal children in response to a *suo motu* injunction of Mumbai High Court.

Objectives of the project

- To develop a sustainable model to reduce malnutrition and related neonatal, infant and under-five child mortality and morbidity among tribal children.
- To identify the means to develop sustainable interventions for development in the field of health, education, livelihood, training and capacity building, community development, and to develop ways to maintain cultural tribal identity.
- To develop leadership qualities among tribal men and women volunteers.
- To work in partnership with government to understand and work towards bridging the gaps in implementation of government's tribal development plan.

We launched a project entitled "Comprehensive and Sustainable Human Development of the Tribal People of Maharashtra". Using the anthropological theory of holism and functionalism, our initial inputs were in the area of health. But as per the concept of functional integration of culture, we also provided inputs in education, in community organisation, such as empowering the Gram Panchayats and Mahila Mandals, intersectoral coordination, involving the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) and health department functionaries. We also introduced puppetry to supplement traditional art forms to generate awareness. We aimed at raising the self-confidence and self-esteem of the tribal people. The programme was implemented by about 250 male and 250 female volunteers from the tribal villages and hamlets. They were paid ₹ 250 per month as an honorarium for the voluntary work. The traditional health care providers such as the *Dai* and the local healer were involved.

Some of the approaches included keeping a medicine box for common ailments with every volunteer, distribution of seeds for kitchen garden, distribution of clothing to new born to protect against respiratory infections and providing supplementary food fortified with Ayurvedic herbs to lactating women, and ready to eat, pre-cooked 'Sattu' powder to children under three years of age. Pregnant women were given a cooked meal once a day in the second and third trimesters at the volunteer's home.

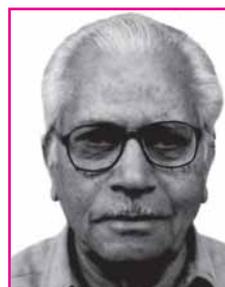
There was a measurable impact on the birth weight of new borns, and reduction of malnutrition as per the Anganwadi scale. Due to 'capacity building' exercises conducted, these 500 volunteers are now empowered to undertake programmes of similar nature in their respective villages. They have also understood the cause effect relationship of weight and malnutrition, since the children were weighed every fortnight and charting of weight and other documentation was done by the volunteers. *Dai* huts were constructed in the villages as a sanitary place for institutional delivery by the *Dai*. Training in birthing practices was given to female volunteers as also to *Dais* to upscale their skills.

To put it briefly, anthropological approach has been practised to understand processes of human development and to address the needs of the people. It was found necessary to understand the functioning of the government system with

regard to tribal development. This programme has also provided a model of Government-NGO Partnership by installing the joint monitoring system at the State and Block level.

As anthropologists, we have learnt the necessity to widen the definition of holism, going beyond the ethnography of a tribal community as if it were an isolate. We have to understand the interaction between the macro decisions and issues of micro level implementation. Vision development of volunteers motivated them to work for their own communities which enhanced their self-esteem and self-confidence, bestowing on some of them formal positions of authority and employment, such as becoming members of Gram Panchayats or *anganwadi sevika*.

The 500 male and female volunteers were presented in person at a media briefing which was also attended by a Tribal Cabinet Minister and the Tribal Commissioner of Maharashtra, at Nasik on 22 November 2012. Some of them articulated their experiences about the skills and empowerment they received from the programme. The tribal women who had not travelled beyond 20 kms, were very happy with this opportunity to travel and interact with tribals from other ethnic groups. The Government of Maharashtra has since sanctioned a Phase-II of this project extending over three years to utilise and upscale the knowledge of these volunteers. To conclude, I quote from the speech by the Hon'ble President of India Pranab Mukherjee, at the inauguration of the Golden Jubilee Celebrations of the Tribal Research and Training Institute (TRTI), Pune, on 28 December 2013: "At a time when the entire country is gripped by concerns about women's safety and security as well as by moral challenges, a peek into the gender behaviour and relations in tribal communities hold significant lessons for the society at large. As much as we ought to learn from tribal people, we have a duty to empower plural tribal streams and contribute to that guiding spirit of our Constitution - "We the People of India". ■



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Festival

Kolu is a festival of toys celebrated during the festival of Navratri in Southern India. For nine days, dolls depicting mythology are displayed proudly by the women of the house in odd-numbered tiers, usually 7, 9 or 11. It is traditional to have a few wooden toys and at least one each of a boy and a girl together, called Marapacchi Bommai. Visitors are greeted with colourful kolam (floor decoration made with rice flour), kumkum (red coloured powder used to make religious markings) lighted lamps, savouries, and traditionally dressed women and girls chanting slokas and singing. On the tenth day, Vijayadasami, any one doll is symbolically put to sleep and prayers are offered in gratitude for the successful completion of that year's kolu.

Tribal self-governance and implementation of PESA

The Union Government has passed a slew of legislations including the PESA (Panchayat Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act which recognise the special needs of the tribal areas. Prof. Yatindra Singh Sisodia hopes that these legislations will encourage tribal participation in the better management of their affairs.

THE tribals in India, as is well known, are the indigenous autochthonous people of the land. They have been settled in different parts of the country long before the Aryans settled along the river valleys. The tribals had to move gradually from the plains, to the more inaccessible regions of forests, hills and large mountain slopes or frontier regions on the fringes of agriculturally settled, organised and more developed areas.

The process went on for centuries very steadily until recent times, when concerted efforts were made by the State to bring these communities back into the mainstream of society. The tribal population in India is at different levels of socio-economic development. There are tribes that live in the forests and are exclusively dependent on forests for their livelihood. They practise hunting and food gathering. With their primitive technology, limited skills and traditional and ritual practices, their entire lifestyle revolves around the forests. On the other hand, there are a few tribal communities in the eastern parts of the country that have been totally assimilated in the national mainstream. However, large segments of tribal population have been leading a life suspended between these two stages of socio-economic development. Low productivity, dispersed habitation, shifting cultivation, weak cooperative and marketing infrastructure, continued tribal land grab by others, leading to their dispossession and exploitation, are some of the common features which characterise the tribal areas.

Tribal evolution since independence

Over the last 65 years or so, many of the Scheduled Tribes (STs) appear to have evolved into two, more or less distinct groups: one, those who have been able to take advantage of the protection and benefits guaranteed to them under the Constitution and under various Acts and schemes and have been able to decrease the gap in development between them and others. And two, those STs whom such programmes and protection have failed to reach and who, therefore, still exist at subsistence level with poor health, and low education and income levels.

Ownership of land signifies livelihood, culture and identity of a tribal economy. Poor land record system, poverty, ignorance

and greed of others have resulted in the continuous transfer of resources leading to pauperisation of tribals. In recent decades, these tribals have been victims of displacement due to State sponsored as well as private industrial and mining projects. Inadequate rehabilitation of displaced tribals compounds their woes, making them asset-less and pushing them towards debt bondage. Due to the above said processes, our tribal brethren have been victimised by the contemporary development paradigm at the macro level, and simultaneously have remained unaffected by policies meant for human development, due to poor delivery systems. As a result, such exclusion of scheduled/tribal areas has proven to be happy hunting grounds for insurgent groups who prey upon the discontent and anger of the exploited tribals. The tribal development policies of India have been influenced by the Panchasheel policy propounded by Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru. Since independence, several policies on positive discrimination and affirmative action on developmental and regulatory fronts have been adopted by the national governments from time to time. Scores of new legislations and schemes like ITDP, PESA and FRA have been adopted for better human development in tribal areas. In other rural development schemes like MGNREGS, NRHM, SGSY etc, tribal areas are given special attention to improve their well being. However, the benefits of all these developmental efforts have not been proportionate to the investment made for the tribal population, as compared to the other sections of the Indian society.

It can be seen that the improvements in the socio-economic conditions of STs measured in parameters like literacy rates, reduction in poverty etc, have not been proportionate to the investments therein. Development processes in the tribal areas need to be balanced by the preservation of tribal identity, culture and values, while increasing and ensuring their access to mainstream education, health and income generation.

Why the PESA Act?

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act and State Conformity Acts, which were modelled on the lines suggested

by the 73rd Amendment Act, provided respectable spaces to the tribal people in the working of the Panchayat Raj system, but such legislation could not make the tribal communities the sole masters of their socio-political destinies in their homeland. It was imperative that the institutional structures within the scheduled areas be in consonance with the tribal needs and ethos; tribal institutions had to be shaped in a manner in which these people were familiar for ages. Also, many areas, which were once freely managed by the tribal people themselves, for example, forests, lands, water resources etc, unfortunately, remained out of their purview due to the official control of external institutions/agencies over these resources.

Added to such disgruntlements were the voices of the friends of Panchayat Raj system as well as of the tribal people themselves, who pleaded for more powers to the Panchayats under scheduled areas in a way that their institutions, while enjoying decentralised status and functioning as units of self-government, could at the same time preserve and safeguard the traditions, customs and cultural identities of their people. As a result of such demands and felt needs of the tribal communities, the Union Government passed a legislation known as 'Panchayat (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996' or PESA. A perusal of the powers and functions of PESA indicate that the Panchayats of the scheduled areas have been equipped with special powers and functions, which are in consonance with the ethos of the tribal people/communities. Such provisions equipped these bodies with some preferential powers and functions. At the foundation level is the Gram Sabha, as the tribal people live in a scattered manner in hamlets/group of hamlets. The Act defines a village in the scheduled areas as 'which shall ordinarily consist of a habitation or a group of habitations or a hamlet or a group of hamlets comprising a community and managing its affairs in accordance with its traditions and customs'.

It further says, reservation of seats for STs in every Panchayat of the scheduled areas shall be in proportion to their respective population in that Panchayat area. Also, all seats of *Sarpanch*/Chairperson of Panchayats at all levels in the scheduled areas are reserved for members of the STs. The Panchayat Raj system in scheduled areas has empowered Gram Sabhas with all such powers and duties to become the real units of self-governance.

PESA and the ground reality

Panchayat Raj institutions in tribal regions, through PESA, have specially empowered the people to work as units of self-governance, but it has been observed that the level of awareness and exposure among Panchayat Raj representatives

and Gram Sabha members is very low. Despite knowing the procedural aspect, Gram Sabha is almost a formal institution. The state governments did not transfer all the powers through conformity acts. However, it seems that mere amendments in the State Acts and specific provisions to bring about a new system will not change the scenario. It is essential to opt for an effective device whereby maximum people can be informed, made aware and motivated to come forward for the proper implementation and execution of PESA. There is an urgent need to break the culture of silence and to strive for capacity building, sensitisation and orientation to improve tribal self-rule.

The provisions of the State Acts should be translated into simple Hindi and local dialect and be distributed to all Panchayat functionaries in the form of pocket booklets as ready reckoners. Posters can also be prepared and displayed on the walls of Gram Panchayat and other public buildings. It has often been seen that the Gram Sabha members find it difficult to perform their duties due to the complicated rules and procedures. It is, therefore necessary that the rules and procedures be simplified and adequately disseminated to villagers. Gram Sabhas have been provided supreme position in the PESA Act, but people at large are least informed about these provisions. They are still attuned to accepting the supremacy of Gram Panchayat. It is important to make them aware about such provisions. For this purpose, public awareness campaigns can be launched through NGOs and the electronic media (community television). The list of duties assigned to Gram Sabha includes management of natural resources like land, water and forest. This provision can provide ample opportunities to rural masses for better living conditions and creating livelihood bases.

It has also been suggested that activities like watershed should be taken up by the Gram Sabhas in their respective areas on a voluntary basis. People's participation can change the scenario drastically. The need is proper orientation of people towards such work. The Gram Sabha will have to perform a very specific role to safeguard and preserve the traditions and customs, cultural identity and community resources, and the customary mode of dispute resolution.

Involve tribals in decision-making processes

As the tribal community practices most of the works mentioned above through *Jati* Panchayat ordinarily, at various places, the Gram Sabhas/Panchayats have started taking an initiative in such affairs, especially where the leadership of *Jati* Panchayat and Gram Panchayat is common. It is desirable that the Gram Sabhas be empowered to minimise the social

(Continued on page 18)

Did you know?

Kokrebellur is a village in Mandya district of Karnataka named after the Painted Stork and Spotbilled Pelican birds called 'Kokkare', which have a breeding site here. The villagers consider the birds as harbingers of good luck and prosperity, and also benefit from the phosphorous and potassium rich manure from the bird droppings. The birds have been classified as 'near threatened category' on the IUCN Red List of 2009. Many tourists visit Kokrebellur to see these birds.

From culture of silence to culture of violence

Tribals of India have for centuries lived in peace and harmony with nature. But post-independence India has shattered this harmony and trodden on their lands, dignity and rights in the name of globalisation and progress. None of the benefits of this progress have reached the tribals. Is it a surprise then, that tribal areas today are seething cauldrons of discontent? asks **Prof. S.N.Chaudhary**.

AFTER realising the pitiable and worsening socio-economic status of tribes, efforts have been made to restore their human rights by different change agents since independence. A number of constitutional provisions have been made, the National Commission for SCs (Scheduled Castes) and STs (Scheduled Tribes) has been established and from time to time, a number of welfare schemes have been formulated by the State.

However, it is observed that most of these efforts were made without taking serious note of the grassroots level social reality of the tribals. Most of these efforts lacked depth, direction, sensitivity and connectivity. The schemes were like unconnected compartments with many missing links. The situation was much the same at the implementation level. While the implementing agencies were accountable to their bosses, they were not accountable to the unorganised and unassertive tribal masses.

The result was insignificant relief to the tribes. Geographical isolation, absence of social capital, transportation and communication network, compelled tribes to remain excluded and isolated. Insignificant presence of push and pull factors and slow population growth also encouraged them to remain confined to their native places. However, over time, tribal interaction with the non-tribal world increased. And with this began the process of pauperisation and marginalisation of tribes which gradually increased and in turn made them victims of acculturation.

Marginalisation of the tribal community

The number of NGOs (non-governmental organisations) addressing tribal concerns has increased dramatically since independence. Some of these NGOs are located within tribal areas and some are located outside. Many are engaged in so-called capacity building work, while others act as watchdogs. Some NGOs are issue specific and some work in a holistic manner. Yet, if we examine their agenda, particularly from the human rights and development perspectives, the picture

is largely frustrating. Their efforts, it is clear, have not arrested the marginalisation of tribals. Only a few tribes belonging to dominant categories and living around growth centres seem to have benefitted. Literature on tribal studies reveals that local community leaders have played a crucial role in the mitigation of problems faced by tribes since ages past. The tribal villagers have always shared problems and jointly celebrated their joys. They basically believe and adhere to the concept of 'live and let live'.

If you study the social hierarchy of a tribal village, you will see that the village headman was the custodian of customs and traditions responsible for the peaceful functioning of socio-cultural institutions. But with the introduction of formal leadership and political institutions, the situation began changing. The formal tribal leaders became accountable not to their own tribes, but to their leaders and political bosses. They imitated and adapted customs and ways of life alien to them. They became agents of change and development as per the wishes of the State. Sadly, they popularised corruption and red-tapism in tribal areas.

Gradually, it was observed, some of them became very powerful and culturally too, they no longer fit in with their own community. They became almost like outsiders. They promoted assimilation rather than integration and inclusion. There are examples to prove that despite the innovative character of a number of tribal development schemes, the achieved results were not up to the mark. It is really frustrating to see that all the implementing agents, including the Panchayat and Block level tribal elites and tribal dominated institutions are largely insensitive. Many of them are self-serving and are eager to ape the culture and way of life of the non-tribals. Hence, inclusion of tribes in the overall development process has remained a distant dream.

Victims of globalisation

So far as tribal culture is concerned, whether it is material

or non-material, it is rapidly losing its relevance today. Culture worked as a crisis management mechanism till the establishment of Hindu rule. Nobody could undermine the role and importance of the indigenous knowledge system in tribal areas. But gradually, the tribal culture lost its problem solving character. Today tribes are living suspended between their own and an alien culture. Their dependence on the alien culture is increasing day-by-day. Tribal youth are the immediate victim of cultural disintegration. Many elements of their indigenous culture are almost dead. Yet, ironically, they have not managed to adopt the non-tribal culture well too, with the result that the benefits of English language, modern medicine, modern education, money management mechanisms, ways to interact with police, court and change agents and so on have not been felt by them. In short, they have largely failed to avail benefits of modernisation and development.

Globalisation in India which was set in motion in July 1991, too has adversely affected the tribes. Tribal areas were logistically identified as places for investment and establishment of mega-development projects. Over time, hundreds of such projects have been established in these areas. Thousands of tribals have been displaced from their native places without any proper rehabilitation. Further, rehabilitation policies and schemes are faulty. They are neither just nor humanistic from the tribals' point of view. Due to the near lack of voices raised against displacement and exploitation, industries prefer to install their projects in tribal areas. Many of these projects have negative social, economic, psychological and environmental consequences. And the immediate victims are the tribals. It is very clear that the tribals have not taken advantage of these projects as they are still struggling with meeting their most basic needs. Also, only non-tribal specialists and workers are recruited by these organisations and this has serious demographic and cultural consequences. And the State is either silent or siding with the investors under the guise of "national interest". Given this scenario, one can easily imagine the state of human rights, culture and dignity of the tribes.

CSR a myth?

In the recent past, the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become popular in the country. But how can CSR address the question of environmental degradation and poverty created by corporate houses themselves? How can it deal with different components of environmental degradation such as loss of bio-diversity, climate change, unregulated population growth, water pollution, deforestation, land degradation, desertification and so on? Critically speaking, the notion of CSR is a myth. It is clearly anti-tribal. It has miserably failed to even address the problems

largely created by these very organisations.

In many pockets, particularly in the states of Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, cases of seasonal out-migration have rapidly increased during the last two decades. Push and pull factors created by modernisation and capitalistic mode of production are responsible for migration. In most of the cases, migration is informal and mostly to urban areas. Even more pertinent, none of the migrants is trained either in new skills or trained to adapt to an alien job market.

Very clearly, these factors are not enough to free tribals from the traps of poverty and deprivation. On the contrary, these migrants are now the victims of consumerism. As a result, whatever they earn is spent. Studies prove that any increase in income is offset by indebtedness. Their spending is so highly influenced by the alien culture they find themselves in that it has only led to more frustration.

The tribal movements

During the last few decades tribes of Central India particularly in the states of Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, whereas large number of tribal communities live, have been exposed to many social movements in favour of their rights. The Narmada Bachao Andolan and related ecological movements have addressed the environmental aspect. The Naxalite movement which is ongoing is also for proper rehabilitation of the victims of investment induced displacement. It is also directed at restoring the human rights and dignity of tribes. Neither of these two movements is separatist in nature. Both primarily address the fundamental premise that tribes should be allowed to lead a peaceful and dignified life and their human rights must be restored.

Both the movements believe that the original custodians of *Jal, Jungal* and *Zameen* (Water, Forest and Land) are the tribals and they should be handed over the same. But the State is completely against this proposition. Rather, efforts are being made to keep the tribals far away from natural resources. Be that as it may, these movements too are incapable of providing any relief to the tribal population. In principle, Naxalism stands for justice, but today it is massively engaged in retaliation. There are enough examples to prove that the tribals are caught equally between the State and the Naxalites. If they help the State, they are tortured by the Naxals and if they help the Naxals, the State comes down upon them very severely.

Journey from peace to violence

Even before the British rule, tribals in the Indian sub-continent lived a peaceful life of harmony with nature. Their life was autonomous and self-sustaining. Local resources were enough to meet their limited requirements. They virtually owned these resources. But as acculturation with unequal

partners increased, degeneration in their lives and the natural resources also increased.

This state of affairs may be perceived as the historical root of hopelessness and helplessness. Today, barring a few tribal elites, the rest are homeless, jobless and have been pushed towards insecurity and deprivation. High illiteracy rate, increasing sex ratio, high school dropout rate, poor quality of education, high mortality rate, maximum dependence on primary sources for their livelihood, decreasing number of agricultural farmers and increasing number of wage earners, increasing cases of indebtedness, seasonal migration, trafficking, land alienation, prevalence of primitive tribal groups even after several decades of declaration and number of interventions etc are sufficient to draw a conclusion that like the State, initiatives taken by civil societies, local culture, migration and CSR are not upto the mark. In many cases poor tribals are getting poorer. Even new institutional initiatives like The Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (or PESA), Forests Right Act-2006, New Panchayat Raj System, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNRES), Rehabilitation Policy, Land Acquisition Act, Food Security Act, and so on have miserably failed to restore their human rights and dignity.

Tribals are leading a life of insecurity and stress. Their once-peaceful existence is now a chimera and their ever

deteriorating socio-economic condition is making them resort to violence. Tribals have tested all coping mechanisms and they have realised they will not get any succor. They do not know what to do and where to go. Their human rights, dignity and honour are constantly being eroded. Tribes and tribal areas are today very disturbed regions. Everywhere, all one can see are cases of atrocities on tribes and investment induced displacement. Welfare projects for them exist, but only on paper. Hence, it can be concluded that tribes have moved from culture of silence to culture of violence. All efforts to restore peace and progress in their lives have so far failed miserably. Efforts have also failed to associate tribes with the forces of modernisation and development in an integrative manner. ■

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Tribal self-governance and implementation of PESA

(Continued from page 15)

evils such as alcoholism and the practice of dowry. The promotion of social evils should not be permitted in the name of traditions and customs.

It would also be good if important traditions and customs of various tribal groups are documented. With the cooperation of the tribal leadership a detailed list of tribal customs, traditions and rituals, which need to be preserved and protected, should be prepared. Tribal regions are facing chronic drought, which leads to acute shortage of food, starvation and compulsory migration. Better management skills can ensure speedy redressal and therefore it is important to equip the Panchayats with such skills through training and awareness campaigns to help them face natural calamities. It has been observed that there is no direct involvement of tribals in the execution of a tribal sub-plan despite specific provisions. It is therefore imperative that Panchayat representatives and villagers are involved from planning to implementation stage in all development activities. Without people's participation and involvement, the expected targets cannot be achieved.

To conclude, it can be inferred that the participation in Gram Sabha meetings has been low despite the hype around PESA. Sarpanch and other influential people dominate the decision-making processes. There are two prominent and sharply contrasting groups

leading the Panchayats - the group of traditionally influential representatives and the other of new entrants. The participation of people is an important part of Panchayat Raj in tribal regions, but this has not been observed in practice.

In retrospect, it seems inevitable that persons of influence would look at larger community participation with hostility. The vibrancy and efficacy of Gram Sabha will remain dismal if it does not possess the capacity to perform assigned roles and responsibilities. This question becomes more pertinent in a tribal society where human resource development is low and society is deeply introverted. Therefore, what is urgently needed is that these marginalised sections of society are sensitised and their capacity built. Experience suggests that the Gram Sabha and its ever-increasing powers and authority have generated a lot of interest among tribal people. Actually,



this interest is required to be translated into a more broad-based and participative leadership at the grassroots level. ■

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Vision for tribal development

Despite decades of special status accorded to them, has the tribal population in India made significant socio-economic progress? Is it time to redefine the vision for their development? Mukesh Khullar studies Maharashtra state's Vision 2020 tribal development policy and other legislations to see if they hold some answers.

THE general perception of tribal development in India is that there has not been a significant improvement in their socio-economic status. This is especially so, if the perception is based on media reports, legislative discussions and court proceedings, as much of the discussion hovers around misappropriation of budget, misdirected schemes and poor implementation of various statutory, welfare and protective measures.

Now, it is true that government publications like the Maharashtra Human Development Report, 2012, point to a significant improvement in human development indicators of the tribal population over the past ten years. We know that tribal candidates are getting selected as civil servants, doctors, engineers, academicians and so on. There is a reasonably good infrastructure of roads, communication, electricity, health, nutrition, education and public institutions created in most of the tribal areas.

Yet, a periodical analytical account of the tribal development work against a clearly spelt out vision of tribal development is missing, which perhaps contributes to this persistent negative perception.

Nehru's vision

The Panchsheel principles for tribal development enunciated by our first Prime Minister Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru set the context in which tribal development was to be carried out. These principles essentially talk of promoting socio economic development without disturbing the socio cultural fabric of tribal life.

It was understood that tribal development effort was different from development of other disadvantaged social groups. The vision was that the tribals would nurture their own governing structures without much outsider involvement, keeping the development programmes simple, which in turn, would allow them to decide priorities as per their understanding. And development would be measured not by statistics alone.

Hence, the Tribal Development policy hinges on two planks. One, to provide dedicated budgetary support to address developmental needs of the tribals, especially to bridge huge

gaps that exist in different sectoral domains, and the other, by providing constitutional and statutory safeguards to actively promote equality.

Apart from reservations in education, appointments and political institutions, protection legislations on prevention of Atrocities and protection of Civil Rights, there have been progressive social enactments like Forest Rights Act and Panchayat Extension of Scheduled Area (PESA) Act recently. These legislations, recognising the limitations of the tribal population in their access to the mainstream governing institutions, bestowed the rights to self-govern. But there are vested interests at work and it will be some time before the tribals can realise the benefits of these legislative measures.

The Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) has been created for supplementing the normal budgets of the line departments promoting the developmental initiatives of their respective domains. Considering the dispersed tribal habitations, relatively under-developed infrastructure and inadequate institutional presence, planning norms are modified and relaxed to improve reach of the planned interventions. Consequential financial burden is sought to be borne by allocations under TSP.

Need of the hour

Despite increasing budgetary outflows and proactive welfare legislations, there is no assurance from the administrative system that the tribal development efforts are working in tandem to bring the tribal population at par with the mainstream population within a given time frame.

There is a need to draw up a short term and medium term vision of tribal development for planning targeted interventions. This will have to be well supported by competent organisations to deliver these interventions alongside an analytical framework, which correlates achievements with the planned measures.

Maharashtra's Vision 2020 for Tribal Development

The state of Maharashtra has envisioned a Vision 2020 document for tribal development which is guided by the twin objectives of mainstreaming the tribal population to bring their socio economic condition at par with the rest of the population,

and of preserving their cultural heritage so as to learn from their indigenous knowledge. Tribal development efforts would be catapulted from survival issues to achieving significant development gains through productivity enhancement, diversity in occupation, and reduced migration, thus, resulting in higher economic prosperity.

Mainstreaming

- The department would strive to reduce the developmental deficits by half by 2020 as compared to the state average in health, nutrition, education, infrastructure, road connectivity, electrification, drinking water and sanitation.
- The department would build social capital through new institutions that aim to aggregate the agricultural and non-timber forest produce of dispersed tribal habitations and link them with the markets for creating value chains in different commodities.
- The department would impart training to equip the tribal youth with necessary skillsets in order to diversify their employment options while creating opportunities for self-employment to service the needs of the scheduled area.

Preservation of cultural heritage

- The department would codify the customary laws of settling minor property and personal disputes, marriage and inheritance disputes and make them a part of the respective main legislation to achieve self-rule for the tribal communities as envisaged under PESA.
- The department would strive to document tribal cultural traditions that promote living in communion, with no gender bias, and in oneness with nature.
- The department would ensure that all individual and community forest rights envisaged under Forest Rights Act are fully secured and a mechanism is put in place to sustainably harness the consequential benefits.

Monitoring

- The department would focus on developing an accountability framework and would create a facilitative organisation structure for working horizontally across related departments and agencies.
- The department would set performance benchmarks in identified indicators to measure progress through a composite development index that promotes holistic and a fulfilling tribal lifestyle for others to emulate, while achieving better quality of life index for tribals.
- The department would bring out a semi-annual situation report on the development status of the tribal population of Maharashtra, ranking different project areas on the development index and ranking sectoral domains within each project area.

A new action agenda to realise the vision

In keeping with the vision document, necessary changes would have to be made in the organisation structure and work culture in order to build capacity to work horizontally across departments and enforce implementation of various statutory measures.

It is expected that the Tribal Research and Training Institute would be the knowledge partner of the government to help understand the tribal society and to train the functionaries of various departments on the salient ethnography of each tribe. In addition, the Tribal Development Corporation would need to change its role from being a market player to that of a market developer. Infusion of capital, technology and modern management practices is needed to ensure linkage of markets with the tribal farmers.

A comprehensive tribal development plan would need to be prepared that places the tribal sub-plan in proper perspective in the general plan of the domain departments for the tribal area. Clear strategy would need to be developed to ensure that the plan would get adopted by the tribal communities. There would have to be a larger role for the community based organisations.

A tribal development index on the lines of National Gross Happiness Index of Bhutan would need to be constructed that measures not just the performance of a work plan created from the vision and its impact on the development deficits but would also promote holistic living practiced by tribal communities. Periodical situation reports on the impact of tribal development efforts should be published. Repeated updating of the baseline survey of the tribal households conducted by Tribal Research and Training Institute could alert the service deliverers and the stakeholders on the need to drop some interventions or to amend their implementation approach.

A clearly spelt out vision over short and medium term pragmatically outlines the intent and the determination of the government to deliver results. It galvanises the different stakeholders to contribute for its realisation. A vision for tribal development which upholds the dignity of the tribal population, while setting up an agenda for bridging the development deficits, is what genuine effort can and should achieve. ■



The writer is an IAS officer of 1985 batch allotted to Maharashtra Cadre, currently serving as its Principal Secretary in Tribal Development Department. In most of his postings he got exposure to tribal areas of Maharashtra which included his service tenures as Collector, Thane, Assistant Collector, Jalgaon and Gadchiroli, CEO, Nagpur Zilla Parishad and MD, Maharashtra State Cooperative Tribal Development Corporation, Nashik.

The sanctity of space

Randhir Khare gives a poignant account of the sacred spaces which were once such an intrinsic part of tribal culture and mythology. While some of these sacred spaces have managed to survive, most are inexorably vanishing in the march of modernisation and encroaching external culture.

PEOPLE from traditional communities in India, like their near and distant neighbours, have always considered the physical spaces that they inhabit or frequent as meaningful. These physical spaces are intrinsically connected to their way of life, their worship, folklore, mythology and culture. In some cases, they are closely related to social customs, songs and story traditions, as well as dialects. Whether the communities are nomadic like the Narikuravar gypsies who still roam the length and breadth of the Indian sub-continent, the semi nomadic herding community of the Dhangars, the camel herding Rababris of Kutch, the settled forest dwelling Santhals or Gonds, the Bhils, the numerous tribal communities of the Nilgiris of Tamil Nadu or the Dangs of South Gujarat, physical spaces are significant.

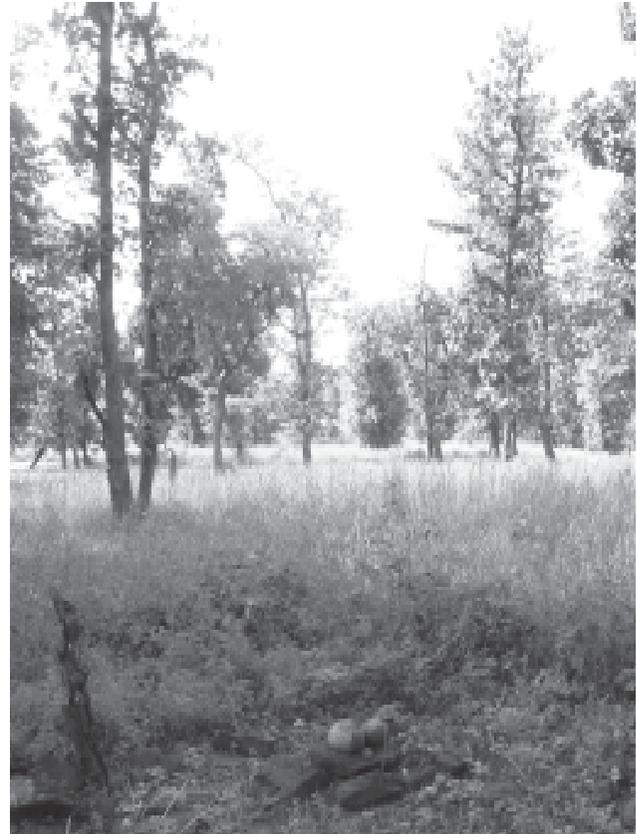
Unfortunately, as non-tribal communities begin to alter their use of land, traditional routes of nomads or semi nomads are blocked, sacred spaces are either taken over, denied access to or wiped out, leaving no trace of their presence. To many of us, this may be an inevitable process of change and development, but to people from tribal and other traditional communities, it is an affront to the very touch-stones of their identity – as important as food, physical security, shelter and livelihood.

A case in point - the Dangs of South Gujarat

Consider the region of the Dangs of South Gujarat, for example. It is alive with numerous sacred spaces that are a living part of the lives and customs (even dialects) of the



A shrine in the Dangi woods



Sacred stones in a sacred space beside a cultivated field

traditional and tribal communities of the forests. Beside the road which bends its way through the scattered settlement of Pimpari in the Dangs, is a derelict grove of trees smelling of egret droppings. In its shade, carpeted with dead leaves and twigs, fallen trunks uprooted by unseasonal storms and refuse from nearby homes, are memorial pillars. A number of them lie on their sides whilst others protrude from the fecund earth – sentinels standing eerily in the dark, splashed with light. Their surfaces, pitted, gnawed and ground by the elements, still reveal carved images of armed horse-riders in battle, groups of warriors, festive dancers and women and children. Some of these stones are elaborately carved signifying the status of those that they commemorate whilst others bear only an image or two on their surface, reflecting the rank of the departed.



A sacred space in Dhavalidod

This is the sacred memorial ground of the Bhil chieftains of old. Among them are greats such as Rusinek, Kaagnek, Baagnek, Jaranek and Lahawgora. They were heroes in their time when they fought to protect their forest home against outsiders and led their people to inflict sudden death on unsuspecting intruders unused to guerrilla combat. Each of them once carried a story of heroism, romance, intrigue and victory. Until a few decades ago, Bhil elders remembered these stories, recalling them when necessary. In fact some of the stories even seeped into the narratives of *thali* playing bards of the Dangs. One particular narrative actually recounted the life and death of Jaranek, describing how he was lured down to the banks of the swollen Khapri, decapitated and his head thrown into the river – and turning up downstream the following summer among the rocks, still intact.

In time, of course, the content and trajectory of the stories began to alter, meandering as they did through a haze of memory. Their exploits were superimposed on the exploits of other Bhil heroes and gradually sucked into a separate reality – the reality of Bhil folklore which had space enough for mutations in theme and style. One that remained until not long ago, appearing and disappearing from places like Pimpari, Gadvi and Linga is as follows:

I am the son of the son of the son of the son of the son
 Of the great grandson of the son of Rusinek
 The one with wrists as thick as your neck
 With thighs as wide as your chest;
 I can spear as he speared a racing boar,
 I can shoot as he shot the Brahmin's son
 Through the eye as he slept in his stolen bed;
 I can have as he had a hundred wives
 A dozen children with each,
 Hoi, I am the son of the son of the son of the son
 Of the great grandson of the son of Rusinek.

The Pimpari sacred space of the Bhils has almost receded into oblivion and has little connection with Bhil life and identity today, but other traditional and tribal communities in the region still hold on to their sacred spaces which are marked in various ways. The most obvious and visible are Vaghdev totems in wood and stone. Some of them are considerably old and have begun to decompose whilst others have developed cracks that are clearly visible. However, the images on their surface are clearly visible. The topmost point on the face of each totem is the image of the sun and moon, below is a standing peacock, then a tiger (*vagh*) and at the bottom is a snake. Some of the totems even include one or more standing human forms.

Totems of this sort are composite entities that were originally created to harness the power of various natural elements and beings by both appeasing and honouring them. By doing this, believers ensured both their protection as well as their energies – thus vitally connecting human life with the natural environment. The image of the sun primarily signifies light, growth and vitality and is considered by most communities in the Dangs as essentially male.

The moon on the other hand is considered to be female, symbolising mysterious magical powers, protective energies and is associated with the life of the spirit. When the sun is positioned at the topmost point of the totem and the moon is curved upwards beneath it, the prevailing belief is that the sun's energies and vitality is held by the moon and temperately filtered down to sanctify the physical space and the area around it. Whereas, if the moon is curved downwards from the topmost position on the totem and the orb of the sun is placed below it, the belief is that the moon is assisting in focusing the sun's energies on the space and the area around to ensure a more intense giving of life and support for growth. In some cases, both the sun and the moon are depicted side by side as in the case of one or two totems on this particular site. At this point, it is important to note that sometimes the sun and moon are replaced by a human form. This is usually



A sacred Kunbi story telling session accompanied by the *thali*

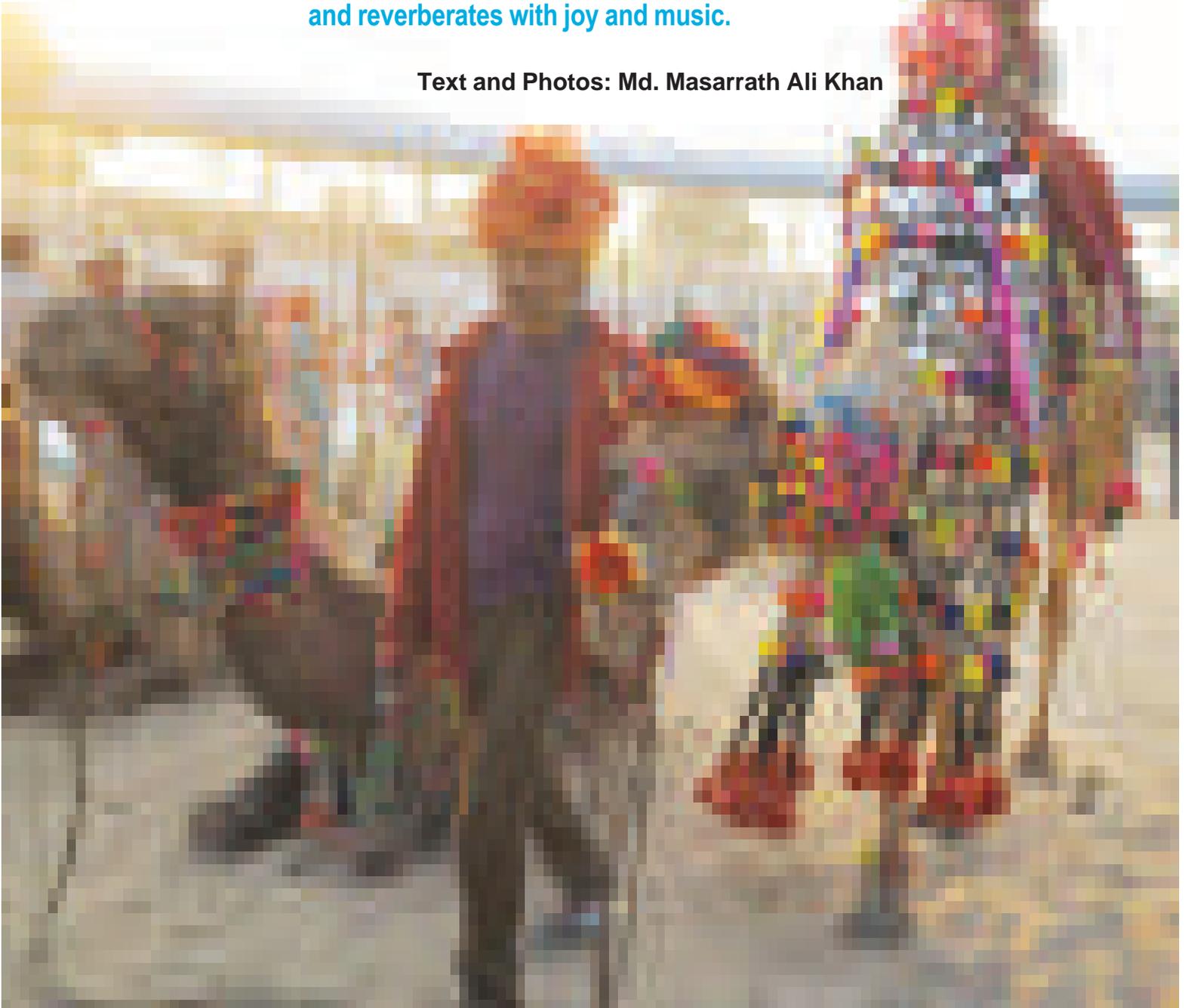
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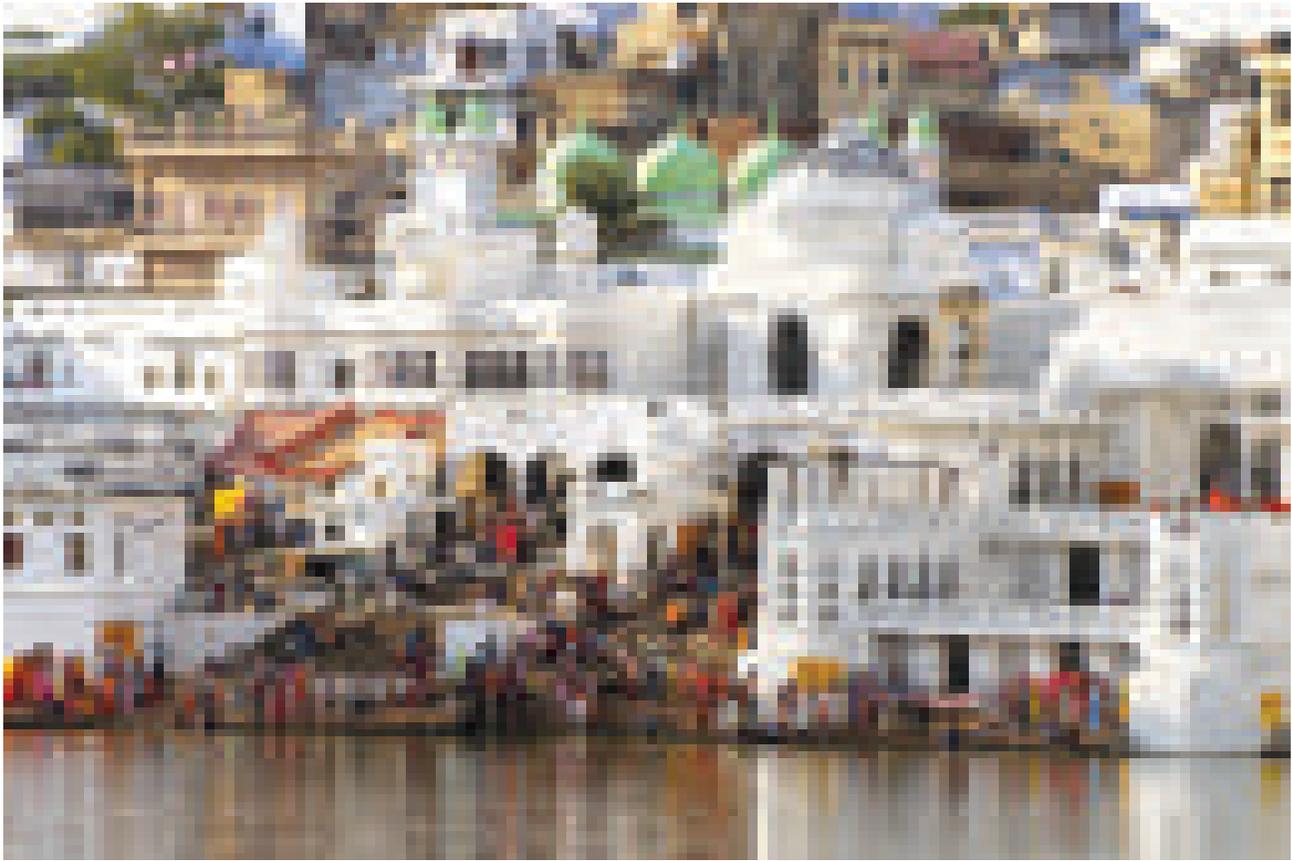
The Mingle of Pushkar

Pushkar, the enchanting town in Rajasthan, is redolent with religious myths, divine antiquity and a present firmly rooted in culture and commerce. The town comes alive during Kartik Pournima, when millions of pilgrims and tourists throng Pushkar's bathing ghats, its unique Brahma temple and the camel fair.

Pilgrims, mystics, sadhus, traders, herders and tourists mingle in one of the greatest gatherings known to mankind. There is romance in the air as Pushkar transforms into a riot of colors and reverberates with joy and music.

Text and Photos: Md. Masarrath Ali Khan



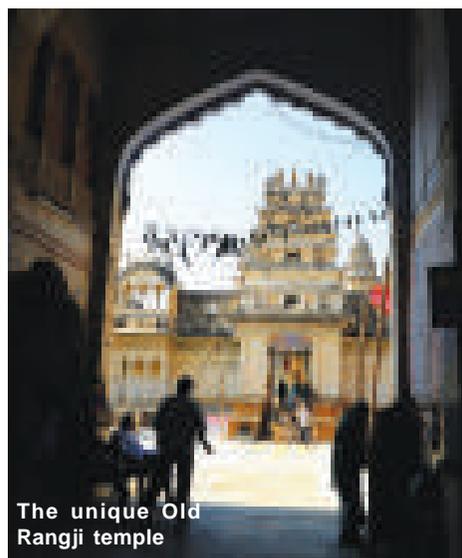


Fifty two ghats surround the Pushkar lake and connect many temples to the water (pic courtesy: Rajasthan Tourism)

THE town of Pushkar welcomes visitors with the fragrance of incense sticks, the mellifluous sounds of temple bells and the chants of hymns. It is an ancient historic town situated 11 kms to the northwest of Ajmer. It is surrounded on three sides by the majestic Aravalli hills, and on the fourth by the sand dunes. A serpentine road, *nag pahad* (snake mountain) forms a natural barrier between Ajmer and Pushkar.

This otherwise sleepy, somnolent town springs to life during seven days in the Hindu month of *Kartika* which falls in October-November every year. During this week, pilgrims throng the town to take a dip at the various *ghats* of the Pushkar Lake, in the belief that it will absolve them of all sins, and visit the Brahma temple, the only such temple to Brahma in the world. This also coincides perfectly with the annual Pushkar fair, when thousands of camels are brought from the neighbouring states for sale in Pushkar for the *Oont ka mela* or camel fair. The camel owners, along with relatives and friends come together

to celebrate, enjoy and take part in the various competitions, musicals, dance and cultural programmes. The town explodes in a kaleidoscope of a myriad hues of festooned camels, strutting mustachioed men with colourful turbans, beautiful women adorned in heavy, ethnic jewellery, and local women applying cunning *henna* designs on the hands and feet of pilgrims and tourists. Local artisans and craftsmen seize the moment and set up stalls of Rajasthani textiles, silver ornaments, blue pottery and so on. The town rejoices in its popularity with the tourists and welcomes its visitors with open arms.



The unique Old Rangji temple

Brahma and the legend of the lake

The town of Pushkar is mainly its lake. And it's intimately tied to Lord Brahma, one of the three holy trinity of Hinduism. According to legend, Brahma slew the cruel demon Vajranabha with his weapon - the lotus flower, which fell and struck the earth at three places within a radius of 9 kms, creating three lakes. Brahma named



Sunset at the Varaha ghat

the place Pushkar meaning lotus, and the lakes, *Jyeshtha* (elder), *Madhya* (central) and *Kanishtha* (younger) Pushkar. Brahma then decided to perform a *yajna* (fire-sacrifice) at the *Jyeshtha* Pushkar. It is said he created the hills around Pushkar – Ratnagiri in the south, Nilgiri in the north, Sanchoora in the west and Suryagiri in the east and positioned gods there to ensure peaceful conduct of the *yajna*. But this was soon in danger of being derailed, not by the demons, but due to the delay in appearance of Brahma's consort Savitri (called Saraswati in some versions).

A new consort (a shepherd's daughter) was identified and sanctified (by passing her through a cow's body and given the name Gayatri in her second birth) and the *yajna* was completed with Gayatri sitting beside Brahma, holding the pot of *amrita* (elixir of life) on her head and giving *ahuti* (offering to the sacrificial fire). This didn't go down well with Savitri, who then cursed Brahma that he would never be worshipped anywhere in the world except in Pushkar. Thus, Pushkar has the only temple in the world dedicated to Brahma! Savitri herself, so the legend goes, merged into the Ratnagiri Hill and emerged as a spring known as the Savitri *jharna* (stream); a temple in her honour exists here.

Since Brahma performed the *yajna* at the Pushkar lake from *Kartik Shukla Ekadashi* to *Kartik Poornima*, a dip in the waters of the lake on this occasion is believed to be equivalent to performing *yajnas* for several hundred years. A woman taking a dip in the lake, it is believed, absolves herself as well as her husband of all sins! Many also believe that no pilgrimage to *char dham* {the four principal pilgrim centres namely, Badrinath (Uttarakhand), Jagannath (Orissa), Rameshwaram (Tamil Nadu)

A land of temples

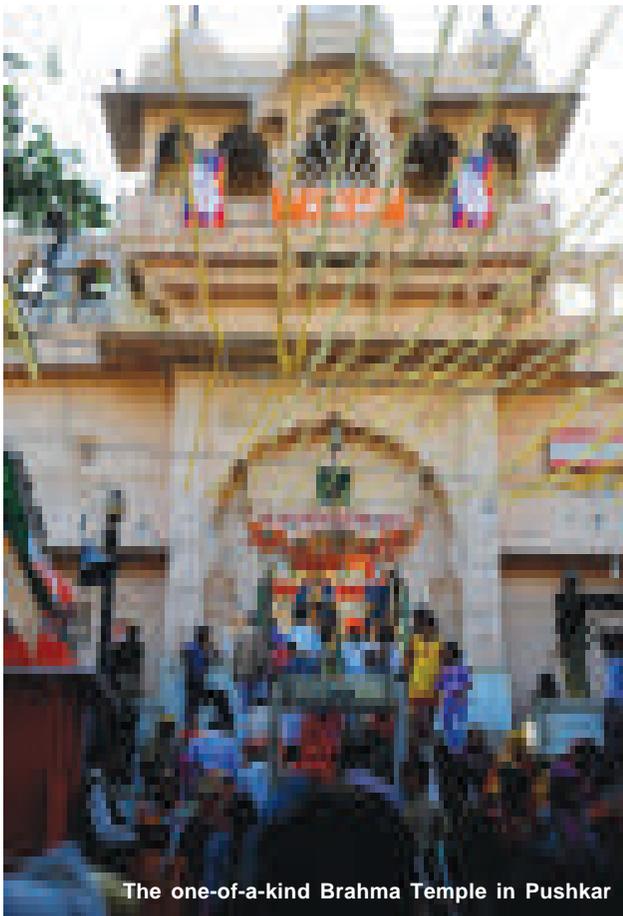
Though the Brahma temple may be the most famous, Pushkar has more than 350 other temples. One encounters a temple at virtually every step! An interesting and unique temple is the Old Rangji Temple or Vaikunthnathji Temple (dedicated to Vishnu), built in 1844 AD by Seth Puran Mal Ganeriwal of Hyderabad. It has a *gopuram* typical of southern Indian temples, and is an amalgamation of South Indian, Rajput and Mughal styles of architecture.

The complex enshrines the presiding deities Shri Krishna, Ranganath, Lakshmi, Godamma and Shri Ramanujacharya. Significantly, it is the first temple of *Ramanuja Sampradaya* of Shri Vaishnav sect of south India in Rajasthan and *poojas* and rituals are being performed as per *Pancharatra Vidhi* since 1844 AD. Beautiful paintings and sculptures depicting south Indian mythological themes, majestic *vahanas* (vehicles) and gorgeous umbrellas used during festivals for the deities can be seen in the temple. Steps in a corner, lead to a small cave dedicated to Shiva. The temple is governed by the *sanyasi* (ascetic) sect priesthood. Foreign tourists are allowed to enter the outer *parikrama* (circumambulation) since 1864 AD.

Another notable temple is the gigantic Varaha Temple which houses an image of Vishnu in the incarnation of a wild boar. This ancient temple is said to have been built by the Chauhan King Anaji (1123-1150 AD) and renovated by Gokul Chand Parikh, a Scindia minister, in 1806 A.D. It hosts a remarkable opulently bejeweled image house. The scorned wife Savitri's temple was built in 1687 AD atop the Ratnagiri Hill. The route to the temple is through the hills and offers a panoramic view of the lake and picturesque rural landscape.



The Varaha temple built by Chauhan king Anaji



The one-of-a-kind Brahma Temple in Pushkar

and Dwaraka (Gujarat)} is complete without a dip in the holy waters of this lake. So, millions of pilgrims flock to Pushkar to observe the ritual and bathe on the occasion of *Kartik Poornima*, or on any of the four days preceding it. Then the pilgrims visit the Brahma temple.

Historical legacy

Hindu mythology attributes the creation of Pushkar to Brahma, but the antiquity of the town and its environs goes back several millennia. Ancient historical literature onwards there are references to Pushkar's divinity. The great Hindu epics Mahabharata and Ramayana make references to this religious place as the *adi tirtha* (King of pilgrimages). The Indian scriptures, the *vedas* and *puranas*, record that Rishi Vyas undertook penance at Pushkar and Shri Balram, brother of Lord Krishna visited Pushkar more than 5000 years ago.

The Harivansha Purana says that Lord Krishna himself spent some time here. The epic Ramayana mentions that the sage Vishwamitra performed penance (*tapa*) at Pushkar and the celestial enchantress Menaka came to bathe in its serene waters. Historically, the earliest reference to this town is found in the scriptures of the Chinese traveller Fa-Hien. A more concrete reference to Pushkar occurs in the 2nd century BC Sanchi Stupa in Madhya Pradesh which has a stone inscription that mentions the charitable donations made by Buddhist monks or *bhikshuks* of Pushkar. The earliest punch marked coins,

anterior to the 4th century BC, have been found in Pushkar's environs along with Greek and Gupta coins. A unique and ancient Shivalinga, as tall as a human being, with an image of Krishna, Balarama, Devi and Surya is found in the vicinity of Pushkar. It is thought to date from 200 AD.

The great Indian poet, Kalidas also immortalised Pushkar in his classic, *Abhijñāna Sākuntalam*. In 1073 AD, a Chauhan king Singhraj, visited Pushkar, bathed at the *ghats* and in gratitude donated four villages for the maintenance of the temples. Prithviraja I is said to have defended the people of Pushkar from the invading Chalukyas in 1105 AD. The Rajput kings of Bundi, Bikaner, Jaisalmer and Scindia made valuable contributions in making and developing the *ghats* and structures around the sacred lake. Raja Man Singh I of Ajmer built a royal guest house, namely Man Mahal – the largest one in Pushkar in the east of the sacred lake. It affords a clear view of the banks and temples located around the lake. It has since been converted into a heritage hotel.

Historical works like *Prithviraj Vijay* by C. Jayanak (a contemporary account of the 12th century kingdom of Ajmer ruled by the Chauhan clan), *Hamir Mahakavya* and *Surjan Charitra*, suggest that an ancestor of the Chauhan dynasty Rishiraj Shri Chahman, was born in Pushkar. The Chauhan queen Rudrani, also known as Atma Prabha used to light 1000 lamps daily before the Shivalinga at Pushkar. Vakpati Raj, a

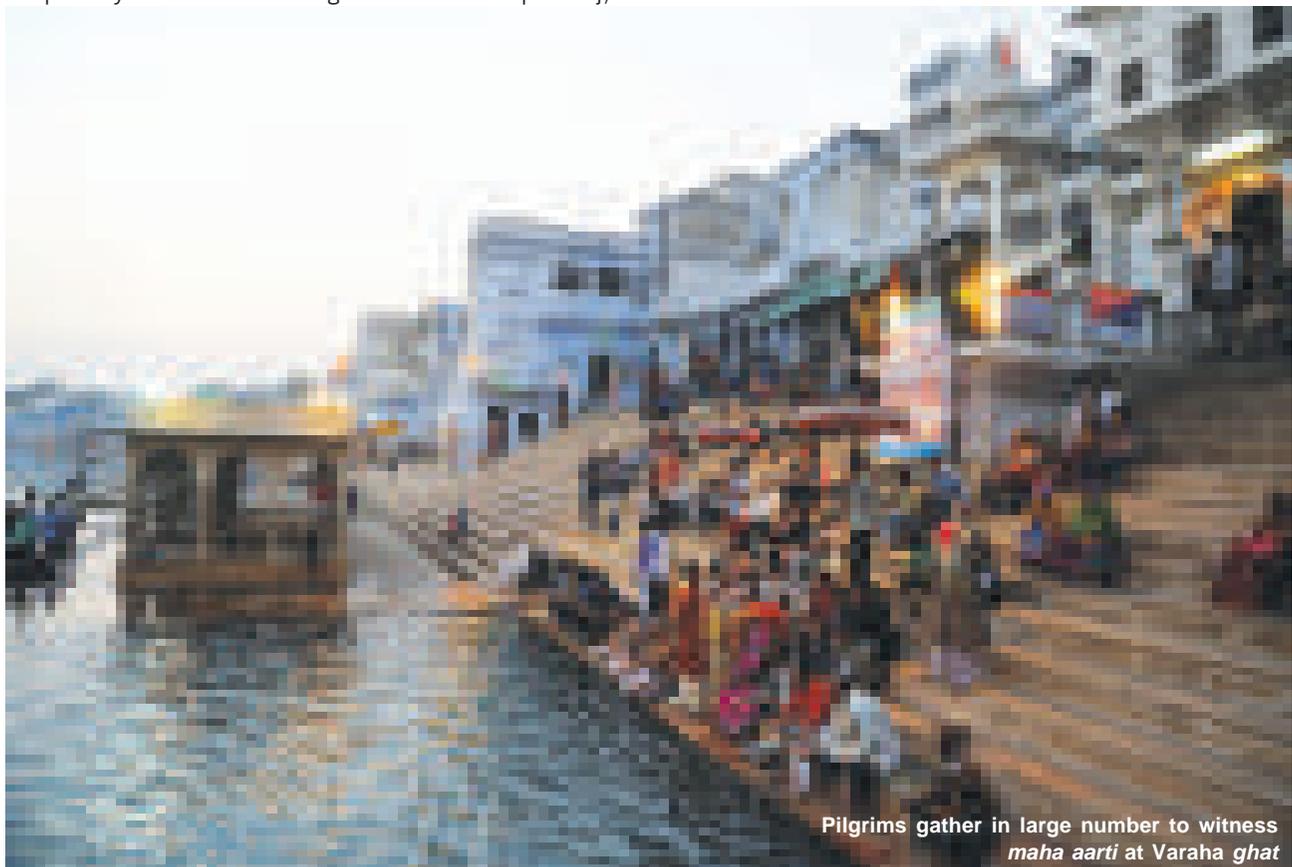
descendant of the Chauhan clan, built the temple of Shiva, here in the 10th century AD.

In more recent times, one of the first contacts between the Mughal and the British took place in Pushkar when Sir Thomas Roe met Emperor Jahangir in 1616 AD. The Mughals, the Rajput kings of Amber, Bundi, Bikaner Jaisalmer, and the Scindias ruled this sacred place till the British placed all the princely states under their direct control in Pushkar in 1818 AD. It was one of the few places in Rajasthan which was directly under the control of the British Government. The British combined religion with trade and introduced the cattle fair in Pushkar. Col. James Tod has made many references to Pushkar in his classical masterpiece *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*.

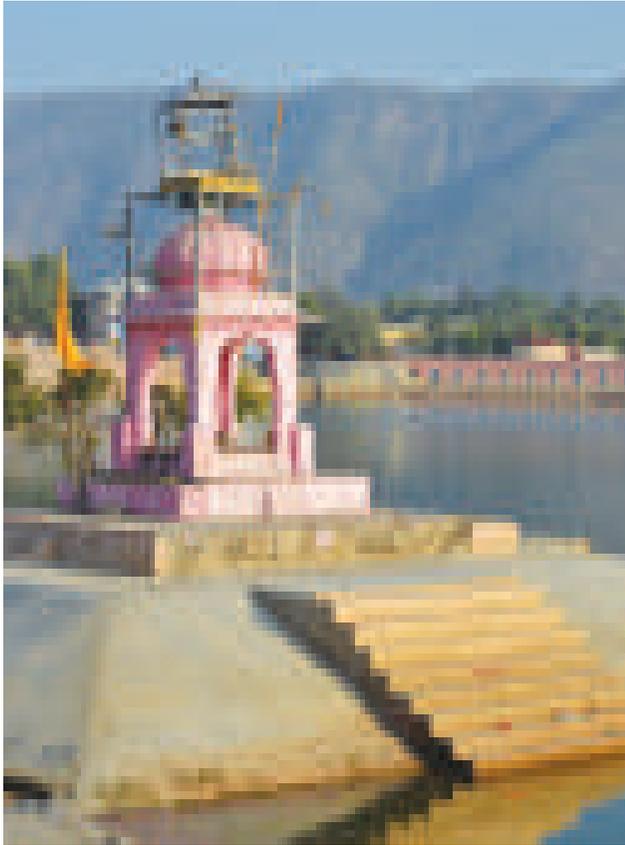
The one-of-a-kind Brahma Temple

Pushkar's star attraction is its unique Shri Brahma Temple. On *Kartik Poornima*, a festival dedicated to Brahma is held when large numbers of pilgrims take a bath in the sacred lake and visit this temple.

The present temple structure dates to the 14th century, but the shrine is believed to be 2000 years old. It is mainly built of marble and stone slabs. A beautifully carved silver turtle sits on the floor facing the *garbha griha* or sanctum sanctorum. The marble floor around the silver turtle is embedded with hundreds



Pilgrims gather in large number to witness *maha aarti* at Varaha ghat



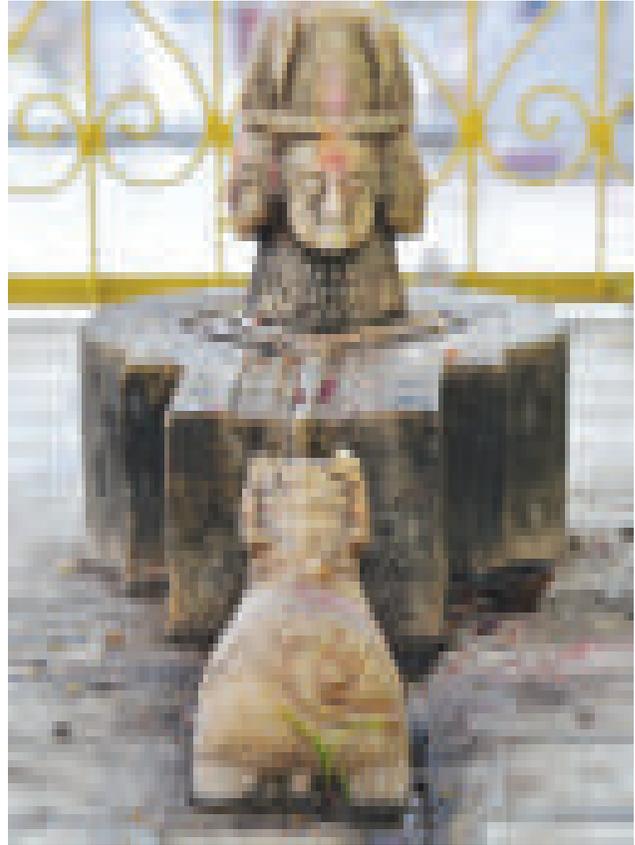
The exact location of Brahma's yajna
pic courtesy: Akul Tripathi

of silver coins with donors' names engraved on them. Similar coins are also inset in the walls of the temple. Peacocks adorn the temple walls, as they are believed to be the vehicle of Saraswati. It has a distinct red pinnacle (*shikhara*) and a *hansa* (swan) bird motif. The sanctuary has silver doors inside a carved marble gateway. A small image of *Gayatri* flanks the *Chaumurthi*, the four-faced image of Shri Brahma. The temple is bereft of any exquisite carvings or artwork found in most other temples. This unique temple pulls in thousands of pilgrims and tourists every year.

The Pushkar mela

The other attraction of Pushkar, especially during the *Kartik* month is the Pushkar *mela*. This *mela* (fair) held every year in this holy month, brings together the religious, the cultural and the commercial in a perfect symphony. Preparations for the fair begin soon after Diwali. The fair begins on *ashtami day* (8th day of the *Kartik* month) and lasts till *Kartik Purnima* (full moon night). It's as much a celebration of divinity as it is of the town's vivid culture and its people.

The first 4-5 days are reserved for the camel fair considered the largest such fair in Asia. The star attraction are the 50,000 camels, innumerable sheep, bulls, cows and horses, which majestically amble their way through the golden sands to



Trimurti on the banks of Pushkar lake
pic courtesy: Akul Tripathi

The ghats of Pushkar

The Pushkar lake has a whopping 52 *ghats* or lakefronts! Originally, there were only 12 *ghats* around the lake. About 1100 years ago, King Rao Nahar Mal Parihara of Mandore got a few permanent *ghats* constructed after he was cured



Entrance to Varaha ghat



Camels gathered for the *Oont ka mela* (pic courtesy: Jai Gakhreja)

of a skin disease after taking a bath in the Pushkar lake. Other kings followed suit and today there are 52 *ghats* which also connect many old and new temples. Of the 52, the Varaha, Brahma and Gau Ghat are considered the most sacred.

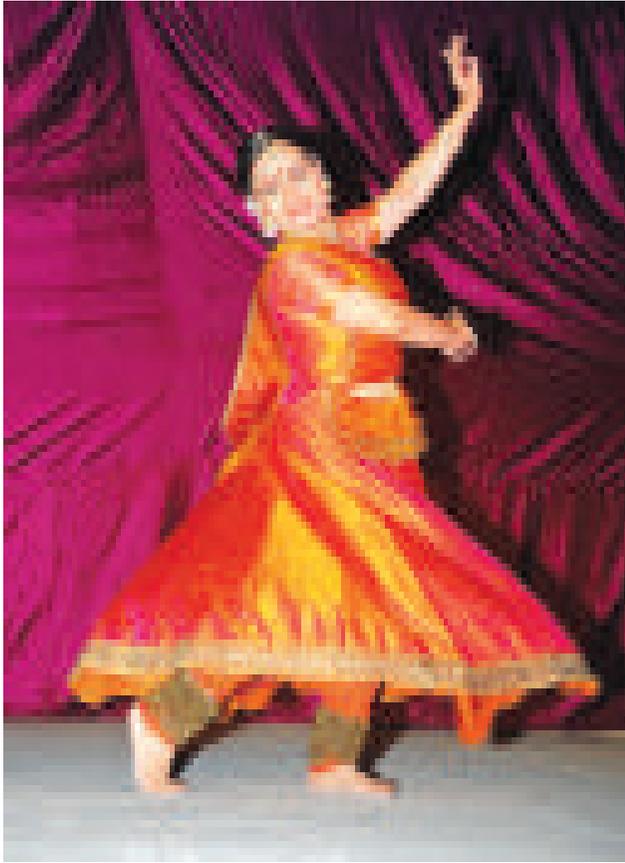
Lord Vishnu is believed to have appeared at Varaha Ghat in the form of a wild boar. Brahma took a bath here and performed *yajna* at the Brahma Ghat accompanied by Vishnu and Mahadev. It is said Adi Guru Shankaracharya and Maha Mandaleswar took a holy bath at Brahma Ghat. In recent times, Shri Jayendra Saraswathi has got a Shankaracharya temple constructed here. The Gau Ghat was renovated 400 years ago. There is also a Zenana Ghat which was renovated by Queen Mary of London.

Each *ghat's* water is said to be imbued with special curative properties. For instance, the Nag Kund is known to cure fertility, the Roop Tirth Kund is known to enhance beauty, the water of Kapil Vyapi Kund is said to cure leprosy while a dip in the Mrikand Muni Kund is said to grant the boon of wisdom! These beliefs are well-entrenched among the thousands who flock to Pushkar every year. And beliefs tempered by religion are eternal!

converge at Pushkar. In the scrublands beyond the west of the Brahma temple, pitched tents and temporary barricades become a temporary home to the thousands of camels. As the early morning mist of the desert gives way to warm sunshine, the herders and traders busy themselves cooking *rotis* and sipping tea at the golden sands, while the camels bask in the early morning sunlight in the desert.

Pushkar is one place where man-animal relationship acquires a new meaning. The camels are lovingly sheared, scrubbed, washed and perfumed. Symbolic hair motifs called *moondra* are carved onto the fur and tattoos are stamped on the sheared skins using back henna and heated ladles. Then they are bedecked in their best finery, silver bells and silver jewellery for the beauty contest! The camel race is another much awaited event at the fair. The camels are judged on the basis of their gait, humps and ability to obey their master's commands. An interesting event called *Laddoo Oont* is held where camels compete to be pronounced the strongest based on the maximum weight they can carry. And can you guess what is loaded on the camels to test their strength? People! One after another people clamber on to the back of the camel till the point when the camel dislodges its burden. In utter merriment everyone comes crashing down!

In another event, reminiscent of musical chairs, the camel



Danseuse Malti Shyam presents 'Kathak', a temple dance at Old Rangji temple

sticks its long neck between two poles under the guidance of its owner, who prods the animal by means of a silken cord attached to the camel's nose ring. Visitors also enjoy the camel dance competition. This fair is not just about fun and games, though that is an important aspect of the fair. This is also a trader's fair where camels are bought and sold. New owners walk away proudly with their animals in tow. They are not averse to showing off their acquisition to the tourists gathered there! A day before *Kartik Poornima* the traded animals are let off the grounds.



Giant wheels and merry-go-rounds are a major draw pic courtesy: Forts and Palaces Publications, Jaipur



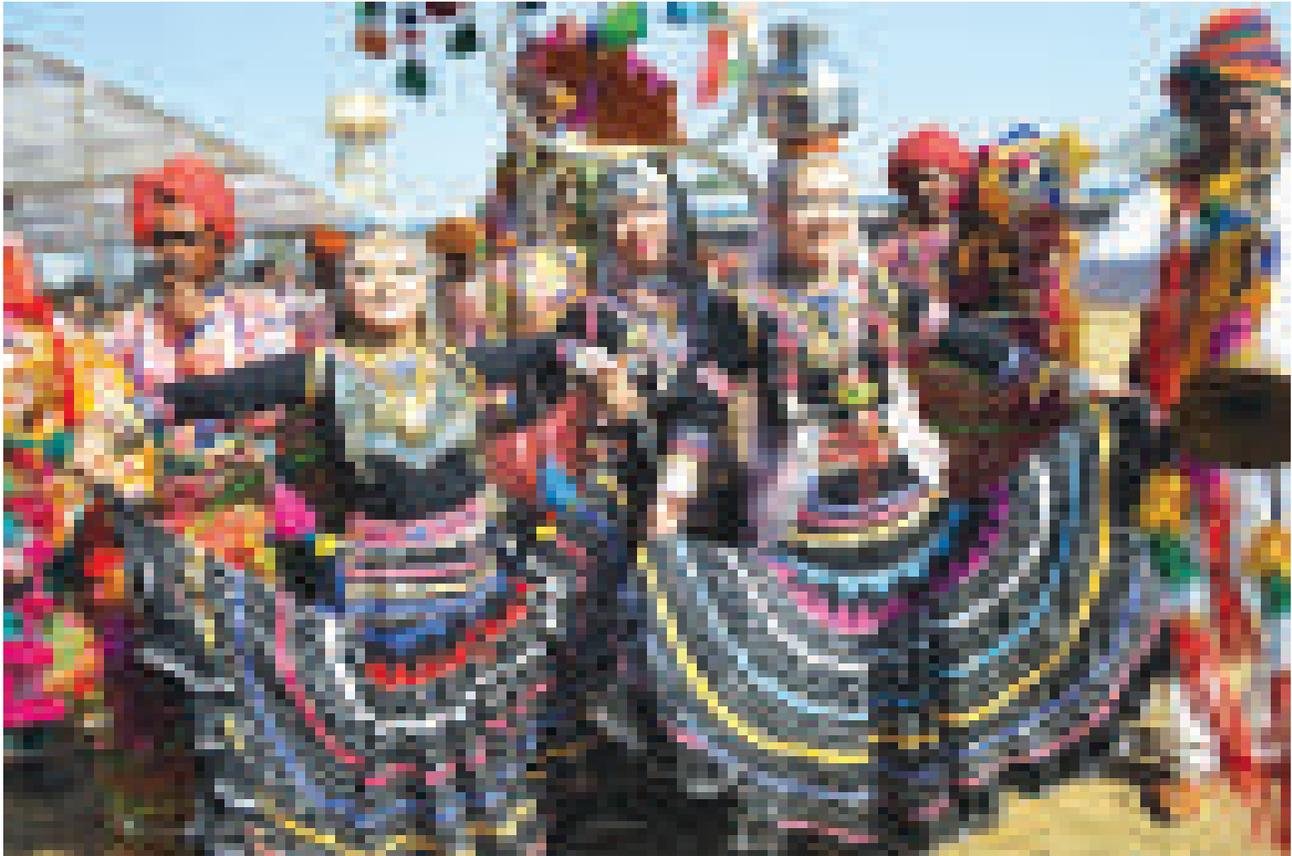
Kavita Dwibedi performs 'Odissi' at the Rangji temple

Culture, colour and contests

After this spectacular show of camels, the town of Pushkar puts its best cultural foot forward. As the sun sinks and the evening turns mellow, the ringing of bells and the soft sounds of hymns and prayers in the temples fill the air. Pilgrims and tourists gather in large numbers to witness the *maha aarti* held at Varaha Ghat in the evening. Thousands of tiny leaf boats (*pattals*) – each carrying flowers and an oil lamp – are set afloat on the crystal clear waters of the lake, giving it a



Nautanki (street shows) at mela ground



Beautifully bedecked and attired local women dance at the Pushkar mela (pic courtesy: Rajasthan Tourism)

mystical tint. A thousand stars flicker and twinkle together in the divine lake, which is illuminated in magical hues of golden yellow, orange and red!

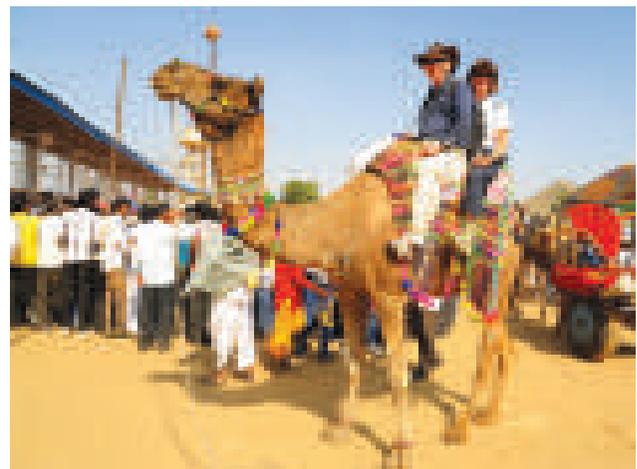
At a stone's throw away from Varaha Ghat, exhibitions are organized at the Old Rangji Temple. This year, the travel company, Indian Terrains plans to focus on art works relating to 'India's vanishing works'. The same venue also traditionally hosts mesmerising dance performances by noted artists in the evening. In the past, eminent artists like Malati Shyam (Kathak, Lucknow Gharana) and Kavita Dwibedi (Odissi) have performed here. A spiritual



Shopping is another attraction of the mela

walk *Pushkar Parikrama* is organised from the Brahma Temple.

Brightly turbaned men with impressive moustaches and women in vibrantly coloured *lehengas* (ethnic skirts) and *odhnis* (long colourful stoles worn by women over *lehengas*) lend a majestic air to the fair. It is common to see village women in intricately embroidered, swirling skirts, spontaneously pull the *ghunghat* (veil) over their faces at the sight of a stranger! Local artistes amuse visitors with music and cultural dances of Rajasthan. Local women make beautiful, intricate *henna* patterns on the hands and feet of visitors, adding yet another



Foreign tourists enjoy a camel safari



Majestically decorated camels strut around the *mela* ground

colourful dimension to the fair.

The fair has many games and events for tourists, both domestic and foreign. For instance, the *matka* (water pot) race between domestic and foreign tourists, moustache competition, wrestling competition, turban tying competition, puppet shows, acrobat shows, magic shows, tight rope balancing and cartwheels through flaming rings by young girls, snake and mongoose fights, and snake charmers, who sway the crowds with their antics. A very popular contest, especially among foreigners is the Indian bride and bridegroom competition, where the tourists dress up in bridal clothes! This event is held at night in the *mela* ground and is a major draw among the tourists. Prizes are given away to the best dressed couples.

The *mela* ground becomes a beehive of activities during the fair. The giant wheels, merry-go-round, and magic shows are a big draw among children. Artistes of various age groups who perform in poor rural areas assemble here and present shows one after another. One can also see many *nautankis* or street shows through the day. There are also camel safaris on offer and many tourists enjoy this experience of riding the colourfully canopied camels. The *mela* ground turns into a sea of humanity on the last day of the fair. Visitors start arriving since early hours of the morning to occupy the gallery for the daylong valedictory celebrations. Cultural programmes by folk artistes, camel parade,

camel race, horse race, tug of war, water pot race and *jalebi* race are part of the closing ceremony of the *mela*.

Besides pilgrims, visitors, traders, domestic and foreign tourists, thousands of *sadhus* also throng the sands of Pushkar. Dressed in saffron clothes with garlands of flowers about their necks, the ash-smeared *sadhus* are held in great respect by the pilgrims. The devotees offer food, sweets, clothes and cash to the *sadhus* and seek their blessings.

Shopping mecca

The Pushkar *mela* is also known for the multitude of shopping options, especially of ethnic handicrafts. The markets are full of stalls selling lovely colourful bangles, beads, necklaces, embroidered shawls, clothes embedded with mirrors, textiles, ethnic jewellery, costume jewellery, miniature paintings, beautiful wall hangings, blue pottery, puppets, brass utensils, leather goods, shoulder bags, and ropes; the list is endless! It is not just tourists, but locals too who find this the perfect place to pick up various items, especially textiles like *odhnis*, *ghagras*, *leharis* fabrics, intricate silver ornaments, hairpins and so on. Numerous stalls of trinkets, silver ornaments, chains, nose rings, necklaces, waistbands, anklets, toe rings, hairpins, chains and the ivory bangles worn from wrist to shoulder lure the rural women and foreign tourists.



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Closing ceremony of Pushkar Fair

Garments and tattoos are also very popular among womenfolk. Rustic women dressed in their finery sell glittering wares.

An Art and Craft Bazar (Shilpgram), Rural Grama Haat (exhibition ground) and the Pushkar Udyog Craft Mela are also



Thousands gather to witness the closing ceremony of the Pushkar Fair



Foreign tourists participate in the 'Indian bride' competition

organised to help the Rajasthani craftsmen to sell their produce to the tourists.

Pushkar in a nutshell

The annual fair at Pushkar is a combination of the religious, the social and the cultural. Visitors can just laze around the *ghats* in the pre-dawn hours and be mesmerized by how life unfurls here in all its beauty and serenity. A late evening visit to the *ghats*, to the accompaniment of soft music playing in the various hotels and guesthouses along the lakefront, can be a most invigorating experience. One can also spend hours feeding the flocks of pigeons on the *ghats*!

A popular thing to do is to go up to the Savitri Devi temple on the Ratnagiri Hill and enjoy the beautiful sunset views; or just pay a visit to the Gayatri temple atop another small hill for a beautiful sunrise! One can also explore the sand dunes on a

camel, learn some local music and get an Ayurvedic massage.

Pushkar's food is a big part of its appeal. One can satisfy one's taste buds with the sweet, mouthwatering *malpua* in the Halwai *gali*, or try the famous Rajasthani delicacies like *dal baati churma* or indulge in some shakes and juices at a café! No visit to Pushkar can be rounded off without indulging in at least a few souvenirs! The religiously inclined can visit the temples and take part in the chanting of hymns and



bhajans. Though Pushkar can be visited at any time of the year, the month of *Kartik* lends a special fervour to the town and should figure on every tourist's bucket list! ■

The writer is a freelance travel writer.

Our Last Six Issues

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New Government	Agriculture	Activism	Institutions	Urban Transport	Manifesto

“Satyajit Ray introduced me as ‘my Apu for the third part of the trilogy.’ I was speechless. That is how I came to know that I was to play Apu in *Apur Sansar*”

Soumitra Chatterjee is a living icon in the country not only because of his performance as a protagonist in 14 films directed by Satyajit Ray and other eminent films over the past five decades, but also because of his multi-layered excellence in several forms of creative expression. He is a renowned poet among contemporary Bengali poets, and co-edited one of the most outstanding literary magazines in Bengali called *Ekhon* and authored 11 collections of poetry. He is a famous director, actor and translator in Bengali professional theatre, having translated, directed and acted in different kinds of plays. He is a gifted elocutionist and recitation artist, who can recite poetry from Rabindranath Tagore through Jibanananda Das from memory.

The man who once refused the Best Actor Award for his performance in Goutam Ghose’s *Dekha*, but gracefully accepted the same award for Suman Ghose’s *Padakhhep* in 2008, was visibly happy with the Dadasaheb Phalke Award in 2012. Other awards include the Padma Bhushan and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for his contribution to theatre. He received the ‘Officier des Arts et Metiers’, the highest award for arts given by the French government, and a lifetime achievement award from Italy. The icon talks to **Shoma A Chatterji** about his interest in cinema, working with Satyajit Ray, theatre and other interests.

Why did you refuse the Best Actor Award for the role of the blind writer you portrayed in *Dekha*?

I felt awards often went to people who did not deserve them when other, better and more powerful performances were ignored. I felt that stars were awarded over genuine actors and I did not wish to be part of that scenario.

So why were you happy about the Dadasaheb Phalke Award?

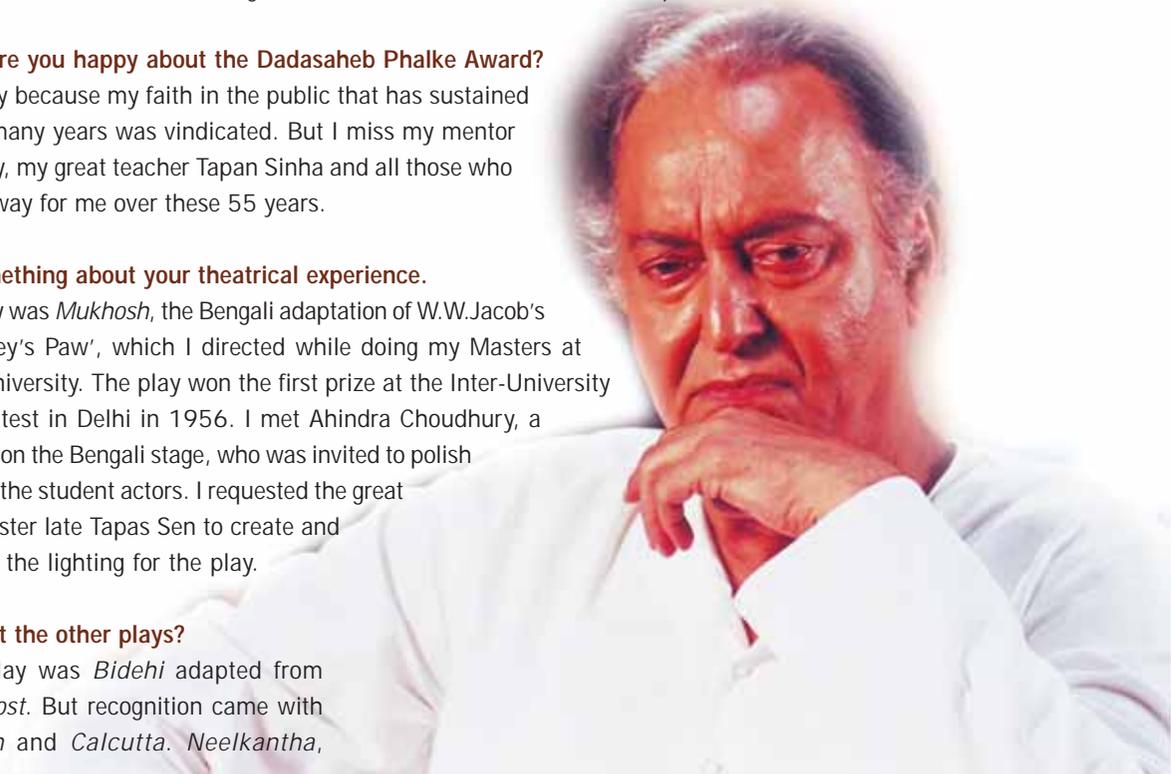
I was happy because my faith in the public that has sustained me for so many years was vindicated. But I miss my mentor Satyajit Ray, my great teacher Tapan Sinha and all those who paved the way for me over these 55 years.

Tell us something about your theatrical experience.

My first play was *Mukhosh*, the Bengali adaptation of W.W.Jacob’s ‘The Monkey’s Paw’, which I directed while doing my Masters at Calcutta University. The play won the first prize at the Inter-University Drama Contest in Delhi in 1956. I met Ahindra Choudhury, a great name on the Bengali stage, who was invited to polish the work of the student actors. I requested the great lighting master late Tapas Sen to create and orchestrate the lighting for the play.

What about the other plays?

My next play was *Bidehi* adapted from Ibsen’s *Ghost*. But recognition came with *Naamjibon* and *Calcutta. Neelkantha*,



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written and directed by me in which I also played the title role, was first staged in 1988. When we revived the play several years later, it drew a full house every time. Other successful plays are *Rajkumar*, *Tiktiki* (Sleuth), *Atmakatha* (the Bengali adaptation of Mahesh Elkunchwar's famous Marathi play) and *Raja Lear*, adapted from Shakespeare's King Lear. *Tiktiki* had more than 125 shows, each one performed to a full house. We also staged an autobiographical play *Tritiyo Onko Otoeb* roughly translated as 'The Third Act, therefore'. I was suffering from a terminal disease at the time and instead of writing about it, I chose to write a play that in the process, turned into my life story narrated by three different actors including me, each one a dimension of the same character – me. It was a self-reflexive commentary produced by Prachya. The disease is never named in the play but it is implied and understood.

What triggered the interest in theatre?

Acting would be more appropriate because I was also deeply influenced by films. The home environment was not against these things. My grandfather was the president of an amateur dramatic club and we grew up hearing his anecdotes. My father acted in plays produced by a similar group. He was brilliant at one other art – reciting poetry. As children, we would often put up our own 'plays' at home, based on small booklets that could be bought from the market. I recall having 'staged' Tagore's *Mukut* at home, using bed sheets for curtains, the bed for the stage and getting help for props and costumes from my parents. We got a lot of encouragement from our parents. I loved the very feeling of acting. I found it fascinating.

Sisir Bhaduri, labelled *Nata Samrat* of Bengali classical theatre, made a deep impact on you. Can you elaborate?

It was my Sisir Bhaduri link that finally decided that I wanted to become an

actor and nothing else. His theatre inspired me. As I watched him perform – his way of walking about on stage, creating a character, his unique style, I decided to become an actor. I had seen plays of the IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) before seeing Bhaduri on stage. I also saw *Bohuroopi* plays. I watched Sisir Bhaduri perform in Srirangam's *Prafulla* the night before Srirangam, his group, was closing down in 1956. My fundamentals in acting are from his plays. I consider him my guru.

When did you first find yourself drawn to films?

When I was very little, I watched films like 'Thief of Baghdad', 'Saboo', etc. As I grew into boyhood, I began to cut school to watch films. I also watched P.C.Barua's films. Serious interest in cinema started with the first Film Festival in Calcutta after my parents shifted to Calcutta from Howrah. I watched 'The Bicycle Thief', 'Miracle in Milan', 'Fall of Berlin', with friends equally passionate about cinema. We saw Renoir's 'River', shot entirely in India, after it was released. Then came *Pather Panchali*. Ray made four films before he did *Apur Sansar*. I now feel, for me, those films were a preparation for what was to come – my first film, *Apur Sansar*.

How did you land the role of Apu in Ray's *Apur Sansar*?

A crew member from Ray's team spotted me outside the Coffee House one day. They were scouting for someone to play Apu in *Aparajita*, the second in the Apu trilogy. Ray took one look at me and decided I was too tall for Apu. He had earmarked me for *Apur Sansar*. Later, he made me go through a camera test and a voice test to free me of camera consciousness. One day, when I dropped in on the sets of *Jalsaghar*, Ray introduced me to Chhabi Biswas who played the main role in the film. He introduced me as 'my Apu for the third

part of the trilogy.' I was speechless. That is how I came to know that I was to play Apu in *Apur Sansar*.

Are there any differences between acting on stage and acting in films in front of a camera?

Acting in theatre is acting in real time. It is continuous, sequential, and chronological. The rehearsals for a play take care of the actor's preparation for his role. The response too, is immediate. Cinema however, is not acting in real time. It is discontinuous, not sequential and not chronological either. There are no rehearsals for cinema. So, it is very important that the actor prepares for his role through discussions with the director, by reading and re-reading the script. Ray had given me a three-page sketch of his own conception of Apu as a character. This helped me in preparing for Apu.

Which films in recent times would you like to mention among your better ones?

Rituparno Ghosh's *Asookh*, Aparna Sen's *Paromitaar Ek Din*, Raja Sen's *Atmiyo Swajan* and Gautam Ghose's *Dekha*.

You are often seen acting in some terrible films. Why do you accept these assignments?

(Laughs loudly). Acting is my bread and butter and I have a big family to feed. I just cannot let go of assignments just because I feel they are going to be 'bad' films. Besides, how can an actor become judgemental about a film that is being shot when he does not know what the final product will look like? The quality of an average Bengali film has gone down, so my roles and the films I work in are a reflection of that quality. Sometimes, you feel this film is not going to be good at all and it turns out to be a pleasant surprise. Cinema is full of uncertainties and elements beyond anyone's control, and an actor is just a small keg in that giant wheel. ■

(Continued from page 22)



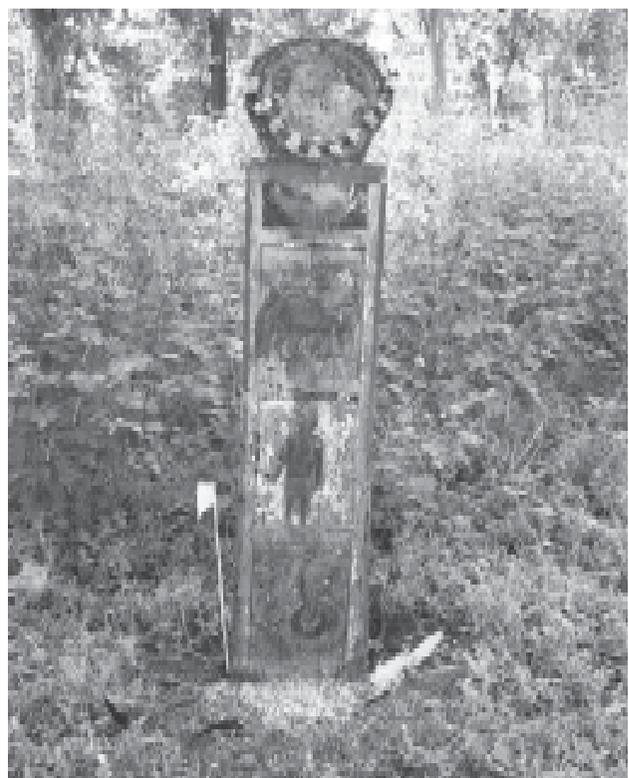
Cluster of Vaghdev totems

done when believers choose to honour an ancestor.

The peacock, appearing below the topmost image, represents all avian life and symbolizes beauty, grace and dignity. By honouring the bird, believers show their respect for all winged creatures in the hope of appeasing them so that they do not steal their harvest grain or damage their fruits and vegetables. Though the posture of the bird is always the same, the direction it faces does alter according to the believer's needs. The tiger is perhaps the most dominant image (not in size or proportion but in significance) because it represents the sheer power and vitality of the forest. Honouring and appeasing the animal implies human respect for it. The tiger is addressed as the protector and his defensive energies are called upon through the totem. The snake at the bottom represents the strength, fecundity and creative power of the underworld. When the creature is depicted erect with an open hood, it reflects the believers' need for the aggressive defence of their lives and property and when it is depicted curled in a spiral, it is said to be in its most energetic, nurturing, mysterious and miraculous form. When images of human beings are depicted in the middle or lower part of a totem, they represent the living family or community's need for physical protection from all the elements and creatures represented on the totem.

During Vagh Baras, which is two days before the Hindus celebrate Diwali, Vaghdev totems are venerated. They are smeared with a paste the colour of turmeric. A lamp is lit and placed at the base of the totem to honour the celestial forms, grains of rice are scattered for the peacock, a fowl is sacrificed for the tiger and an egg is offered to the snake.

These totems are usually found standing guard over fields and orchards, villages, hamlets, homes, sometimes on the banks of significant rivers and streams, and beside forest land that is particularly valuable because of the trees and vegetation growing there. They are always in the open, free of any barriers, fences, enclosures and the suffocating presence of organized worship. This form of totemism is attributed to the Gamit



A close-up of a Vaghdev totem

community who were joined later by the Warlis and others. Today they significantly reflect a composite pan-Dangi identity.

Exploring another aspect of sacred spaces and their connectedness with oral narratives in the Dangs, it would be worth considering Ma Vali Para and the grove it occupies.

Ma Vali Para or the Place of the Mother

Not far from Dhulda village and the narrow body of the river Gira, west of Ahwa, is a sacred grove which stands on the edge of a dense forest patch. An amazing variety of trees, shrubs and creepers make up this space. There are trees such as Sadada, Sal, Kalam, Amla, Kori, Asan, Tanas, Arav, Haldu, Bondara, Kiramda, Kakor, Alee and Mowra. Ground cover includes medicinal foliage such as Sonaro, Aati, Hoomb, Neelisote, Paevota, Kora, Timeroo and Lotee. Here, in the midst of this grove is the home of Agn Mata the reigning forest deity. Her primary space lies at the roots of an old spray of bamboo near an enormous Kakor tree which rises out of the dense green, skywards. Being a powerful Mother Goddess, she is represented not merely by one stone but a cluster of them, all smeared red. Red and white flags planted by devotees flutter from the bamboo spray. To her right, a long line of sacred stones spread all the way along the path and circle the base of nearby trees. These, as the stories say, are her relatives and friends. So important are they that devotees never fail to make offerings to them too.



Andha Mata's sacred space

According to Baijubhai, the Kunbi Bhagat of Dhulda village, Agn Mata once lived in a distant forest, away from the Dangas. Holy men from the Warli community sanctified the site and prepared the place as her new abode. Many other holy men from other communities too prepared homes for her in other forests. So one day she set out to visit them. Moving from place to place she tried out one home after another until she chose the grove which came to be called 'Ma Vali Para' or the 'Place of The Mother'. There are a number of mystic accounts of this journey that she made. Baijubhai has one version which he chants to the resonance of his *thali* in true bardic style. Placing the *thali* on his lap, he balances the polished stem of a cannabis plant on it. Holding it down on a lump of bee's wax stuck to the *thali*, he runs his fingers along the length of the stem producing a humming sound as he narrates his tale.

So, the earliest holy men who made offerings at the sacred space were the Warlis and after them the Dodiya, followed by the Mahadev Kolis, the Gamits and last of all the Kunbis. Somewhere along the line, he says, the Bhils arrived too and later devotees from other communities. Today, most of the devotees at Agn Mata's shrine are from the Bhil, Warli, Gamit and Kunbi communities. He claims that they continue to worship there because they truly believe that the Mother Spirit of the Dangas dwells there. Each community, according to him, have their own stories and songs about her. Even their forms of worship vary.

Beside the main cluster of sacred stones is a pile of terracotta figurines of semi human and animal forms. Each one has a distinct identity and a story to go with it. For example there is Yetri Mata and her bodyguard, Pangriya Ghora, Hirva and countless others. Then there's the Betki stone used to 'root' a vow, a Surya Chakra and many unidentifiable entities, alien to a visitor but of significance to a devotee.

Offerings here range from two cock birds (the ones that apparently crow at 3 am), harvested produce, coconuts and cooked food. The last mentioned is usually offered by those

who do not own farmland but work on other people's farms or as construction labour.

Predominantly in Dangi Bhasha, Baijubhai's narratives unravel the stories of the many Matas who followed Agn Mata to the forests of the Dangas and settled down into their sacred spaces. Devotees are expected to first pay their respects to the Mother Goddess Agn and then visit the others. There is Deher Mata of Deher, Andha Mata of Kadmal, Dhoonda Mata of Kosbia, Jaari Mata in the jungle of Barade, Saargi Mata of Chimbar and others such as Maargi Mata, Kooghli Mata and Khoori Mata. Of these, the most dramatic abodes are those of Deher Mata in a sacred grove high up on the banks of the Purna river, Andha Mata hidden inside a sacred grove located in the middle of farmland, Dhoonda Mata whose home is in a secluded cavern covered by shrubs on the banks of a river and Jaari Mata standing alone in a wooded area.

When one visits the homes of these Matas and listens to the stories of their magical powers, one cannot ignore the truth – pockets of the Dangas are still alive with an ancient presence as revealed in the oral narratives that abound. After the sacred spaces and the sources of inspiration will dry up – because oral narrative traditions of the Dangas are to a substantial degree kept alive by the reverential power of Mata worship.

As this is being written, there are already signs of mainstream religious worship making its presence felt in Ma Vali Para. According to Baijubhai, dramatically large boulders



Deher Mata's shrine hidden in a wood



Badhu, the last of the great Bhilala Bards

placed at the base of a Mowra tree to the extreme left of the main sacred cluster are now being worshipped as forms of a mainstream deity. How long will it be before ritual is formalized and walls appear? How long before the isolation of a rooted tradition begins?

The Bhilala tribe and its two *shamans*

Across the border from Gujarat is Madhya Pradesh and the district of Alirajpur, home of the Bhilala tribal community. Here too, there are numerous sacred spaces which are still alive and others which have virtually vanished.

The road out from the township of Alirajpur, is an uneven one. A tarred surface gives way to pits and ditches and as it veers out of Sorwa it is forced to slow down and snake through an eerily broken landscape dotted with shrubs of Tendu and wide stretching Mowra trees struggling to survive in a gutted earth. This is the road to the village of Jhinhini, once home to two powerful Bhilala Baduas (*shamans* from the Bhilala community) - Bhoona Baba and his son Nathu Baba. The former wasn't just a shamanic healer but a story-teller and singer. Those who have had the opportunity to have been in his presence and shared his mysteriously enlightening powers realized almost instantly that he was indeed a being with unusual gifts. At the height of his powers in the mid 1980s, he was known to slip into quiet spirit-travel and revisit ancient story-scapes, returning unobtrusively to share his experiences with those he trusted. He believed that each story is like a world in itself which has existed from the beginning when human consciousness was born and sacred memory was the vehicle one had to use to travel to these worlds.

When asked how he chose the story-scape he had to travel to, he'd reply, "We are not in a position to do such a thing. In fact, we don't have the power to choose stories. They choose us when there's a need, when everything inside and outside the storyteller says it's time. Just as when the stars fall into a perfect position with one another. Just as when the setting sun makes magic out of this broken land. It

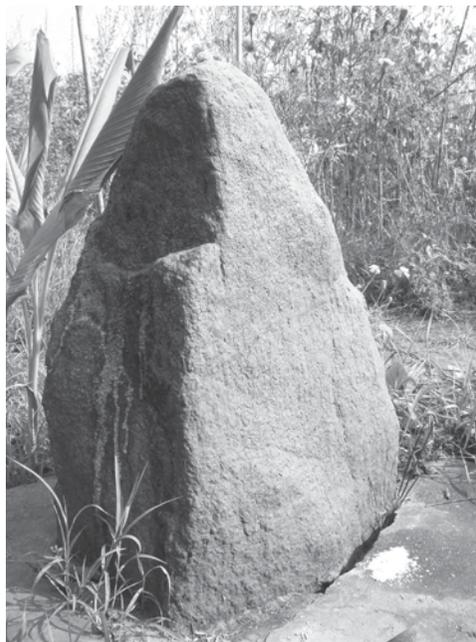


Traditional musical instrument from Ojhar

happens suddenly. Memory says it's time to remember because the story calls. And the storyteller goes off."

When visiting the story-scape, he would never fall into a dramatic trance or do anything outside his character. He'd sit still, almost pensively, and begin speaking, words flowing rhythmically. The story-scapes that he visited were mostly elemental ones. As a Bhilala Badua, Bhoona Baba was acutely aware of the natural and human environment that he lived in and was constantly nurtured by it. His diminutive physical stature enabled him to easily merge into a crowd in a *haat*, get lost among shrubbery in a sacred grove or blend subtly into a herd of grazing cattle. It suited him well to be unobtrusive. Of his three sons, one became a school teacher, the second a marginal farmer and gatherer of wood and the third – a Badua, whose name was Nathu Baba. The last mentioned, was similar in stature and appearance to Bhoona. Except of course, he had additional physical deformities. As it was impossible for the two Baduas to share the same village, Nathu withdrew to a sacred grove beyond Jhinhini. There, he claimed later, he lived beside a sacred spring, communing with wild creatures and a host of otherworldly beings, including the presiding deity of the sacred space. He said that he had learnt his stories from them so well that their words became his.

"This spring is where my stories were born. Here, I looked after them, cared for them, kept them alive. And when my father left his body it was time for me to carry my stories back to Jhinhini because now there was space for me there. But when I got back to my home I discovered that everything had changed. With my father's death, the family, especially my brother the teacher, either burnt or buried my father's belongings. It was as if they did not want to have anything more to do with what he represented. Firstly, they didn't think he was of any real use to them anymore. Secondly, they were ashamed of the way he looked – so small and strange, with beads and feathers around his neck and wrists, wearing nothing but a *langote*.



A large boulder marking a sacred space

And thirdly, they didn't want to have much to do with his beliefs. My brother who was a teacher followed a new faith and he had begun to influence the family and neighbours. So my arrival home was not welcomed by anyone. This difficult situation made it hard for me to be myself", he recounted.

He continued, "At the start I did my best to fit into life at home but when I found that no one was accepting me, I decided to start being myself. I roamed around with a half *dhoti* and lived the life of a Bhilala Badua because that was my life."

It took Nathu Baba quite some time to adjust to the changes that had begun to happen in his family and in the village. Though a Bhilala way of life was still followed by all, it was becoming increasingly like a habit and not a necessity. Mainstream faiths had begun to make inroads over the years, affecting traditional forms of worship and ritual. In the process the Bhilali that was used for prayers altered to regional forms of Hindi and strong strains of Malwi and Gujarati. Though Nathu Baba almost heroically held on to his narratives, it was becoming increasingly difficult for him to share them anymore as those who were interested or who could understand him had vanished into thin air. He was becoming irrelevant and dispensable.

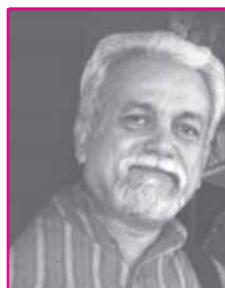
Finally, his grove was appropriated and a place of mainstream worship sprung up at the site of his sacred spring. New deities, new forms of worship, new prayers, new languages

and a retinue of newly imported sacred stories occupied the newly developed space. But Nathu continued to return, offering HIS prayers at the site where the spring originally sprung from (ironically, which is situated just outside the wall of the new place of worship).

"I lament not just the way in which this holy place has been changed but as much because they have cut down sacred trees that once grew here. See this Kheriya. It is a stump now. Once it was tall and beautiful. I remember this place when I spent time here being with wild and sacred creatures. I prayed with them and to them." Nathu Baba left his body not very long ago and Jhinhini's inner and outer environs are changing faster than anyone

would ever have imagined.

Other places in Alirajpur also struggle to keep their physical and folkloric identities. For example, beyond Amtala, on the Madhya Pradesh-Gujarat border Dungari Mata (the reigning deity of the mountain) still holds fast to her position, rising high up above the forested land around. Devotees visit her regularly, climbing the numerous steps to the summit where images of the Mata are enclosed inside the folds of giant rocks. To get to see them one has to literally crawl through a narrow space. Outside on an open rocky space, goats and fowls are sacrificed to appease her. Stories of her exploits still reverberate in the memories of those who believe in her, forming as it were, a living presence in their midst. And so the story goes on. Visit any tribal region in India and you will witness the same scenario; diversity of land use nurtures the diversity of cultures. Diversity of cultures ensures the survival of traditional and tribal identities. ■



The writer is an award winning poet, writer and folklorist, who has published more than 30 volumes of fiction, poetry, folklore and non-fiction. He is also an acclaimed story-teller on whose work a documentary 'The world in a story' is soon to be released.

The photographs in the article are by Susan Bullough Khare.

Health

It is now accepted that water is best consumed between meals and not during a meal. It is a good practice to reach for water at the first sign of stress, headache, anxiety or discomfort, to assist the body in adapting more quickly and easily. To determine how much water you need on a daily basis divide your body weight (in pounds) by 2. This equals the number of ounces of water you need daily. A normal glass is approximately eight ounces.

INDIAN AIR FORCE

Neighbour's envy, India's pride

The story of the Indian Air Force or IAF is a story of grit, determination and an extraordinary commitment to the motherland. The IAF also helps civilians during natural calamities, like their superhuman efforts in Uttarakhand last year and now in Jammu & Kashmir. They truly deserve our heartfelt gratitude and salute, says Brigadier Suresh Chandra Sharma (retd).

THE Indian Air Force (IAF) was established on 8 October 1932 by an announcement in the Gazette notification when six Indians were commissioned after completing their training at Royal Air Force College, Cranwell in UK. The First Flight of IAF was formed at Karachi on 1 April 1933. The equipment was four Wapiti aircraft and the strength of the unit was five officers and 22 airmen, called "Hawai Sipahis". Communication was with Morse code and messages were picked up by a hook. Two more flights were added to form No. 1 Squadron (Sqn) by 1938. The squadron took part in army operations against hostile tribes in North Waziristan. Flying Officer (later AIR Marshal) A M Engineer was "Mentioned-in-Despatch" and the fuel tank of Flying Officer Mehar Singh's plane was hit by a bullet. He had to crash land at a rocky place and make his way to the unit while the tribesmen were looking for him.

The force was equipped with Lysander and Hurricane aircrafts and moved to Burma in February 1942 to participate in World War II. During World War II, the strength of the force grew to 28,500 including 1,600 officers.

The Service established highest traditions of courage and efficiency in carrying out the comparatively



unglamorous task of tactical reconnaissance and support to the army, in ageing aircrafts. The No. 1 Squadron was located at an airfield near Rangoon and flew missions in support of Chinese Army as well. The Chinese were so impressed by the IAF actions that they presented a "Gold Wing" to the squadron - a rare honour indeed. Relentless operations by the IAF turned the retreat of the Japanese into rout. Squadron Leader (later Martial of the Air Force) Arjan Singh, Officer Commanding No. 1 Squadron, noticed a few soldiers in strange uniform on a hill overlooking the air field while taking a round at Imphal, whom he identified as Japanese soldiers. He called out the entire squadron to attack the Japanese. Lord Mountbatten flew into Imphal to personally pin the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) on Arjan Singh. In recognition of the outstanding work, the pre-fix "Royal" was awarded in March 1945 to the IAF. The No. 4 Squadron was part of the Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan.

The force was divided into RIAF and PAF at the time of Independence in 1947. The British officer presiding over the Partition Committee of assets was aghast when the Indian team told him that they did not need any British non-commissioned officers (NCOs) after Independence! He predicted collapse of the RIAF in three months. On the contrary, the RIAF flew from glory to glory, achieving a few firsts in aviation history.

A large number of raiders and Pakistani soldiers had infiltrated into Kashmir in 1947. The No. 12 Squadron airlifted 1 Sikh battalion to Srinagar on 27 October and landed on a dusty airfield without any reconnaissance. Dakotas from civil airlines joined in the air lift, a remarkable achievement at short notice. Fighter aircraft attacked enemy positions in Patan next day. The Air Chief, who was from UK, had given instructions not to use the Srinagar airfield for fighter aircraft due to its limited length of runway. He had not counted on the ingenuity of RIAF pilots.

One of them kept on hovering round the Srinagar airfield till he was short of fuel to fly back and landed at Srinagar, proving the suitability of the runway.

Spitfire fighters were moved to Srinagar and participated in the decisive battle of Shalatang. The raiders were pushed back to Uri. The Spitfires delivered food to Skardu garrison when the dropping zone was restricted and not suitable for drops by Dakotas. In a daring raid, they destroyed the bridges at Domel and Kishenganga. A large number of non-Muslims had collected at Poonch. The raiders were occupying the surrounding hills and road had been cut off. Lt Col (later Brigadier) Pritam Singh had improved the parade ground to serve as an air strip. The troops and refugees were maintained by supplies carried by IAF. The army wanted field guns to hit the enemy at a longer range. It was not possible to do so in daylight due to observed fire from the raiders. This was done at night using candles to mark the strip and one Dakota kept bombing the enemy positions. The challenge to rush troops to Leh at an altitude of 10,000 feet was taken up by Air Commodore Mehar Singh (popularly called Mehar Baba). Major General Thimayya flew along with him. Mehar Baba was awarded Maha Vir Chakra (MVC). The war ended on 31 December 1948. The RIAF had played a notable part earning four MVCs and 23 Vr Cs.

The strength of the force soon rose to 20 squadrons. About 100 fighter aircrafts were procured from UK. The prefix Royal was dropped in 1950 when India became a republic. Twelve MIG 21 fighter aircrafts were procured from USSR in 1962 and an agreement was signed to manufacture them in India. An unusual commitment of the IAF was to support United Nations operations on the Congo (now Zaire) in 1961-62 which it did by providing the U.N. ground forces with its only long-range air support.

War against China erupted on the Northern border in October 1962. It was decided not to use the IAF in offensive role and support was limited to airlift operations. A notable feat was the airlift of AMX tanks to the 15,000 feet high Chushul airfield in Ladakh. The task was carried out by removing the heavy plates from the engine compartment and bogey wheel. The floor was strengthened by wooden planks to suit the shape of the aircraft so that they did not move. Squadron Leader (later AVM) Chandan Singh declined to carry out any trials with the remark, "Chandan does not carry out any trials." He took off and other pilots followed at 15 minutes interval. France promoted this feat as a credit to the AMX tanks.

Large number of militants infiltrated into Jammu & Kashmir in August 1965. The IAF joined the fight against them with attack helicopters and the Pakistan attack was stalled. Full scale war erupted on 6th September. The Gnats of IAF established their reputation by defeating Pakistan Air Force's (PAF) Sabres and the two Keelor brothers from the Gnat squadron became household names in the country. Pakistan Army's crackdown on the people of East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, pushed a large number of refugees into India in 1971. Cross border firing and violation of air space was alleged by both the States. Four Sabre fighters of PAF strafed Indian positions on 22nd November. Three of them were shot down by Indian Gnats. Qureshi, one of the two Pakistani pilots, who bailed out rose to the rank of PAF Chief. PAF bombed a few IAF bases in a pre-emptive strike on 3rd December and a general war broke out. PAF was soon driven off the air in the Eastern Sector and the Army did not face any interference from the PAF there. Airborne operation, helicopter borne attacks and a heli-bridge supported the Indian Army's blitzkrieg to Dacca.

The Indian Army pre-empted Pakistan

by occupying Siachen, the world's highest battle ground, in 1984. Extreme climate, lack of oxygen and close proximity to the hills were the difficulties faced by the pilots and technical staff. The pilots have to be of above average skills and have a strong sense of commitment. Same goes for the technical staff too. Skin peels off on touching a metal part. Successful change of engine in a helicopter at an altitude of 20,000 feet is certainly a world record. They are able to do so due to love for the motherland and pride in the Service. Hardships and risks to life do not deter them. In Sri Lanka, 70,000 sorties were carried out without any loss of aircraft or mission. Tanks are a great asset in a battle and AMX tanks were airlifted to Chushul in 1962. For operations in Sri Lanka, eight 43-ton weighing T-72 tanks were airlifted to Jaffna. Later, the T-72 tanks were airlifted to Ladakh as well. These were remarkable feats in the aviation world.

The IAF is a world class mature and modern force. From 1978 to 1989, more than 20 types of aircraft including supersonic interceptors and contemporary weapon systems were inducted. The technical staff has proven capability to absorb new technology and maintain different types of planes. Impressed by the skills of the IAF, USSR asked them to carry out trials of the new interceptors while it was still on the secret list and was known as Fulcrum. The test pilots were happy with this plane and it was later inducted as MIG-29. Our skies are safe due to the IAF. ■

The writer served in the Army for 30 years. Post retirement he served the telecom industry with multinational and Indian corporates. He is also a freelance journalist and has interests in national security issues.



Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* completes 50 years

Satyajit Ray's masterpiece Charulata based on Rabindranath Tagore's Nastaneer turns 50 this year and the appeal of this film revolving around a young, married woman who is deeply attracted to her brother in law, still holds true. Shoma A Chatterji discusses this appeal and the immense controversies and comparisons to Tagore's original work this film triggered, when it was released in 1964.

SATYAJIT Ray's film *Charulata* (released in 1964) is based on *Nastaneer* (The Broken Nest) a novelette of around 80 pages, written by Tagore in 1901. Its translator, Mary M. Lago, describes it as "one of Tagore's best works of fiction." The story of the film and the original literary piece takes place in 1879, at a time when the Bengal Renaissance was almost at its peak. Western thoughts of freedom and individuality were just about to ruffle the age-old calm feathers of a feudal society. Thinking men were responding to it. Women's liberation was being talked about, but not much beyond a few cases of widow-remarriage and education. In Charu of *Charulata*, Ray probably discovered the crystallisation of the Indian woman, poised between tradition and modernity. Intelligent, sensitive, graceful and serene, Charu was a traditional woman whose psyche imbibed unto itself, winds of change from the world outside. And it was changing,

though below, in the drawing room, her British-influenced husband Bhupati was celebrating the victory of the Liberals in Britain. Nineteenth century Western social philosophy and Ram Mohan Roy's ideas were constantly working towards the liberation of women.

Tagore's original story *Nastaneer* created shock waves among feudal purists and Hindu aristocracy of the time. It was criticised because it not just suggested but made it clear that Charu, a bored and lonely wife with creative talents in writing, is deeply attracted to her husband Bhupati's young cousin Amal, a student who lives with Bhupati and Charu. When Amal realises this, he is shell-shocked and not wanting to be a part of the betrayal of a generous-hearted cousin, beats a hasty retreat, bringing the lives of the husband and wife to a metaphorical and tragic end.

"Where *Charulata* herself is concerned, Ray achieves that wonderful transparency in the objective correlative

which represents ideal cinema. Every thought in her mind is visible, every feeling", writes Chidananda Dasgupta in Talking about Films. He goes on: "Deeply intelligent, sensitive, outwardly graceful, self-composed



A shot from the film *Charulata*

and serene but inwardly the kind of traditional Indian woman of today whose inner seismograph catches the vibration waves reaching from outside into her seclusion, stirring her with a spiritual unrest."

Though *Charulata*, the film, is distanced from *Nastaneer*, it does not move away from the original essence of the Tagore story. Amitabh Chattopadhyay has disputed Ray's loyalty to Tagore's original story. But when one considers the relocation of the story Ray made almost a 100 years after Tagore wrote it, one begins to understand the perspective of a filmmaker 'looking' at a story that was penned by a different person (Tagore) in 1901 (about five characters set in 1879) through his 'cinematic' vision which is – and has to be - distanced from Tagore's literary vision. But there is a sense of 'reverence' to Tagore that Ray expresses through other visual components. The recreation of the period to create the *mise-en-scene* and the setting is an example. The European style haveli with



Satyajit Ray during a film shoot

its heavy, ornate furniture is made into a gilded cage for the helpless Charu. Long corridors, rooms seen through vistas, shuttered windows, dark wallpaper, all combine to create an overpowering sense of being enclosed in a confined space, while at the same time offering glimpses of dappled sunlight filtering through the central courtyard or in the formal garden. They also highlight the loneliness and the boredom that defines Charu's life.

To quote from Chidananda Dasgupta, "the exquisite period flavour is Ray's own, and distinguishes the film from the story which Tagore takes for granted. The sunlit garden, the swing, the embroidery, the floral motifs on the doors and walls, the horse-drawn carriage, the evocative settings created by Bansi Chandragupta are, however, more than exquisite decorations; they frame the action and set it at a distance – the distance of contemplation." It is this 'distance of contemplation' that marks the 'process of transportation' which makes *Charulata*, a creative cinematic

expression stand independent of its original source, as much as it takes the Tagore story a bit further ahead in time. The 'process of transportation' from the novelette to the film both necessitates as well as creates the 'changes' that purist critics of *Charulata* question.

Ray has been drawn and quartered for taking liberties with the Tagore original and magazines brought out special issues on an on-going barrage of letters between economist Ashok Mitra attacking Ray and Ray defending the changes. Had Tagore written this same story in 1964, when Ray made the film, perhaps he too, would have closed his story along similar lines. The same logic would apply to Ray's strong visual statement highlighting the loneliness of Charu, understated in the original story. *Charulata*, the film, takes the argument of a young married woman's loneliness and subsequent attraction for her brother-in-law Amal further, to fit into the social realities of the 1960s, without changing the framework of the time and the place

given in the Tagore story.

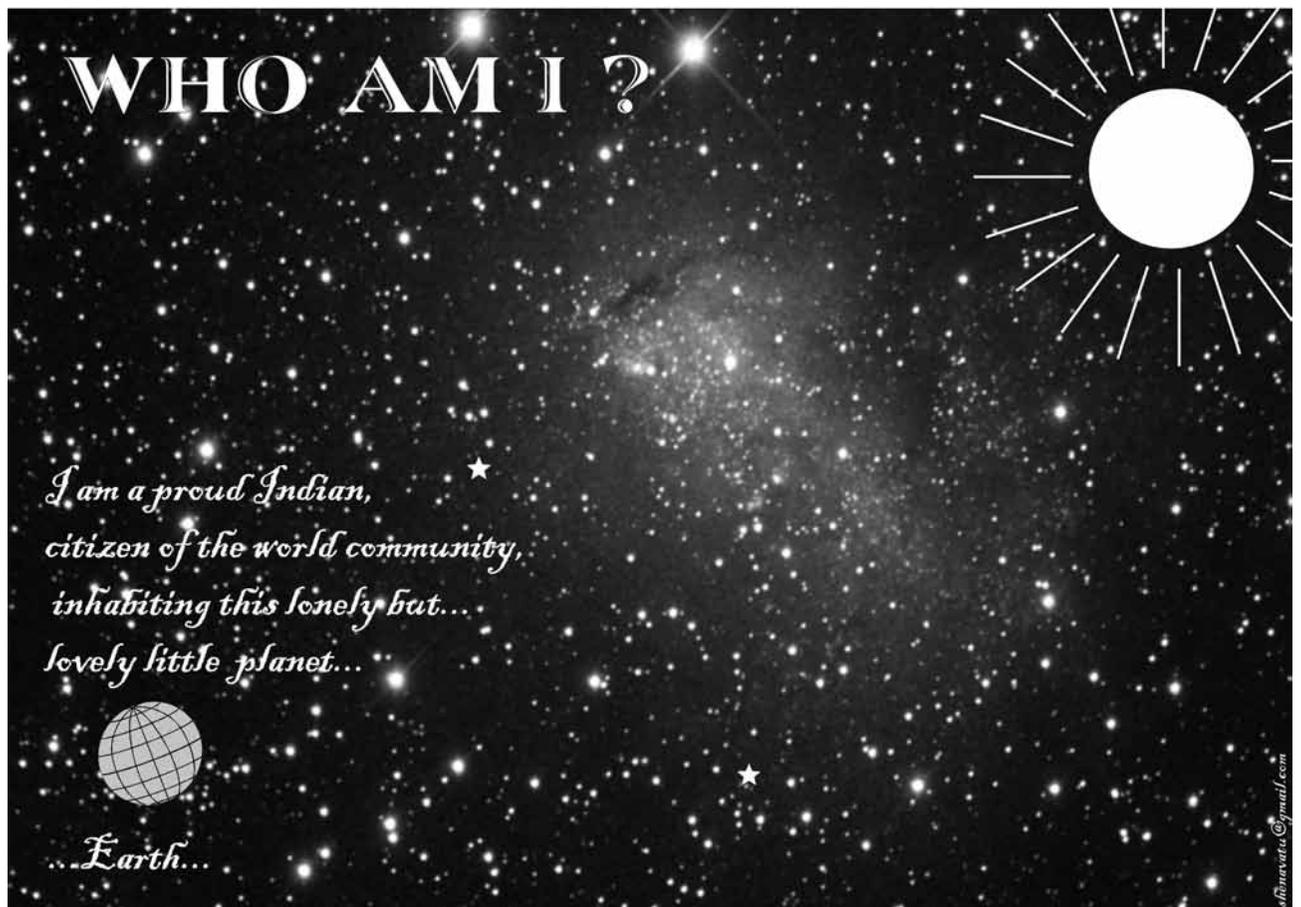
There is a passage in Tagore's novelette *Nastaneer* that reads:

"Perhaps Bhupati had the usual notion that the right to one's own wife's affection does not have to be acquired. The light of her love shines automatically, without fuel, and never goes out in the wind." *Charulata* is fifty but Charu the woman, lives on forever, having left a bit of herself behind in all women everywhere. ■

The writer is a freelance journalist, film scholar and author. She has authored 17 published titles and won the National Award for Best Writing on Cinema twice. She won the UNFPA-Laadli Media Award, 2010 for 'commitment to addressing and analysing gender issues' among many



awards. She is currently Senior Research Fellow, ICSSR, Delhi researching the politics of working women in post-colonial Bengali cinema 1950 to 2003.



Bear necessities

The sloth bear is under threat and it's imperative that we discourage all practices which lead to the bears and bear cubs being captured or poached. This clumsy and beloved denizen of the Indian jungle, with roots going back a million years, has to be protected at all costs.

THE shadow to our right moved ever so gently. We reversed the vehicle slowly and switched off the engine. And there it was – *Melursus Ursinus*, the sloth bear.

My daughter Miel and I were with Fateh Singh Rathore, en route to High Point, in the Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve on February 20, 2003. Driving leisurely, we had stopped for a bit at Lakarda, where, a decade earlier, Fateh almost lost his life when he was attacked by villagers and left for dead. The waterholes and lakes we passed were dry, with crocs and pelicans vying for the few remaining fish. "Drought is nature's family planning device," said Fateh, whose life has been dedicated to protecting the forest he loves. Looking to take in the eternal vistas of the Vindhyas and Aravalis, rather than indulge in tiger chasing, the bear we saw rewarded us with the sighting of a lifetime.

The male bear we saw was large and I figured it weighed around 120-130 kg or so. In a draft chapter written for a book, 'Mammals of India', field biologists K. Yoganand, Clifford Rice and A.J.T. Johnsingh suggest that sloth bears evolved in the early Pleistocene (1.8 million to 11,000 years ago), and further confirm that "a fossilised fragment of a (sloth bear's) humerus bone from the Pleistocene was found in the Kurnool basin of Andhra Pradesh and it is identical to modern specimens." The mind boggles at the sheer vastness of time through which animals like the one we were watching have been able



The Indian sloth bear

to survive the trials of life. At one time, scientists believed these bears were related to real sloths, perhaps because of their long nails, which we could see being put to great use not 20 metres from us.

Unmindful of us, the bear was working to a meticulous plan. In quick order he upturned a large stone, dug furiously under the gnarled roots of an acacia tree, scraped away the earth from a mound, and knocked over two or three small dry bushes. Job accomplished, it revisited all its sites, to the accompaniment of great whooshing breaths as its whitish snout sniffed for the presence of the ants, termites and grubs that constituted much of its diet. The strategy must have been

perfected over millions of years. Insects tend to first freeze and then emerge to investigate or repair damage.

Bears are forest loving, tropical animals. Somewhere in the mists of time, bears and anteaters probably shared a common ancestor. Both not only eat the same kind of food, but also carry their young about on the backs in similar fashion, a sight I have seen more than once in the course of my travels through the Indian jungle. While such thoughts buzzed through my mind, "our" bear was busy helping himself from his buffet that was obviously being replenished every few minutes! Moving with an urgency I would not normally associate with sloth bears, he did his rounds – stone, tree root, earth



The barbaric 'entertainment' *bhalu naach*

mound, bushes and then back again. It was around 5.30 p.m. already and the light was fading. We stayed with the bear for over half an hour. It neither acknowledged us, apart from one brief glance when we first arrived, and it never stopped eating either.

Ranthambhore is of course best known for its tigers, but its relatively undisturbed habitats, with uncounted niches, provide sustenance for an amazing diversity of wildlife. The craggy rocks and deep ravines seemed tailor made for female sloth bears to bring up litters that may consist of two or three cubs. After mating and a gestation period of around seven months, mothers will retreat to secure dens in caves or ground hollows where their young will be born, usually in winter. The mother and cubs may not emerge from hiding for as long as two months, with the female caring for her defenceless cubs, while relying on stored body fat and moisture herself.

When the cubs are old enough to wander, they will be taken on short walks. At this time the protective mother is fiercely defensive of her young and

this is when most human-bear conflicts are likely.

I still remember the horror that the extremely experienced forest guard Gaffar had to face when he got in the way of a protective mother not 100 metres from the famous Jogi Mahal. The bear attacked without warning, rising on its hind legs to attack Gaffar's face and scalp. I know Gaffar well and he said he had to put his hand inside the bear's mouth to get it to back away. He escaped with his life, and is back to patrolling his turf, but to date he insists that it was his and not the bear's fault, and that he should have been more alert.

Bears are vital to the ecology of the forests in which they live. Opportunistic feeders they eat honey, fruit and even carrion. They thus not only turn the soil, and fertilise it with their droppings but also disperse fruit seeds far and near.

Contrast Gaffar's attitude to wildlife with that of the legion of social activists who insinuate that making bears dance on city streets should be the legitimate right of people, just because this is what once used to be done. The sloth bears

range has been reduced dramatically thanks to deforestation. In the few forests where they now survive we cannot allow poachers to kill females and then sell their cubs to the highest bidders. Protecting wild sloth bears is not merely a matter of animal rights – though I for one find my stomach turning at the abominable cruelty and insensitivity of turning a miracle of evolution into a clownish performer – it is an ecological imperative.

Like the tigers of Ranthambhore and scores of other forests, sloth bears are in trouble today. Poachers kill them for the value of their bile and fat. Their claws are sold as talismans. Their most serious threat, however, comes from activists who cannot recognise either the immorality or the ecological insanity in championing the rights of those who kill mothers to steal their cubs.

Fortunately, despite all kinds of efforts and political skulduggery, attempts to legalise this bear trade have failed. Technically, anyone caught with a sloth bear, alive or dead, faces ten years in jail. But this is not the only defence the bears have. Thanks to Kids for Tigers, the programme that is reaching out to over one million Indian children, the general public is turning away from the disgusting *bhalu naach* or bear dance that was once common across India.

Don't watch bear shows (or snake shows, or monkey shows!). And support wildlife efforts to save habitats such as Ranthambhore (and Bandipur, and Nagarhole, and Bhadra and Kudremukh!). This is the barest of all the bear necessities required for

the survival of this amazing animal. ■



Bittu Sahgal is the Editor of Sanctuary Asia magazine.

In search of happiness

A Radhakrishnan *reflects on the meaning of happiness and how the definition varies across philosophies. Happiness comes from within, not without, he notes.*

HAPPINESS, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary is 'the state of being happy; an experience that makes you happy.'

Different people have a different take on what happiness is. For some it is splurging on shopping or having a lot of money, and for others, it is spending quality time at home. It is something which comes from within, not without. You have to be happy to make others happy. There is no formula for happiness. It has to be felt, and shared. It is being able to take pleasure in the smallest things of life, like a smile on the countenance of family members.

Happiness is not an end in itself; it is a constantly changing process. True success in life is being in a state of enduring happiness. Seek happiness in the small elements of everyday life and make sure you find something that makes you laugh out loud.

It's always best to accept reality, whatever it may be, and move on. A feeling of insecurity leads to a life of sorrow. One should reach a state of mind where happiness is not dependent on anything.

'Happiness for me is when mom cooks delicious food; my dad surprises me with gifts, and when my family is beside me through thick and thin ...but at times I wonder how people who don't have the luxuries we have, are happy', says Rasika, a design student based in Bengaluru.

The then monarch Jigme Singye Wangchuck of the small Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, in the 1970s pioneered 'Gross National Happiness' as the goal of development rather than gross domestic product (GDP).

The question as to whether money

really buys you happiness, is a matter of debate. A recent study says that it appears that money can buy you happiness and affluence and plays a pivotal role in financial outlook.

The higher income earners are less financially stretched and higher prices are unlikely to cause them too much concern. On the other hand, a lack of money holds people back from realising their dreams. A U.S based psychologist explains, 'Many people think happiness is just a pleasant experience, but medical research shows that people who experience good feelings, for example, are less likely to get sick, and are more social and philanthropic.

But it's the little things in life that gives the greatest moments of happiness. Nothing can beat the burst of pleasure you get at discovering a forgotten ₹1,000/- note in the pocket of an old shirt. Or the thrill when you find the single vacant seat in a bus or train!!

True, happiness also lies in forgiving yourself and others, being grateful and appreciative, living each day as though it was your last. And above all, view the world through the eyes of a child thrilled by the process of observing and experiencing the wonder and beauty in every single thing.

Swami Sukhabodhanand says that 'being happy involves destroying the 'hurt body'. Every thought creates energy - substance. It is subtle and can be negative or positive. If negative, it results in the creation of a subtle hurt body. The secret of happiness lies in destroying the hurt body by creating bliss body.

Another school of thought avers that life may start getting happier after 50. With age comes experience and

wisdom, tools that increase one's ability to accept the world, eschewing its imperfections. For children, inculcating in them a positive self-image is a basic ingredient for a happy, successful and confident life. That is what indicates how we react emotionally, socially and spiritually to different stages and people in our lives.

Happiness constantly eludes one who is dominated by base instincts and in the process, suppresses the inner voice of conscience. It is a pity that instead of living a simple life devoid of complications, we keep hankering after material things.

The final chapter of the Uddhav Gita, part of the Srimad Bhagavatam, gives deep insights into psychotherapy. 'All unhappiness is born out of the psychological condition of mind called vritis or modifications. Competition, jealousy, hatred and ego destroy our happiness. Keep doing your duty to the best of your capacity without ulterior motive, which will lead to enlightenment.'

The Buddhist perspective is also that true happiness comes from a sense of peace and contentment, which in turn must be achieved through the cultivation of altruism, of love and compassion and elimination of ignorance, selfishness and greed.

In conclusion, I quote Swami Brahmddev who states, 'the idea of happiness is a kind of ignorance. If your understanding is healthy, then you will never give too much importance to happiness. Happiness is not the idea, purpose or aim of life. Happiness is a consequence, a fruit. ■

The writer is a Pune-based freelance journalist, short story writer and poet.

Krishnattam – the dance of Krishna

Kerala's Krishnattam dance drama was created by Manaveda, a Zamorin Raja of Calicut, inspired as he was by existing dance forms like the orthodox Koodiyattam and the beautifully written Narayaneeyam. The result is a work which is both literary, populist, and eminently adaptable to stage, says Dr. Kanak Rele.

KRISHNA Geeti, commonly known as 'Krishnattam', is a dance drama in Sanskrit composed by Manaveda, a scion of the royal family of the Zamorin Raja of Calicut. The Zamorins had played an important role in the cultural and political history of Kerala for nearly 900 years from the 9th to the middle of the 18th century. They had all along been patrons of learning and the Arts, attracting leading scholars and poets of the day to their court at Calicut.

Manaveda was a contemporary of Melpathur Narayana Bhattathiri, author of the famous Sanskrit work, Narayaneeyam. Born in circa 1585, he grew up as a scholar and a man of art, guided and encouraged by his uncle, Manavikrama, who reigned as the Zamorin Raja in the middle of the 17th century. Manaveda was the Zamorin from 1655 to 1658. There is evidence to show that Manaveda completed his work Krishnattam in 1653, five years before he died.

Though records are lacking in details, the origin of Krishnattam can more or less be traced. Having witnessed Koodiyattam, the orthodox Sanskrit drama performances of the Chakkiars

and various types of folk dances which were common in those days, Manaveda

have inspired his genius to compose another devotional work on the story of Krishna, his favourite deity, more suited for performance on stage.



Depiction of demon Narakasura

felt that it might be worthwhile to have an assorted art form, more literary and at the same time, more appealing to the common people. Jayadeva's famous work Geeta Govindam and Melpathur's Narayaneeyam seem to

This dance-drama is divided into eight acts called *stabakas* - 'Avataram', 'Kaliyamardanam', 'Rasakreeda', 'Kamasavadham', 'Svayamvaram', 'Banayudham', 'Vivida Vadham', and 'Svargarohanam'. Each act is staged on a separate night. After 'Svargarohana', the last act on the ascent of Lord Krishna to Vaikuntha (heavenly abode) after the fulfillment of his life's purpose, the first act 'Avataram', (Incarnation) has to be re-enacted on the next night, as if to indicate that Lord Krishna is still with us. However, the other acts can be staged individually and it is not necessary that the entire drama consisting of the eight acts should be staged on successive days at one stretch. All the main stories in Sri Krishna's life are touched upon by the author in these eight acts, some elaborately,

and others tersely, depending on their importance, devotional appeal and suitability for performance on stage.

The most unique and distinguishing feature of Krishnattam is the use of masks for some of the characters. The masks

are larger than life, with the features exaggerated, some even deformed. The design and colour scheme of the masks vary from the simple to the complex, and depend on the type of character represented. The colour scheme reveals symbolic values and its application is governed by the sense of contrast and competence to catch the eye. They are examples of excellent craftsmanship and show sophistication of design.

Krishnattam is an important landmark in the evolution of the Kerala stage, occupying an intermediate position between Koodiyattam and Kathakali, with affinities to both. It is far less complex than the other two art forms in the matter of *abhinaya*, as there is no attempt to interpret the text word by word. The emphasis is on the devotional aspect and this is brought about by graceful dances and devotional music. Except on one occasion in Rasakreeda, where the *gopis* also sing, supporting the background music, the characters throughout remain mute while on stage. Like Kathakali, women do not take part in the performance and all female characters are enacted by



Depiction of demoness Pootana



All female characters like *gopis* (above) are enacted by young boys

young boys. The costumes are similar to those in Kathakali, with the difference that unlike in Kathakali, even some of the female characters have a *chutti* around their jaws and chin.

The songs are sung in the Sopana style in which the Geeta Govindam songs of Jayadeva are even now sung in the Kerala temples. The instruments that are used in the Krishnattam stage are 'Maddalam', 'Chengalam', 'Elatalam', Conch and 'Edakka', the last two also on some auspicious occasions. 'Chenda' (drum) which is an important instrument in Kathakali is not used at all in Krishnattam. The popular Carnatic ragas adopted for singing are 'Shankarabharanam', 'Kamboji', 'Todi' and 'Bhairavi'. Other ragas like 'Kedaragoula', 'Natta' and 'Padi' are also used. The *talas* adopted are 'Chempada', 'Chemba', 'Atanda' and 'Panchari'.

There is only one solitary Krishnattam troupe at present. Previously, it was maintained by the Zamorin Rajas, but gradually with the introduction of several measures of land reforms in Kerala, the income of the Zamorins began to dwindle and it became difficult

for them to maintain the troupe. The Krishnattam troupe was then transferred to the Guruvayur Devaswom, which has been maintaining it ever since.

Training which is systematised and strict took place in the palace *kalari* for six months during the rainy season. The first session was from sometime in May or June until Onam, a religious holiday, the date of which is based on the solar calendar and which occurs in the Malayalam month of Chingam sometime after August 15. The second session began after Onam and continued until Navaratri, a nine-day festival the date of which is based on the lunar calendar occurring in the Malayalam month of Kanni, sometime between October and November. The performance season begins on Vijayadashami day, the day after Navaratri. ■



The writer is Director, Nalanda Dance Research Center and is a recipient of Padmabhushan award, Akademi Ratna (Fellow of Sangeet Natak Akademi)

BEYOND A BILLION BALLOTS

Democratic Reforms for a Resurgent India by Vinay Sahasrabudde

(New Delhi: Wisdom Tree, 2013)

THE book under review is based on the author's revised Ph. D. thesis. But it is not merely a theoretical work, written on the basis of study of published materials; Dr. Sahasrabudde draws heavily from his rich experience as a student activist, journalist, and of over 30 years in politics as the Secretary General of the Rambhau Mhalgi Prabodhini (RMP), the political training centre of the BJP.

The author, in 300 pages divided into seven chapters, discusses India's democracy, its political culture, populism, electoral compulsions and reforms needed to further strengthen the electoral system. In a neatly linear narration, he critiques the Indian electoral system – the bedrock of India's democracy – and argues for its 're-examination' and reforms. Undoubtedly, Indian democracy is a matter of pride for a majority of Indians on a variety of grounds: It is the largest democracy in the world with a total electorate of over 814.5 million as was recorded in the recently concluded 16th General Elections. There were one million polling booths to elect 543 members to the Lok Sabha from amongst 8,251 candidates.

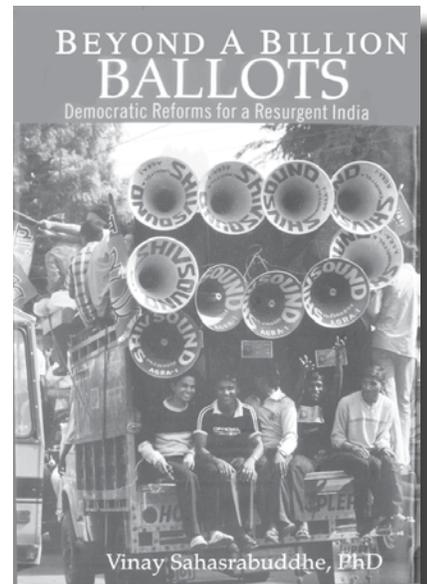
The Indian democracy has managed to survive and thrive, among the very few to do so from the developing countries which became independent in the post-World War II period. It is held in high esteem by many in the developing world. The smooth transfer of power after the recent general elections shows the strong roots of the Indian democracy.

We Indians are critical of our democracy, but whenever I have

travelled to neighbouring countries or in Southeast Asia or read their newspapers, I often find very laudatory remarks on Indian democracy. In most of these countries, people want their politicians to follow in the footsteps of Indian politicians!

But very rightly, these aspects though ego-satisfying, are not enough to sustain Indian democracy as a vibrant democracy, says the author. He points to major limitations or drawbacks in the working of functional democracy in India. One, none of the political parties in India since Independence exhibited any unity of purpose, whether they formed government on their own or through a coalition. It is appropriate to call political parties in India as power-sharing-fronts. Major political parties, like the Congress and the BJP have not been able to perform well their functions as mediators between power wielders and the people.

Two, representative character of elected members is increasingly uncertain. Often, an elected representative is not elected by a majority. As a matter of fact, in a constituency, greater the number of candidates running, smaller the percentage needed to get elected. In the previous Lok Sabha for instance, 78 percent of MPs won the elections, "despite the fact that 50 percent of the voters in their respective constituencies have voted against them..." This questions the very legitimacy of representative democracy. The author does not hesitate to generalise: "Should such a state of affairs continue for long, we will have neither good governance



nor genuine democracy."

Three, political parties have failed to work as instruments to translate people's "discontent and disappointment", into a political process to find solutions to public grievances. Rightly, political parties, to survive, have used populism. It is dangerous to Indian democracy from a long term perspective.

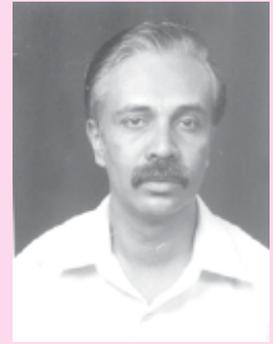
Vinay Sahasrabudde not only analyses deficiencies in the working of Indian democracy, but also makes a few concrete suggestions to improve the working of it. Primarily, he re-examines the political system - Parliamentary government and First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) electoral system to elect MPs.

This book should be read by every politician and political scientist. ■

Dr. P. M. Kamath formerly was Professor of Politics, University of Bombay, currently he is Hon. Director, VPM's Centre for International Studies and Adjunct Professor, Department of Geopolitics and International Relations, Manipal University, Manipal. Of his 18 published books so far, three are on the topic under discussion here: **Nuclear Disarmament: Regional Perspectives on Progress, India's Policy of No First Use of Nuclear Weapons: Relevance to Peace and Security in South Asia and Indian Nuclear Policy: From Idealism to Realism.**

Who will bell this cat?

Violence in Indian politics is here to stay. Ironically, those who incite violence with their words and deeds, often have the tacit sanction of the party leaders, who feel this helps in widening their electoral support and party base. In such a case, will any political party try and bell this cat?



C. V. Aravind

is a Bangalore-based freelance journalist.

INDIAN politicians can be slotted in different categories, and this has nothing to do with their political affiliations. Some of them, alas a microscopic minority, are sincere and honest and are in politics to serve the people. A vast majority hunger after the loaves and fishes of power and have no qualms when it comes to looting the exchequer and building cosy nest eggs for themselves. Some politicians are not averse to stoking the fires of communalism and creating religious divides.

Yet, the politician who spells disaster for the nation is the one who preaches the doctrine of violence and when caught out, tenders an insincere apology and gets away scot-free. In recent times, a video of a hate speech by actor turned politician Tapas Paul, a Lok Sabha MP of the Trinamool Congress created a furore wherein he threatened to send his 'boys' (meaning the party cadres) to rape the womenfolk of the CPM, the opposing party. He has also allegedly advised women to use their kitchen knives to slit throats and the men to chop CPM men to pieces. This kind of bloodcurdling rhetoric takes us back to the medieval times when laws to tackle crime were conspicuous by their absence. There has been no debate on the authenticity of the videos that have surfaced, but it is the muted reaction of the party's leader Mamata Banerjee, the CM of West Bengal and a one-time staunch fighter for human rights that has taken everyone by surprise. The party has allowed the matter to rest after an unconditional apology by the offender! It is alleged that his outburst has earned him brownie points with his leader! This, however, is an extreme case, but violence mongering is not something that is unknown in this country and no party can claim to be above board in this respect. The brutal murder of Chandrasekharan who left the Marxist party in Kerala to start his own political outfit, and the boast by a Marxist party man that his party cadres have committed

several political murders, is indicative of the fact that there is a whole culture of violence that is slowly eating into the vitals of Indian politics.

The role of political parties in elevating leaders with chequered pasts and a history of violence is something that is extremely disturbing. Most parties are keen to recruit rabble rousers and those with dubious pasts as they come in handy during election time for intimidating voters and securing their votes. With time, these criminal elements infiltrate into the party and using muscle power even manage to climb the rungs of the ladder and get themselves elected to office. And then they begin to show their true colours by propagating their doctrine of violence, and this in turn creates a situation where violence is unleashed and human lives are lost.

As far as the party bigwigs are concerned, if an orgy of violence can earn them dividends in the form of electoral support or lead to a widening of the party base, they are only too willing to turn a blind eye to hate speeches or violence perpetrated by their party men. It is indeed a pathetic situation where criminals in the garb of politicians are able to ply their trade without fear of consequences. With public memory being short, many of these crimes are soon forgotten and those who indulged in them and have not been hauled up before the law become emboldened to begin all over again. As it would be futile to expect political parties to take stern action against their leaders who go off the track, the only option would be Public Interest Litigations (PILs) which could move courts into action. The courts too could initiate *suo moto* action to bring the guilty to book. The land which produced the greatest apostle of non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi, can do without politicians who are little more than creators of mayhem. The citizens of the country should be eternally vigilant of this destructive breed. ■



YOUNG

Remembering the Mahatma

On October 2 we celebrate the birth anniversary of the Mahatma. He inspired millions during his lifetime; he continues to inspire millions around the world through his ideas, his achievements and his writings. His observations, based as they are on the inner convictions of a morally courageous man, have the ability to change lives.

He Believed in the Dignity of Labour

ONCE Lala Lajpat Rai and Mahatma Gandhi were staying at the house of an ardent nationalist, Shiv Prasad Gupta.

On their first day there, Lala Lajpat Rai put on new clothes after his bath and left the ones he had taken off, in the bathroom.

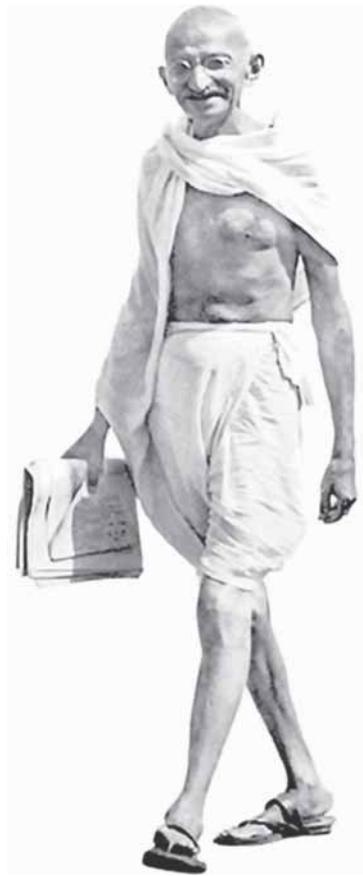
The next day he found the clothes washed and neatly folded, on his bed. He was delighted. He had been travelling a lot and he had many more soiled clothes with him. He asked his host if he could put the whole lot for washing. His host said he certainly could.

So Lala Lajpat Rai got all his clothes washed.

When the time came for them to leave, the Lala said he would like to tip the servant who had washed his clothes. His host said it was not necessary but Rai insisted. Shiv Prasad went in search of the man but to his consternation found that the clothes had not been washed by any of his servants.

"It was the other man in the room with Lalaji who washed them," a servant said, finally.

"I saw him hanging out the clothes to dry."

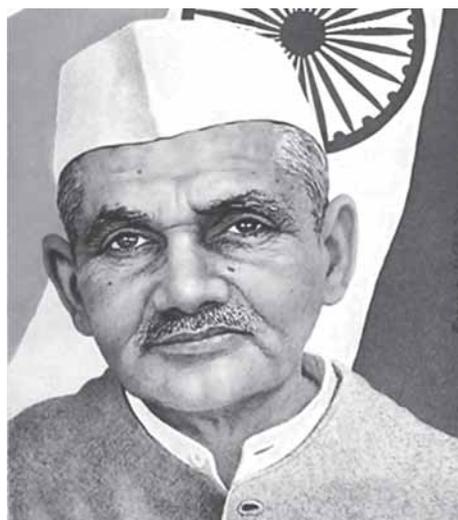


And a salute to Lal Bahadur Shastri

INDIA'S second Prime Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri was also born on October 2, in 1904. His father died when he was 18 months old and he grew up at his grandfather's

house. Since he was very slightly built his grandpa affectionately called him 'Nanhe'. One day Nanhe and his friends were raiding a mango tree when they were surprised by the gardener. The gardener caught Nanhe and slapped him. "Why did you slap me?" asked the boy. "Don't you know I have no father?" "That means you'll have to look after your mother and how can a thief do that?" asked the gardener.

The gardener's words made the boy aware of his responsibilities and a change came over him. He grew up to be one of the leaders of our country.



Shastriji became Prime Minister at a time of turmoil. Pandit Nehru had just died and war erupted with Pakistan in 1965.

The country was reeling under a drought. Quite a tough task for a new Prime Minister to handle.

But he took it all in his stride. He inspired the people with his slogan: 'Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan!'. The Indo - Pak war would have continued, but Russia intervened and both India and Pakistan agreed to sign the Tashkent Agreement on January 11, 1966. Just a few hours after signing the agreement, Shastriji died of a massive heart attack.

He was awarded the 'Bharat Ratna' posthumously. His memorial 'Vijayghat' in Delhi is a constant reminder of a great administrator and a fantastic human being.



Trick or Treat?

Festival

OCTOBER 31 is celebrated as Halloween in the West. It was originally a Celtic custom. The Celts lived in what is now Britain, Ireland and northern France more than 2000 years ago.

Their new year began on the first of November. On the evening before, the Celts honoured the god of death. They believed the dead came to life on that evening and were allowed to visit their earthly homes.

With the emergence of Christianity, the Celtic new year became the Christian festival of All Saints Day which, at the time it was instituted (800 A.D.), was known as All Hallows Day. The eve of this day, October 31, became known as Halloween. As the Celts used to honour their dead on this day, Halloween became associated with ghosts, witches and goblins. People were afraid to stay at home lest they be visited by evil spirits. So they would spend the night outdoors. They sat around bonfires and told stories and ate nuts and apples.

In course of time, as superstition waned, people lost their fear of Halloween. Today it is a festival of fun. In the USA, while adults go partying, children dress up in fancy clothes and go

trick-or-treating, which means if you don't give them sweets they might play a trick on you. Many carve jack-o'-lanterns out of pumpkins. The pumpkin is hollowed out, a grotesque face is carved on one side and a lighted candle is put in. This is a carry-over of a custom from medieval times when lanterns made of hollowed-out vegetables were hung from trees and gate-posts to frighten away devils.



Art Beat

Doll Museum

SHANKAR'S International Doll Museum, New Delhi, is not simply every girl's fantasy come true. It houses one of the world's largest collections of costumed dolls, making it a unique place of learning for people of all ages.

The museum has two sections - one dedicated to exhibits from Europe, USA, Australia, New Zealand, Commonwealth

of Independent States and the other to countries from Asia, Africa and India. Every doll is handcrafted after careful research on the costume, accessories and physical characteristics.

The collection has interesting exhibits like the Japanese kabuki dancer, a 250 year old Swiss doll, a Kathakali stage, Gandhi's Dandi March and more.

While many are gifts from abroad, most dolls are created in the Doll Workshop. There is also a 'clinic' where dolls are repaired.

The museum boasts of at least 6500 exhibits representing 85 countries.

The museum was the brainchild of K.Shankar Pillai (1902 - 1989), better known as Shankar, a famous political cartoonist and founder of the Children's Book Trust.



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EKNATH K. THAKUR

Sterling banker, selfless philanthropist (1914-2014)

EKNATH Thakur will be remembered as a leader of men, motivation and of course, money. A selfless philanthropist and an Indian politician who did not hanker for a post or for another term in the Rajya Sabha, Thakur helped a score of social causes without any ado. He took over as Chairman of the Saraswat Bank in 2001 and continued at its helm till his end. During these 13 years, the Bank expanded its network in states like Delhi, Gujarat, Karnataka, Goa and Madhya Pradesh. His one unfulfilled wish was to obtain a Reserve Bank permit for the Saraswat Bank to operate as a private sector bank.

Under his chairmanship, the Saraswat Bank achieved and retained its premier position among all cooperative banks in the country and took quantum leaps in terms of expanding its customer-base and deposits. Thakur had great plans for the Saraswat Bank's centenary celebrations. He told me in a recent interview, "My plan to take the Bank's business beyond ₹10,000 crore by March 2006 was termed by certain people as a daydream. The Bank exceeded that objective. The next stage of exceeding the deposits beyond ₹25,000 crore by the year 2011 was achieved as well. Our deposits in March 2011 were ₹31,000 crore. I plan to take the business to over ₹50,000 crore in the centenary year, 2016. Ultimately, it is my resolve to cross ₹100,000 crore by March 2021." Thakur had been working towards attaining that target and was confident that he would do it. The people working with him had full faith in him.

During his tenure as Chairman, seven faltering cooperative banks merged into the Saraswat Bank. However, the cancer that had been spreading within him finally slowed Thakur down. He underwent exacting treatment and miraculously overcame that challenge. Thakur's indomitable determination had triumphed, but sadly just for a while.

Born in a small village, Mhapan, in Sindhudurg district, Thakur had lost his parents at a young age and was supported by an elder sister in completing his secondary education. He

obtained a bachelor's degree in English with honours from Pune. He joined the State Bank of India as a probationary officer in 1966 and within a couple of years had assumed leadership of its officers' union.

During his ten years with SBI, Thakur realised the need for providing qualified and trained personnel to major banks. That was how Thakur established the National School of Banking, which has over the years found jobs for thousands of boys and girls in nationalised and cooperative banks. The crowning glory was that he was appointed a non-government

member on the board of the SBI. He was closely connected with a large number of academic, cultural, literary and social movements.

His penchant for helping the needy first surfaced in 1970, a year after the historic bank nationalisation. When a SBI officer was found sympathetic to the cause of farmers, the management felt that he was not fit for promotion due to his outlook. Thakur took up the case of that officer and the management had to relent due to his forceful submission.

Since then, Thakur associated himself with social causes more proactively.

After establishing the National School of Banking, he became involved in the Maharashtra Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Indian Education Society, just to name a few. He was invariably found

at the forefront of various social movements and used to contribute generously to a variety of causes. As the centenary celebrations started beckoning, Thakur undertook a major challenge, which was to reorient the employees' outlook to adapt to the changing needs of the banking sector and customer expectations. He was quite happy that his initiative was receiving excellent response. Thakur was to remain the Bank chairman till 2016 and play a prominent role in the centenary celebrations. Alas, that will not happen now. Still, a true homage to him will be to procure a private bank license from the RBI for the Saraswat Bank, which Thakur loved like his child. ■

– Dilip Chaware is a veteran journalist who has covered state and national politics for over 35 years. He has successfully documented the careers of many chief secretaries of Maharashtra for archival purposes.



B. K. S. IYENGAR

The grand old man of yoga (1918-2014)

BELLUR Krishnamachar Sundararaja Iyengar, better known as B.K.S. Iyengar, who died in Pune at the age of 95, was the founder of the style of yoga known as “Iyengar Yoga” and was considered one of the foremost yoga teachers in the world. A form of Hatha Yoga, Iyengar Yoga gives primacy to the physical alignment of the body in the poses. It teaches that “there is a correct way to do each pose, and that every student will one day be able to attain perfect poses through consistent practice. Once this balance is created in the body, it will be reflected in the mind”.

Born into a poor Sri Vaishnava Iyengar Brahmin family at Bellur, Kolar district in Karnataka, Iyengar was afflicted with various ailments and general malnutrition throughout childhood. He would recall, “My arms were thin, my legs were spindly, and my stomach protruded in an ungainly manner. My head used to hang down, and I had to lift it with great effort.”

In 1934, his brother-in-law, yogi Sri Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, often referred to as “the father of modern yoga”, called him to Mysore, to improve his health and be trained in yoga. Thus started his journey in yoga.

In 1975, in memory of his late wife, Iyengar opened the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute (Rimyi) at Pune, and its spiral structure was inspired by the eight-limbed theory of Patanjali’s yoga system. The guru, who spent many hours each day learning and experimenting with various techniques, had travelled all over the world, propagating yoga as an art form as well as a science. He authored 14 books on yoga practice and philosophy including ‘Light on Yoga’ in 1966, an international best-seller which was translated into 17 languages and sold three million copies!

His commentary on Patanjali’s text says: “When you cannot hold the body still, you cannot hold the brain still. If you do not know the silence of the body, you cannot understand the silence of the mind. Action and silence have to go together. If there is action, there must also be silence. If there is silence, there can be conscious action and not just motion.” He was awarded the Padma Shri in 1991,

the Padma Bhushan in 2002 and the Padma Vibhushan in 2014 by the Indian government. In 2004, Iyengar was named one of the 100 most influential people in the world by Time magazine.

Among the several noted personalities he taught were Jiddu Krishnamurti, Jayaprakash Narayan, Yehudi Menuhin, Elisabeth, the Queen of Belgium, cricket legend Sachin Tendulkar and actor Kareena Kapoor.

Iyengar enticed his students by conducting demonstrations on just what they sought – physical stamina and flexibility. Due to a scooter accident dislocating his spine, he began exploring the use of around 50 props, including ropes and mats, to align and stretch the body to help disabled people practice yoga. In chaste Marathi, he used to admonish teachers who did not place the correctly-measured prop under a student’s back, and smacked the backs of those who appeared sluggish. No wonder disciples played on his initials and called him the ‘Beat, Kick and Slap guru!’ He was however a good-humoured man outside of class. “Practice is my feast”, he once said and in his old age, he could still do the *sirsasana* or the headstand for half an hour. He easily used to walk up a flight of stairs in small, brisk steps, not for a moment breaking his stride.

The latest version of the Oxford English Dictionary has even added ‘Iyengar’ to its lexicon: “A type of Hatha yoga focusing on the correct alignment of the body.” Iyengar supported nature conservation, donating Rs. 2 million to Chamarajendra Zoological Gardens, Mysore. He also adopted a tiger and a cub and helped promote awareness of multiple sclerosis with the Pune unit of the Multiple Sclerosis Society of India. Guruji may be not around anymore, but the warmth of his smile and his healing quality which touched so many lives in unique ways, will remain with us forever. His was a serene, light hearted approach and his positive spirit and guidance helped all.

Truly, he was the last of the great exponents. ■

– A. Radhakrishnan is a freelance journalist based in Pune.



MAJOR MOHIT SHARMA AC SM

A brave son of India (1978-2009)

MOHIT was born on 13 January 1978, in Rohtak, Haryana. He was the second child of his parents, Sushila and Rajendra Prasad Sharma. He studied in Manavsthal School, New Delhi and Holy Angels School, Sahibabad. He later shifted to Delhi Public School (DPS), Ghaziabad. He was a brilliant student and sportsman. He scored good grades in the Higher Secondary examination and took admission in Sant Gajanan Maharaj College of Engineering, Shegaon. He had a passion to join the armed forces and left the engineering college to join the National Defence Academy (NDA) in 1995. At the NDA, he excelled in sports and was a boxing champion and champion horse rider. He continued his quest for excellence in the Indian Military Academy (IMA) and was selected to join the batch to meet President Narayanan at the Rashtrapati Bhavan. His family fondly called him Chintu while his colleagues and friends called him Mike. He was an ardent fan of Michael Jackson and loved to play various instruments.

He was commissioned into 5 Madras on 11 December 1999, and joined the unit in Hyderabad. He proceeded to Kashmir to serve in 38 Rashtriya Rifles (RR) and was awarded the Chief of Army Staff's commendation for gallantry in counter-insurgency operations in 2002. From the beginning, he was keen to be a para commando and was transferred to the elite 1 PARA (Special Forces) in 2003. He served with 1 PARA in Kashmir and was awarded the Sena Medal for daring covert operations in 2005. He was an instructor in the commando wing at Belgaum between 2005-06. After a brief tenure at Nahan, he went back to Kashmir in 2008.

Mohit had acquired excellent skills in combating militants in jungles during his four years service in Kashmir. On 21 March 2009, information was received of the presence of militants in the dense Haphruda forest in Kupwara district. He planned the operation meticulously to track them and led his Bravo Assault team to the site. He alerted his team on noticing some suspicious movement. The militants opened

fire indiscriminately from three directions wounding four commandoes. Bravery came easily to Mohit who had been earlier decorated for gallantry twice. He pulled two of his comrades to safety and killed two terrorists. He received multiple wounds himself. The bullet wounds did not deter him and he continued to direct his men in combat. Sensing the danger to his comrades and with no care for his own safety or injuries, he charged on the enemy and killed two more militants before succumbing to his injuries. Mohit and four commandos achieved martyrdom. It was one of the longest and deadliest encounters of recent times and four more soldiers were killed two days later. He had an invincible soul and displayed unmatched gallantry and leadership in the face of the enemy. He was awarded Ashoka Chakra on 15 August 2009, for most conspicuous bravery.

Senior military officers visited his parents at their residence in Ghaziabad on 22 March and informed them of the supreme sacrifice by Mohit. His wife, Reshma, herself a Major and posted at Patiala, fainted when she heard the news and had to be hospitalised. He had visited home in October on leave and had spoken to his parents just two days before this operation commenced. He was cheerful as usual. Every time he went on a mission, the family had a prayer on their lips and hoped that he would come back to fight another day. This turned out to be his last operation and his body was brought to Ghaziabad on 23 March. He was cremated with full military honours. The family is proud but inconsolable and still finds it difficult to come to terms with their loss.

The Major Mohit Sharma Trust has been established in his memory for the welfare of service families and disadvantaged children. In the following year, the Trust organized a medical camp for 300 under-privileged children at Tapovan School. ■

– Brigadier Suresh Chandra Sharma (retd)

(Sketches of Great Indians by C.D. Rane)



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Sadanand A. Shetty, Founder Editor

(October 9th, 1930 – February 23rd, 2007)

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