

# Oral Traditions, Myths & Legends of India

*An ITRHD Publication*



**Indian Trust for Rural Heritage  
and Development**

Registered Office: C-56 (G.F.) Nizamuddin East  
New Delhi 110 013

Tel: 91-11-2435 4190/91-11-2435 4070

E-mail: [mail.itrhd@gmail.com](mailto:mail.itrhd@gmail.com), Website: [www.itrhd.com](http://www.itrhd.com)



Indian Trust for Rural Heritage  
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CHAIRMAN: S K MISRA

EDITOR: SANGYA CHAUDHARY

DESIGNER: VIKRAM KALRA

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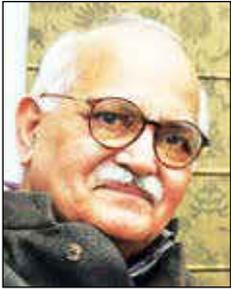
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## Editorial

Oral traditions, myths and legends have always been a very important and integral part of the lives of us Indians. They have for generations not only conveyed our most cherished values but also contributed in a very major way towards the extension of our worlds. To truly appreciate an oral tradition, it is necessary to understand the nature of the tradition itself. Its cultural values, societal functions, its form, content, literal and in depth interpretation.

We as children have heard many tales, stories and traditions, which are still deeply enrooted within us, and we therefore refer to them on many occasions, incidents and situations that we come across in our lives. We find ourselves using these tales, stories and traditions as source while communicating in such instances. These have over the years assisted people in educating the young and in teaching important lessons about the past and about life in general. The use of oral traditions as source has been very popular in the past. Because many oral traditions are highly classified and are told faithfully without modification, they can be as reliable as other non-oral ways of recording and passing on experiences.



The narratives, myths and legends that make these oral traditions encompass a wide variety of categories from stories of creation, human heroes, folk tales, paintings, living legends, dialects, historical narrations, kinship, local beliefs, etc. Throughout history especially in India, societies have relied heavily on stories, histories and lessons to maintain a historical record and sustain their cultures and identities. There is a wealth of information available which could reveal many aspects of a country's tradition. Many people have stories to tell and are just waiting to be asked. According to scholars Renee Hulan and Renate Eigenbrod, oral traditions are "the means by which knowledge is reproduced, preserved and conveyed from generation to generation. Oral traditions form the foundation of Aboriginal societies, connecting the speaker and listener in communal experience and uniting past and present in memory".

'Oral Traditions, Myths and Legends of India' is the second in the series of special edition publications by ITRHD, the first being 'Traditional Cuisines of India'. In this publication, we have tried to cover a wide range of articles from different states of India, which will help our readers experience and explore the world of narratives, myths and legends of an area or expression, to which they do not belong or are not aware of. This issue barely touches the surface of the ocean of oral traditions, myths and legends that may be found across the country and is merely a window into this world.

ITRHD's publications have become central to our activities complementing both the energy and vision of the Trust. The magazine Explore Rural India and our special issue on Traditional Cuisines have been very well received and appreciated for which we offer our heartfelt gratitude. We would like to sincerely thank all our contributors for taking out time to write these articles for this publication, which are integral to the success of

the publication. We would specially like to thank Mr B.N. Goswamy, a leading authority on Indian Art for permitting us to use some of the most beautiful works contained in his spectacular book on collections of Indian paintings titled “The Spirit of Indian Painting: Close Encounters with 101 Great Works, 1100-1900”.

For a tradition to be alive in a society, that tradition must contain values that are relevant and appreciated in that society. ITRHD through its projects and activities has been slowly trying to work towards creating this feeling of relevance, appreciations and sense of belonging towards rural heritage, society and culture. We have always strived to create conditions in which sustainability may thrive in rural India.

This publication has particularly been very interesting and exciting to work on and we hope that all are readers enjoy this as well. We wish everyone a very happy and prosperous new year and hope that 2017 would be a year of positivity leading to greater awareness, appreciation and recognition of our culture and traditions.

**S.K.Misra**  
Chairman  
Indian Trust for Rural Heritage  
and Development

**Sangya Chaudhary**  
Director  
Indian Trust for Rural Heritage  
and Development



Konyak Morung at Wakching village, Mon district, Nagaland

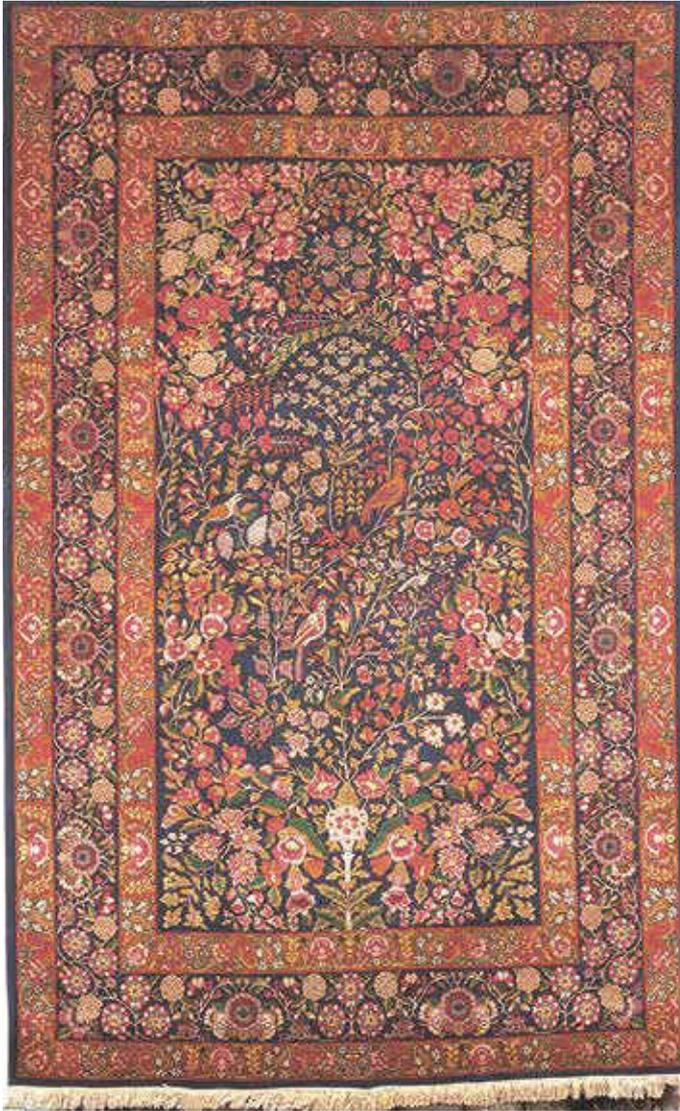
## Glimpses of the Oral Tradition

*AshaRani Mathur*

Twenty years ago I saw a film which, for the first time, brought alive for me the splendour of the oral tradition and pointed me to the many ways it has permeated our country and its living culture.

That may sound like a strange thing to say. After all, we are surrounded from birth by a tradition of the spoken

word which is as old as it is diverse: the retelling from generation to generation of ancient myths of creation when the earth was birthed in water, grandmotherly stories of clever animals and befuddled humans, cautionary tales of those foolish enough to defy the gods. India is the land of the story teller, the bard, those who recount the epics; it resounds equally to the solemn chant of hymns and the



Three Bird Kirman, Kashmir wool carpet. Richly detailed with warm tones, a masterpiece of the Talim

unbearably romantic verses of the *ghazal*, the sonorous tones of the teacher and the acid tongue of the cynic who comments on life.

The tradition in India speaks in different languages, many more than can be counted. And sometimes it speaks at once in more than one language – think of the supple

sliding between Persian, Arabic and Brajbhasha in the verses of Amir Khusro, Sufi poet of medieval Delhi. Part of the vast oral tradition is shared across the whole country, leading to glorious local versions; and some parts are critically specific, such as recipes of medicines made from nearby herbs and uttered in a shaman's language spoken by perhaps just a few hundred people.

But to get back to the film and my moment of epiphany. Its subject was the oral transmission of the Vedas which have come down to us over millennia and through countless generations. Though the dating of the Vedas remains speculative, one compilation is thought to have taken place ca. 1500 BC, others might be even earlier. What is certain is that the Vedas are the original sacred scriptures of Hindu teaching. The devout say that their spiritual wisdom comes from the breath of God himself. Others hold the widespread belief that they are the words of God in human speech as told to the sages of ancient times, and are thus a vital fundament of the Hindu faith encompassing all aspects of our lives. Clearly it was crucial for the utmost accuracy to be maintained in transmitting the words of the Divine, else their meaning and efficacy would be lost to mankind forever. The original had to be preserved in pristine purity; there could be no accretions and no omissions, not one superfluous syllable nor any left out. Each word of each mantra had to be in the exact order and let us remember that there were a very (very) large number of mantras.

How, then, was this amazing feat accomplished? Especially when nothing was written down and relied purely on memory? Quite simply, our ancestors used the means available to them. They laid down a framework of rules and regulations from which there could be no deviation. Then they devised and perfected a highly sophisticated method of memorizing, beginning with the relatively straightforward rote learning of words in their order, then ascending in complexity to being able to chant the words



Talim. Picture courtesy - [www.asilkaddiction.com](http://www.asilkaddiction.com)

in complicated permutations and combinations such that each word in its right place was forever fixed in the mind.

Let's take a closer look. The framework of rules called for the correct and prescribed pronunciation, utterance, enunciation and intonation. These rules were set forth in the *Shiksha*, and they dealt with the voice pitch, its varying power during articulation, the length it must dwell on a particular syllable, uniformity, continuity, and so on. This sprang from the belief that sound itself is a divine tool and that the power of any mantra is derived from the sacred sound of its pure and correct utterance. Only then could the mantra achieve its true efficacy; for, as it is written, "By sound vibration one becomes liberated".

But it was the method of memorizing that made this learning process very unique. It consisted of the *pathas*, or recitation styles. Eleven such styles were devised, three of them basic for beginners or young students, which ran the words in order. Here students were taught to memorize using simpler techniques like continuous recitation (a b c d e f) or slightly more complex ones (ab bc cd de, and so on). Once these were mastered, students went beyond to the eight remaining *pathas* which were ever more complex, including having to learn the words in reverse order. For example, the *jataa* or "plaited" *patha* was named



Pahadi Korba. Picture courtesy - Dipankar Ghose, Indian Express

after its braid-like reverse/forward/reverse arrangement and learnt as a-b-b-a-a-b; b-c-c-b-b-c; c-d-d-c-c-d; d-e-e-d-d-e; e-f-f-e-e-f and so on. Ascending the scale of difficulty, there were the *mala* (garland), the *shikha* (top-knot) and the *ratha* (chariot) *pathas*; and the very names give you an idea of the concentration required to master them. Most complex and difficult of all was the *ghana* (bell) *patha*, where the order in which the words were learnt took the shape of a bell – and had to be recited backward and forward. No wonder this was a style which took years to learn and perfect.

But such intensive teaching and learning, the occupation of a life-time, achieved many objectives. Because each text was recited in so many different ways, in effect it was being continually cross-checked for fidelity of word order and the number of words. Moreover, the repeated practice of each technique embedded the whole deeper and deeper into the mind. Few systems of learning (if any) combined this high degree of mathematical precision with total reliance on the human mind for faithful retention. In 2003, UNESCO proclaimed the Vedic chant as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity a tribute to a unique canon considered the oldest unbroken oral tradition in existence.



If we look around, we see many examples of the varying ways in which the oral tradition operated across India. In the absence of the written word it was the only tool for the transmission of culture, values, skills and a sense of identity. Take, for example, the custom of the dormitory which was widespread in many parts of tribal India. It was like an informal school, the youth's introduction to the reality of life and how it was to be lived within the community, defining rights and obligations. The *morung* dormitory of the Konyak Nagas was that place of magic alchemy that, over the years, turned a boy just past puberty into a young Konyak man. This is where he absorbed the stirring memories of ancestors and songs of valour taught to him since childhood and made that history uniquely his own by beating out its rhythm and bravery on the big log drum. Here he lived with other boys and learnt the craft of whittling wood into shapes both human and animal; perhaps, with them, he would be asked to join the village in turning the soil over to open its mysteries and plant the seed. He learnt the art of hunting along with the arts of combat because above all the Konyaks were warriors. Their deeds were recorded by way of the hunting trophies hanging on the walls of the *morung* along with spears, shields and *daos* (a kind of sword).

Clear across the country, far to the west, chanting served its purpose in a handicraft so advanced that we might well call

it art, woven art, for that is indeed what it was. On looms in the vale of Kashmir carpets of extraordinary design and fineness were created, often taking months and sometimes years to complete. From beginning to end many processes were involved, from the treating and dyeing of wool or silk to the design and weaving and finally the washing to add lustre. The art of carpet weaving actually had its roots in the 19th century collapse of the export market for Kashmir shawls. It was then that many shawl weavers transferred their skills to carpet making, bringing to this medium their inherent gifts for exquisite rendition of design, minute knotting, and subtlety of shaded colours. And their own method of patterning, one that they had used for shawls, the *talim*.

Strictly speaking, the *talim* is a written document, great rolls and folds of yellowing paper inscribed with what looks like hieroglyphs from some antique land. In reality, it is itself a master work of incomparable skill recording the pattern, with page after page of coded directions for the number of knots to be woven per square inch and the colours to be used along the weft lines. Its preparation calls for experience and immense concentration; the *talim* for a whole carpet can take upto three months to prepare, each page encoding upto twenty rows in a carpet with details of where the coloured knots go.

Why then should we even consider the *talim* as part of the oral heritage? Because of the way it is communicated. The master weaver winds the warp around the loom and then begins chanting the *talim*, almost singing it out. The knotters chant in reply, "*hau*", as they follow each direction. The interpretation and the execution of the *talim* must be sparked by the experienced human voice and only then can these works of art be created. If you imagine the carpet as a song, then the *talim* is the lyric that shapes the music. It is said that there are masters so experienced that they can sing out many patterns from memory which they can reduce or expand according to the size required. It is also

a matter of record that weaving with the *talim* technique is accurate and lessens the chance of making mistakes.

When we think of the richness of our oral tradition, the songs we have sung and the stories we have told of the sun and the moon, the deeds of great kings and the tragedies of unrequited love and of star-crossed lovers, is our nostalgia enveloped in an air of sweet melancholy? For then we must also think of how much we have lost to technological change, to social upheavals and simply to the fact that there is an inexorable forwardness to the way we have to do things. The forms that stayed the same for generations are crumbling because we no longer need to memorize them to share them with others, they can be endlessly replicated in a variety of media, which themselves are programmed to self-destruct through the cycle of obsolescence. Our concepts of permanence and certainty have been eroded; indeed, language, the spoken word, the very foundation of our being, can vanish without trace, as it has in so many places, especially our tribal areas and tracts.

But can we use that same technology to cherish and preserve? Of course we can. Even as I was writing this article, serendipity intervened and brought me to a newspaper article about the Pahadi Korbas of Chhattisgarh whose language was fading into extinction, quite simply because it was not being used enough. But the use of mobile phones (now fairly ubiquitous in both rural and tribal India) and special programming help from an NGO brought those forgotten sounds back to a small and scattered population. They were reminded of their own songs, and perhaps a once-vibrant connectivity between far-flung villages. Now, thanks to mobile networks, they can communicate with each other. The next proposed step is to reach out to members of the tribe in different districts to organize meetings, perhaps a large gathering where each household will donate rice and vegetables which will help bring people together.

“That is all we need,” said Moru Hasda, a Pahadi Korba.  
“The song and dance comes from deep within us.”

And that is how I know that the oral tradition will survive.



Open Kaavad with inner panels

# The Kaavad Storytelling Tradition of Rajasthan

*Dr. Nina Sabnani*

## Introduction

Stories could be memories or mediations between reality and aspirations that reflect what a society wishes to express about itself. Story is perhaps the oldest form of communication known to humankind. It has a way of mesmerizing the listeners into silence and the tellers into expressing the deepest desires and anxieties of their society, directly or through subversive means. Storytelling brings people together, whether it is a street corner or a darkened cinema hall. While the essence of story remains the same, the way of telling stories has been influenced by the kind of tools and technology of the times. From telling stories with the help of voice and gesture alone to using painted scrolls and boxes, text, dance, music, performance or a combination of all, storytelling in India is a rich heritage. It defines our culture and our identity.

‘*Kaavad Banchana*’, an oral tradition of storytelling is still alive in Rajasthan where stories from the epics Mahabharata and

Ramayana are told along with stories from the *Puranas*, caste genealogies and stories from the folk tradition. The experience is audio-visual as the telling is accompanied by taking the listener on a visual journey made possible by the ‘*Kaavad*’ shrine. Against the backdrop of storytelling it invokes the notion of a sacred space and provides an identity to all concerned with its making, telling and listening.

The *Kaavad* is a portable wooden temple/shrine that has visual narratives on its multiple panels that are hinged together. These panels open and close like doors simulating the several thresholds of a temple. The visuals are those of Gods, goddesses, saints, local heroes and the patrons. It is made by the *Suthar* (carpenter) community in Mewar for the itinerant *Kaavadiya Bhat* (storyteller) from Marwar who brings it to his patron’s houses in Rajasthan. This portable temple/shrine comes to the devotee rather than the devotee going to the temple (Bhanawat, 1975). The *Kaavadiya Bhat* periodically brings the shrine to his patron’s house to recite his genealogy and to sing praises of

his ancestors. He also recites the stories especially those that relate to the patron saint of the community concerned. The *Kaavadiyas* (storytellers) and their *jajmans* (hereditary patrons) consider the *Kaavad* as a sacred shrine which demands certain rituals to be followed, listening to genealogies, epic stories and making donations. It is believed that listening to stories purifies the soul and reserves a place of entry for the devotee in heaven.

A synergy exists between the maker, the storyteller and his patron, which has kept the tradition alive. The survival of the *Kaavad* tradition hinges not only on a set of economic relations and transactions but on the fact that the maker, teller and patron are dependent on each other for their individual identity which cannot exist if either of them is absent. The *Suthar* community prides itself for being the preservers of the *Kaavad* making craft for generations since no one else outside village Bassi makes it. The storyteller's identity is tied to the very term *Kaavad* as they are known as the *Kaavadiya Bhats*, (distinguishing themselves from other *Bhats* or *Kaavadiyas*), and their patrons derive their identity from the *Kaavad* recitation where their genealogies are recited by the storyteller as he points out at their painted images on the shrine. Thus, the *Kaavad* imparts each with an identity that reaches back into time and space, in a way enabling 'the groups to preserve a remembered past, conserve community integrity and identity and behold a vision of the future' (Mayaram, 1997). One of the ways by which the identities are reinforced is the



way the origin myth of each community connects to reality and binds them together. The synergy that exists within the communities is thus mirrored in these myths, making life and myth seamless. Finally, images, myths and genealogies together connote memories as well as aspirations of the communities involved.

### Overview of the *Kaavad* Tradition

The *Kaavad* tradition is approximately a 400-year-old tradition (Lyons, 2007) although like several oral traditions in India, its origin is located in mythology or attributed to a mysterious power. Historical evidence of portable shrine exists in some religious texts (Jain, 1998) but there are no clear references to the *Kaavad*. An indirect reference is probably made to the *Kaavad* in *Tarikh-i-Firoz-Shahi* of Afif, where it is referred to as a '*Muhrik* — a wooden tablet covered with paintings within and without' (Singh, 1995)

All the extant *Kaavad* shrines have images of the Bhakti saints as well as stories of Ram and Krishna, so it may be assumed that it probably came into prominence after the 'Bhakti movement', bhakti also being the term for Hindu devotional expression. The Bhakti movement in the North, centered on the devotion of Ram and Krishna, both considered as incarnations of Vishnu. Bhakti was also associated with a group of saints who rebelled against rituals and caste distinctions (Sharma, 2002). Saints like Kabir, Meera, and Narsinh Mehta amongst others can be found in the *Kaavad*. The fact that the other images on the *Kaavad* represent Hindu gods and goddesses also suggests its intent of being a sacred shrine, which is portable.

### The *Kaavad* Makers: *Suthars*/*Basayatis*

The *Kaavad* makers known as *Suthars* or *Basayatis* reside in Nalla Bazaar in village Bassi, approximately twenty-five kilometers from Chittor. Bassi lies on the Chittor-Kota road. It is situated amidst the hills of the Aravalli ranges in Rajasthan. Of the 25 families of *Suthars* only five to six families are involved in making *Kaavads*. Bassi was found in 1560 AD by prince Jaimal from Devgarh. According to



Ghanshyamji Suthar

the genealogist of the royal family one of their ancestors Govindadas happened to come across a group of artisans in Malpura near Nagaur making painted wooden objects. He brought one of them, Parabhat to Bassi (Lyons, 2007) offering him ten *bhigas* of farming land and a house to settle in. This house called the *Bheda ki Guwadi* has seven to nine rooms and some families continue to live there, although several families have moved out of it over generations. Since they came and settled in the place it came to be called Bassi (as in *Buss jaana*: to settle) and the *Suthars* (carpenters) came to be known as *Basayatis*.

### Origin Myths of the *Suthars*

The *Suthars* of Bassi call themselves the children of Visvakarma. According to the Hindu tradition, Visvakarma is the chief



Kaavad Shrine Closed

architect of the Universe, the supreme patrons of the Arts (Raina, 1999). He had five sons that were born from his body, one of them being Maya the carpenter (*Suthar*), who fathered the carpenter community. The community in Bassi believes that Visvakarma was the younger brother of Brahma (others believe he was Brahma's son). Visvakarma was called upon several times to build for the Gods. At first he made the universe, and then he recreated a Golden Lanka because it was burnt down. He also recreated Dwarkapuri for Lord Krishna because it had drowned. So pleased were the Gods with Dwarkapuri that they wanted to send him gifts. While he was still on his way home they sent the gifts of diamonds & emeralds and a cow to his house. His wife was sweeping the floor when the gift bearers arrived. She would not accept the gifts in his absence and sent them away. A merchant's (*Baniya's*) wife in the neighborhood invited the gift bearers to her place and accepted the gifts meant for Visvakarma

and ‘so the *Suthars* lost their wealth to the *Baniya* merchants’ (Mistry, 2009).

This myth establishes the professional identity of carpenter for the *Suthars* although not limited to the makers of *Kaavad* but it does give them a status of a higher caste whose ancestry is connected to the Gods themselves. The specific identity of *Kaavad* makers comes from the place Bassi, as it is the only place where *Kaavads* are made by a community that has one common ancestor.

### **The *Kaavadiya Bhat* or Storytellers**

The *Kaavadiya Bhat*s are the itinerant storytellers of the *Kaavad* tradition who live around the Jodhpur, Nagaur and Kishangarh districts of Rajasthan. The name is derived from the profession of the ones who carry/use the *Kaavad* to make a living. The term ‘*Bhat*’ is derived from the caste of the teller. This distinguishes them from the *Kaavadiyas* who carry the water from the Ganges in Haridwar to their hometowns in ‘*Kaavads*’ (two baskets balanced on a pole in which the pots of water are placed and carried on the shoulder by the *Kaavadiya*). The *Kaavadiya Bhat*s are related to the *Barots* of Gujarat as they too are record keepers and maintain a *Bahi Khata* of their patrons (Rav, 2008). The *Kaavadiya Bhat*s live the life of a genealogist in their own village preferring to hide the teller identity at home because the storyteller status equates them to a ‘*maang khani jati*’ (those who beg and survive), the stigma of which is worse than being called a thief or murderer (Rav B, 2004). Their life too revolves around the seasons. In the monsoons it is believed that the Gods sleep and therefore the patron cannot wake up the Gods and make a wish through the storyteller. This makes the storyteller free to pursue other economic activities such as agriculture. Some *Kaavadiya Bhat*s have their own land but most often they work on the land of others. Others use their camels to transport goods for the community. For some months they even travel to distant places to work as masons or do labour work like carrying stones or making roads. Today too, the storyteller has to adopt multiple professions to make a living. However, he comes into his own when narrating stories or reciting the genealogies for his patrons.



Sethuram ji Rav

### **Origin Myths of the *Kaavadiya Bhat*s**

There are several narratives built around the origins of the *Kaavadiya Bhat*s. A *Bhat* has been described in some of the ancient texts (*Brahmavaivarta Purana*) as the one born of a Kshatriya father and ‘prostitute’ mother, or Kshatriya father and widowed Brahmini or Brahmin father and Shudra mother etc. Gunarathi (2000) describes the *Bhat* as the ‘other’ *jati* who are the record-keepers or genealogists of all castes, from the Brahmin to the *Bhangi*. They are divided into 9 ‘*nyat*’ (the superior caste that drinks alcohol and smokes *bidis* and visit the ‘*chhoot* or touchables’) and 12 ‘*Phagotara*’ (those who visit and eat with the ‘untouchables’). Gunarathi also reports Sir Henry Elton’s (reference to accounts of *Bhat*s in the *Ain-i-Akbari*) origin story of the *Bhat*s. This is the time before the universe was created (*Sristi*) Shiva wanted to spend time with his wife Parvati and did not want to go grazing the cows. So he created a *Bhat* from his sweat to look after the animals and chant (*stuti*) his name. But the *Bhat* began to sing praises of Parvati and wandered here and



Hukmaram Jat

there. This angered Shiva considerably so he evicted him from heaven and cursed him to be a *Bhanwar Bhat* whose children will forever wander aimlessly (Gunarathi, 2000).

However, in their own words the *Kaavadiya Bhats* claim to be the descendants of Shraavan Kumar of the Ramayan, but were born from the brow of Lord Shiva. In the *Kaavad* lore Shraavan Kumar, was the nephew of Dashrath (father of Lord Ram) and was accidentally killed by him when Shraavan was transporting his blind parents in a *Kaavad*. This narrative explains the given identity of being *Kaavad* bearers from the *Treta Yug* and also forges an alliance with Lord Ram. The other narrative, which alludes to their birth from Shiva's brow, explains their skills as storytellers. The way it is explained is that once a bit of ash fell from Shiva's brow and transformed itself into a bumble bee (*bhanwara*) and Shiva blessing the bee turned it into a human being. This 'being' then begged to be given an identity and to be assigned his task in life. Shiva pronounced him to be a *Bhanwar Bhat* who would go around singing the praises of the lord. Coming from the brow of Shiva the *Bhanwar Bhats* were thus gifted with superior memory and they became the record keepers of the barbers, tailors and carpenters (Rav, 2008). Lastly, they also claim to be blessed by goddess Sarasvati who resides in their throat when invoked, enabling them to speak fluidly and faultlessly.

There is no discomfort in claiming these multiple identities as each narrative tries to rationalize the storyteller's innate characteristics, which are pre-given by birth. Besides claiming a space in immemorial time, claims are also made to caste status in historical time, that of having Rajput origins.

### Origins of the word *Kaavad*

The dictionary (Apte, 1996) defines *Kaavad* as either a '*Kavaat*' or '*Kapaat*' or '*Kivaad*' meaning half a door or panel of a door, or as '*Shruti*', which is audition, hearing or relating to the ear. Bhanawat (1975) subscribes to the term '*Kivaad*' meaning door and the shrine consists of several panels that open up like many doors. The *Kaavadiya Bhats* are more concerned with the conceptual aspects and for them the word *Kaavad* means 'that which is carried on the shoulder' and the origin of the tradition is therefore attributed to Shraavan Kumar from the Ramayana who carried his blind parents in a *Kaavad* to various pilgrim spots but was accidentally killed by King Dashrath. Since Shraavan was unable to complete the task of taking his parents to all the holy spots, the *Kaavadiyas* carry on the tradition of bringing the pilgrim spots to the people in the form of the *Kaavad* shrine (Rav K. , 2007).

To explain the origins of the shrine-like form they attribute it to a Brahmini Kundana Bai from Varanasi who made the first *Kaavad* and gifted them to the storytellers (Rav, 2008). Kundana Bai collected half the earnings of the *Kaavadiyas* towards feeding of cows. This is also inscribed on the front doors of the *Kaavad* shrine for the benefit of the patrons.

### The Patrons

The patrons of the storytellers are spread far and wide in Rajasthan. They belong to 36 *jatis* and each storyteller may have 30 to 50 patrons whom he will visit once a year. The patron or *jajman* is inherited by the storyteller from his father and will in turn distribute his patrons amongst his sons when he retires. The patron is bound to make

donations to the teller once in a year. The patron gets the experience of a pilgrimage as the shrine-like *Kaavad* comes to their homes and sanctifies their space.

As the teller performs the ritual of reciting their genealogies and points out the images of their ancestors on the *Kaavad* shrine the patrons have the satisfaction of seeing their forefathers well looked after in the other world. It gives them immense pleasure to be told about their ancestry and helps them and their children remember all the generations. It encourages them to make donations and also aspire for a place for themselves on the *Kaavad*. As a part of the donation they may provide the storyteller with a goat or a calf, grain for the year, clothes, cash and even jewelry. The storyteller will also regale them with origin myths of their community, which establishes their caste or professional identity.

### Origin Myth of the Jat Community

The *jats* came from the *jatas* (coiled hair) of Shiva and as they came into being they asked Shiva what they must do in order to get salvation. He asked them to be charitable and generous. When they asked who they should offer the charity to, Shiva rubbed his forehead and with the ash created the storyteller who could be the recipient of all charity. This myth ensures a synergy between the teller and his patron as each depends on the other for his survival and identity. For the patron it explains his identity and establishes his direct descent from Shiva.

### Conclusion

The *Kaavad* offers an identity to all the communities that are connected to it. Each community has multiple identities but in this specific one concerning the *Kaavad* they are all related. The makers get their uniqueness, as they are the only ones who make them and were created to make them. They depend on the tellers to some degree to continue making the *Kaavads*. The tellers get their professional identity from the very name and depend on their patrons to continue the tradition. The patrons 'recognize

themselves' and their ancestors in the images that the *Kaavad* mirrors. The myth in a way explains the reality and reinforces the dependence and synergy.

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# Revealed - The Oral Tradition of Healing

*Shailaja Chandra*

## Introduction

For millennia, communities have used medicinal plants to promote good health and treat disease. Even today, tribal and folk healers have a wealth of knowledge about the properties of different plants but as forests and the rural countryside shrink with urbanization, there is danger of this precious heritage being lost forever. Herbs that were once easy to find and were the mainstay of villagers who knew where to find them, are disappearing.

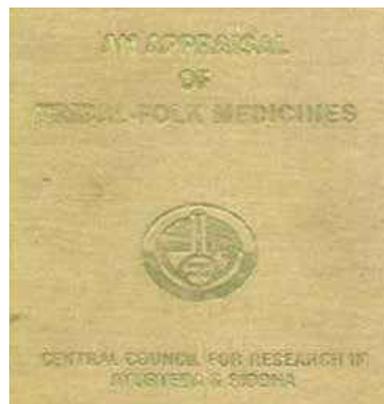
This article is about the heritage of healing with medicinal plants by people. Before delving into this fascinating subject, it is necessary to explain the difference between oral traditions and documented knowledge about medicine. The latter refers to ancient systems of healing based on countless manuscripts and classical texts – the product of a long and uninterrupted lineage of generations of vaidyas and hakims – many of whom continue the family tradition even today. Ayurveda and Unani systems of medicine fall in the “codified” segment of traditional medicine as both systems depend on textual references to interpret health and disease and as references for thousands of formulations.

The approach is entirely different from the word – of – mouth heritage which is the result of unwritten knowledge and which despite the absence of documentation is alive even today-particularly in Indian villages. Simple and unpretentious as these methods are, they resonate through the lives of communities and Indian kitchens - no matter how commonplace they might appear. They are unique and distinct features of Indian healing heritage, time tested and timeless.

## Documentation of Tribal and Folk Healing Practices

When two research councils for Indian medicine were established in the seventies, the need to document the knowledge held by the tribal and folk communities was fortunately recognised. Two organizations (the Councils for Ayurveda as well as Unani medicine, then under the Ministry of Health) sent several teams of botanists and Ayurvedic and Unani doctors deep into the forests and remote villages. They observed the healing practices of

the local people. The herbarium sheets and observations made after numerous visits yielded valuable information. Seventeen survey units of the Ayurveda Council undertook this research and documented it and it can be accessed if someone does take the effort to do so. The Council for Ayurveda<sup>1</sup>



A book “An appraisal of Tribal-Folk Medicines”

stationed a team at Junagadh in Gujarat and Churu in Rajasthan and they studied the Bhils, Garasia, Siddi, and Bharwad tribes who inhabited parts of some tehsils and villages like Haripar, Piper Toda, Jambuda, Koteshwar, Vijarkhi and Motathavaria Pipladevi. Based on the research outcomes, the Council published a book called “An Appraisal of Tribal Folk Medicines” in 1999.

<sup>1</sup> Central Council for Research in Ayurvedic Sciences, and Ministry of AYUSH, Government of India.

In this compilation, each folklore practice is followed by the local name of the plant and subsequently by its Sanskrit name, Botanical/English name and the area of collection, the part of the plant used and the mode of administration. The compendium is not inspiring to look at and is cryptic to read, but it represents the fruit of primary research undertaken systematically and painstakingly decades ago.

The Unani Council (CCRUM) did similar work<sup>2</sup> and its publications cover 11,845 folk claims for treating a wide variety of disease conditions have been similarly listed. The high quality photographs in these publications make browsing worthwhile. CCRUM undertook the work in the rural areas of different states in the country and recorded folk claims for treating a wide range of afflictions; but this research also includes a commentary on the economic benefits of the plants which adds to the reader's knowledge. The Unani Council's survey units were operating from Aligarh (UP), Bhadrak (Odisha), Chennai (Tamil Nadu), Hyderabad (in undivided Andhra Pradesh) and Srinagar (Jammu & Kashmir).

### **Unraveling the Oral Tradition of Healing - How Perseverance Paid**

The research route followed by the survey teams must have been tedious and the task daunting. Each team comprised of a botanist, an Ayurvedic/Unani physician, a field assistant and a driver with a vehicle. One is referring to the surveys conducted inside forests and village farmlands and wood lands some 25-30 years ago when the communication systems on land and through the telephone were rudimentary and travel was arduous.

I had been wanting to hear a first person account of the experience and had asked to speak with one of those original team members. With some difficulty an elderly

botanist was tracked down and pulled away from his life in retirement to meet me. According to Dr. OP Mishra<sup>3</sup>, who went on such visits for over a better part of his career, the forests were inhospitable territory. Mosquitoes tortured the visitors and but for the kindness of the forest rangers, overhead shelter even for a few days was impossible to find. The team had to first convince the forest dwellers to overcome their initial suspicion about such visitations; with time and patience it was possible to gain their confidence.

The Ayurvedic physician first diagnosed the disease condition for which the plants were being used. This was done through consultation with local people and observation of the symptoms. The folk healers and elderly persons living in the area were then interviewed and information regarding the local use of the plants observed and noted. Sometimes one or two villagers were engaged to stay with the survey teams and work as conduits to access the forest dwellers that were reticent about speaking to the strange visitors.

Once the plants were identified, the botanist used his knowledge of the regional flora to make an initial deduction. The final identification and authentication was done after comparison with published literature and herbarium sheets maintained in the regional and national herbaria. Each herbarium specimen was listed with its botanical name, family and local name, habitat, date of collection and the medicinal use(s) observed. The identity was confirmed after matching the samples at the Central National Herbarium (CNH), Howrah; Forest Research Institute (FRI), Dehradun; Botanical Survey of India (BSI), Coimbatore; Regional Research Laboratory (RRL), Bhubaneswar etcetera. Only after that were the plant

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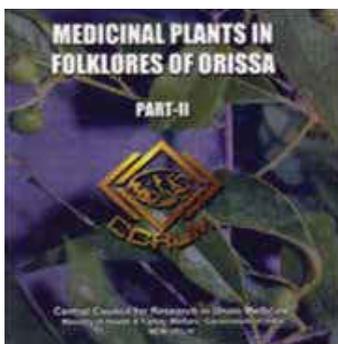
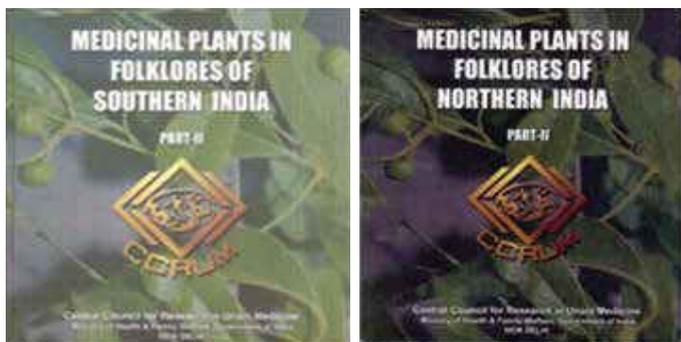
2 Central Council for Research in Unani Medicine now under Ministry of AYUSH Govt. of India.

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3 Former Assistant Director (Botany), CCRAS, Department of AYUSH, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Government of India, New Delhi.

specimens docketed on to herbarium sheets and deposited in designated institutes.

For the work undertaken in the 1980s and 1990s, this must have called for remarkable perseverance. While one has to salute the survey teams for what they achieved, the fact that the research findings were never validated leaves one with a feeling of some regret – who knows what



Seven different books on Medicinal Plants & Tribal and Folk Healing published by CCRUM

discoveries might still be contained in those old notes and tomes of herbarium sheets stored away for no particular reason, than to maintain a historical record?



Typical Note Sheet of field visit



Typical Herbarium Sheet.



Field notes, herbarium specimens held in a standard depository in the Council's office.

## Four Unique Findings from the Surveys

### Healing secrets

I located "An Appraisal of Tribal-Folk Medicines" (CCRAS 1999) and all the other publications of CCRUM. I was keen to find out whether what was known to these tribal and folk people was already available in the ancient Ayurvedic texts. By 2010, when I wrote my Report, the textual references to the formulations and the plants used in Ayurveda had been entered into patent compatible formats and translated into 6 UN languages. That was a

project that I had spearheaded when I was the Secretary in the Indian Medicine Department. A Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL) had been established – in which all references in the Ayurveda and Unani texts had been entered with the objective of forestalling claims that these were recent discoveries and therefore eligible to get patents. Therefore, all that was needed was to check which of the plants used by the tribal and village people did not feature in the Ayurvedic and Unani documented texts. Four plants were found in the Traditional Knowledge Resource Classification which was a part of the TKDL initiative and I was informed that they did not feature in the Ayurvedic lists of medicinal plants.

The next step was to locate a couple of good botanists to examine the tribal and folk people's use of those plants and through available literature, search all botanical sites to see whether the same usage had been mentioned anywhere in the world. As a part of my assignment I persuaded two botanists<sup>4</sup> to conduct an Internet search of all the relevant botanical sites where the uses of these four plants had been listed. What emerged was that the four plants were used extensively for medicinal purposes in some other countries but the uses which the Indian research teams had noted were unique.

The uses ranged from powdering the seeds of stinging nettle, mixing with water and drinking the concoction to treat a skin problem; applying the ashes of another plant mixed with sesame oil for burns; using the powdered seeds of the hoary basil plant for treating diarrhoea; and finally, chewing the root of the English broom weed to stop toothache. These are unique uses and the way the material is presented in the book is shown below (edited for this article.)

4 Dr. Ashok BK, Research Assistant, Gujarat Ayurvedic University and Chinmay Rath, Senior Research Fellow (Botany) at CCRAS New Delhi.

## The four plants are listed in the following boxes:

### 1. *Girardinia heterophylla* Decene.<sup>5 6</sup>

Common name/ Local Name	: Bicchubuti, Bishcubuti
English name	: Indian Stinging Nettle, Himalayan, Nettle, Nilgiri nettle
Part used	: Leaf
Area of collection	: Gondla (Himachal Pradesh)
Type of disease	: Skin disease
<b>Mode of administration</b>	<b>: Powder of seeds is drunk with water.</b>

### 2. *Aerva tomentosa* Forsk.<sup>7 8</sup>

Common name/ Local name	: Bui
English name	: Javanese Wol Plant
Synonyms	: <i>Aerva javanica</i> (Burm.f.); <i>Aerva persica</i>
Part used	: Whole plant
Area of collection	: Jaipur (Rajasthan)
<b>Mode of administration<sup>8b</sup></b>	<b>: Ash of the plant mixed with gingili oil (Tila Taila) is applied on burns.</b>

5 (An appraisal of Tribal Folk Medicines. CCRAS publication; 1999. p.258).

6 This plant is found in the wastelands and shrubberies at a height of 80 -2700 meters in the Himalayas, in moist, shady, forested areas and at altitudes of 1200 - 3000 meters in Nepal, (<http://www.naturalmedicinalherbs.net/>) and also in different parts of India (Hooker J D, editors. The Flora of British India. Vol. V. L. Reeve and Co. Ltd. England; 1885.p.550).

7 (An appraisal of Tribal Folk Medicines.CCRAS publication;1999. p.40)

8 This tomentose herb extensively grows in North-West India mainly Thar desert region, plains of Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and also in other countries like Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Arabia, East and West of Tropical Africa (The Wealth of India (raw materials).Vol.I. National Institute of Science Communication (NISCOM), Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), New Delhi; 1995).

### 3. *Ocimum americanum* L.<sup>9</sup>

Common name/ Local name	: Nagad Bavachi
English name	: Hoary Basil
Part used	: Seeds
Area of collection	: Khareri, Rajasthan
Type of disease	: Diarrhoea
<b>Mode of administration</b>	<b>: Powder of seeds is taken orally with water</b>
The use of the powdered seeds for curing diarrhoea had not been listed. It shows the novel use of the Khareri folk/tribal people of Churu district of Rajasthan.	

### 4. *Scoparia dulcis* L.<sup>10</sup>

Common name/ Local name	: Dantiyari
English name	: Sweet broomweed
Part used	: Root
Area of collection	: Gwalior (M.P.)
Type of disease	: Dental Pain
Mode of administration	: Root is chewed to stop toothache
<b><i>The use of the plant's root to reduce toothache pain appeared to be unique.</i></b>	

The foregoing study covering just four out of thousands of plants shows that indeed the knowledge about medicinal plants amassed by tribal and folk people was enormous and quite distinctive. The Research Councils and the

9 This plant is widely distributed in the plains and lower hills of India (Hooker, JD, editors. The Flora of British India. Vol.V. L.Reeve and Co. Ltd. England; 1885. p.607).

10 (An appraisal of Tribal Folk Medicines. CCRAS publication;1999.p. 66)

This plant is a perennial medicinal herb distributed throughout the tropical and subtropical regions and is a native of tropical America. (Riel MA, Kyle DE, Milhous WK. Efficacy of scopadulcic acid A against Plasmodium falciparum in vitro. J Nat Prod. 2002; 65: 614-615.)

survey teams had certainly succeeded in documenting this for posterity!

### **The Intangible Heritage of Housewives, Dais, Bone-setters and Snake Venom Therapists**

Village “doctors” undertake healing as an add-on vocation. Whether the healer is a barber, a shop-keeper, a blacksmith, a shepherd or even an itinerant monk, he is respected for his knowledge. Those who seek his services trust him because his knowledge is used for healing and is generally not a source of income. Many “specialists” abound in different communities who have remedies for the eyes, the ears or the skin and people visit them from afar. From all accounts they seem to give relief. Within households, village women have enormous knowledge about plants, vegetables, condiments and spices; without any formal training they usually know what will help relieve flatulence, give energy and induce sleep.

### **Housewives**

A traditional Indian housewife and particularly one who does her own cooking usually carries encyclopedic knowledge about the healing properties of plants in her mind and memory. Grandmothers who had access to a kitchen garden grew a profusion of herbs, dried, roasted and powdered them for use in cooking and as medicine. In South India, every household knows about the properties of *bhumi amlaki* or *nela-nelli* (*Phyllanthus amarus*) for treating jaundice. The common name of Aloe Vera (a succulent plant which multiplies itself with no care) is *Kumari* – which signifies youth and beauty. It is widely acknowledged as the best natural astringent and moisturizer at hand and it can also be used to treat burns, colic and constipation. The properties of Neem are well recognized as fungicidal but rural households also use neem oil, the bark of the tree and the leaf extract to treat leprosy, worms and chronic skin infestation.

Most Indian recipes are based on some nutritional or digestive benefit or both. In North India, there is popular dish made of potatoes and fenugreek - commonly called *Methi-Aloo*. It was rarely referred to as *Aloo Methi*, the stress being on the use of *Methi* which quite apart from its own properties which help control blood sugar, cholesterol and constipation, reduces the flatulence caused by potatoes - a tuber which is not native to India but was introduced by Portuguese settlers.

Practically every savory dish in North Indian cooking is seasoned with *jeera* (cumin) and *hing* (asafoetida) both of which improve the taste but also the digestibility of the preparation.

Throughout the country, knowledge about the properties of vegetables, condiments, spices and fruits is well-known and is passed down from mother to daughter and from family to family over generations. From soothing an infant screaming with colic to dealing with a pregnant woman's early morning nausea, from calming dyspepsia to controlling a hacking cough, the average home-maker has an array of decoctions and applications to treat dozens of afflictions. No wonder these remedies are called. दादी माँ के नुस्खे (Dadi maa ke Nuskhe)

### Village Midwives - *Dais*

Despite enormous efforts made to incentivize hospital deliveries, a large number of births still take place at home, largely on account of the household's economic or geographic disadvantage. Village *Dais* have an integral place in Indian villages and though their practices have often been criticized for being unhygienic and harmful, it is these illiterate women who are called to handle child births and obstetric emergencies when transportation to a hospital is not an option. Experienced *Dais* are even able to handle breach deliveries, manage a fetus in the lateral position and deal with a case of the umbilical cord wound

around the infant's neck. Their skill and expertise is widely acknowledged in the village and because their presence could not be wished away, Governments, UNICEF and scores of NGOs invested in their training. Their skills and knowledge are passed on through apprenticeship and according to some reports, they see their role as an "art" based on an understanding of local customs and an instinctive compassion for a woman in labor.

### Bonesetters

#### Visit to the bone setter Sabir Ali Ansari

In India, every cluster of 20-25 villages has a bonesetter who treats sprains and simple fractures, dislocation of the collar bone or the ball and socket joint. Some who have learnt to read X-Rays manage compound fractures too.

As a part of my research into Indian Medicine and Folk Healing, I had the opportunity of visiting a popular bone setter in a village near Lucknow. Sabir Ali owns a semi-pucca building in an interior part of Unnao situated some 60 kms away by road. I was taken there by officials of the AYUSH Department of Uttar Pradesh Government as I had specified that I wanted to see folk healers at work.



Bone setter Sabir Ali Ansari's name board outside his "Hospital" at Unnao.

The day I visited Sabir Ali's "hospital", there were around 40 patients being treated by him – a large number being "in – patients". The facilities provided were rudimentary – her patient was given a Takht or wooden slab to sleep on. Belongings were either hooked on to nails or strung across the ropes attached to the mosquito nets. A family member would cook the food for each patient, sitting next to his "takht". It was a vibrant community scene on display and everyone was considerate and accommodating.

The patients were not destitute or even from the very poor strata. There were quite a few small children who had suffered fractures or dislocation and the child had been brought with full confidence that the treatment would be successful.

Sabir Ali showed me how he changed the bandage and



Bone setter showing an array of bamboo splints

repositioned the splints every third day. The injured area was covered with an application of freshly ground herbs. Sabir Ali's daughter showed me a collection of several herbs, dried and bundled into old newspaper packages. The herbs were easily recognised by the AYUSH doctors that accompanied me. Sabir Ali showed me an array of bamboo splints which had been chiseled and stocked for



Sabir Ali and his daughter relaying the splints

treating different kinds of fractures. The bone setter could read X-rays brought by his patients and went about his vocation with the air of great confidence. Coated with a herbal paste and supported by splints, the fractured bones were stable and Sabir Ali made his patients walk as much as possible.

I asked a young woman in her twenties why she had come to Sabir Ali. She told me that she had a rheumatic heart condition and if she was immobilized in hospital she would die. Sabir Ali made her walk and helped by her mother-in-law, she could tend to her daily needs while the fracture healed - naturally.

I requested the officials to get "before and after" case studies shown to orthopedic surgeons in Lucknow but no one seemed interested. Unfortunately, that is the low esteem in which such folk healers are held by those who have formal training.

Meanwhile Sabir Ali's clientele and many of his ilk continue to be in high demand. At Rs 18000/- for a four month stay and treatment, the cost did not seem outlandish either.

What is more, people came of their own volition and no one had a tale of woe to recount about either negligence or apathy.

### **Snake bite healers**

Thousands of such healers are well-known in village clusters because they can remove the venom from snakebites. The traditional *visha* (poison) healer is able to distinguish a poisonous snakebite from a non-poisonous one and treat each bite with different medication. At times these healers also treat the bites of dogs, leeches and scorpions too. People who watch them while practicing their wares describe the use of a particular stone which, drains away the venom and this practice has also been reported from a village in Kenya. Once again there is no written record of this knowledge and when saving time is critical, villagers still depend on resources like these.

The oral tradition of healing is a fascinating subject. If travel to such remote places and the near absence of board and lodging weren't obvious handicaps, observing healing practices at work would be a captivating pastime. Things are changing rapidly but the faith in traditional wisdom still holds good. Given the side effects of medication, surgery and hospitalization, at times one is inclined to give time-tested natural remedies some credit – particularly when one sees the faith people have and the benefits that they have evidently derived!

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### ***Acknowledgements***

*This article has drawn on research done for a Report titled “Status of Indian Medicine & Folk Healing” in two volumes, which was written by me as the sole author as a part of a 3-year project assigned by the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare. The two volumes were published in 2011 and 2013.*

*(The copyright of the report is with the author and the Ministry of Health.)*

# Kamsel – Relics of Sikkim’s Folklore

*Dr. Jigme Wangchuk  
Ashi Pempem Wangmo*

Every place, community and tradition is born out of narratives and age-old folklores. Folklore, defined as ‘the traditional beliefs, customs and stories of a community, passed through the generations by word of mouth,’ has yet again, turned an ancient legend into belief and a belief into a ritual in the North-Eastern State of India, Sikkim. ‘Kamsel’, a ritual that takes place once in every three years has been an existing and a living proof of the ancient folklore.

Sikkim, a small State of India, tucked in the Himalayas with its unique feature of being bordered by not one but three different countries, has always been a treasure trove for historians as well as visitors. With its diverse culture and innumerable communities, Sikkim has been a manifestation of hundreds of documented and undocumented folklores. This legend turned ritual takes place in a tiny hamlet called Tholung situated in the upper and remotest part of the sub-district in North Sikkim, Dzongu – the dwelling of Sikkim’s indigenous community – the Lepchas<sup>1</sup>. A distinctive attribute of Dzongu is the Protective Law which states that land and property bought and sold within the periphery of Dzongu should be transacted within the Lepcha community only. This Law was made to protect the rights of the Indigenous people by the Chogyal<sup>2</sup> during the Pre-merger period when Sikkim was an Independent Kingdom.

One has to trek from Lingzya (Upper Dzongu) to Tholung, which has an approximate distance of 11 kms and takes about 5 hours. ‘Tholung’, a remote hamlet known for its purity and believed to be a place where divine beings reside, has been considered sacred, solely for the ritual or ceremony called “Kamsel”. Considering its sparse population, Tholung consists of not more than ten houses apart from the ‘Tholung Gompa’<sup>3</sup>. The herders and their families who dwell there do not stay there throughout the year. The landscape of Tholung comprises mountains, sacred hot springs, sacred caves at a high altitude with holy water bodies.

**HISTORY:** ‘Dholung’ or the ‘Valley of Stones’ is now known as Tholung the holy place chosen by Lhatsun Chenpo as a place to keep Sikkim’s artifacts and relics safely during the 17th Century. Lhatsun Chenpo, also called Lhatsun Kunzang Namgyal, a contemporary of the late 5th Dalai Lama, was one of the Great three holy monks who came from Tibet to coronate and enthrone the first Chogyal of Sikkim. He was educated in the prestigious ‘Mindroling Gompa’<sup>4</sup> in Tibet.

The question as to why a remote place like Tholung was chosen is thought-provoking as there were many other remote places that could have been selected as a place for safekeeping. Narratives brought down from generations believe that while returning to Tibet after the

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1 Lepchas – The indigenous people of Sikkim

2 Chogyal – Monarch of the former Kingdom of Sikkim

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3 Gompa – A Tibetan Monastery or temple

4 Mindroling Gompa – One of the six monasteries of the Nyingma School in Tibet

coronation of the Chogyal, Lhatsun Chenpo had visited Tholung and was in awe of the sanctity and sacredness of the place associating it with the beauty of a lotus. He further visualized this place in his dreams after, which he decided that the treasures of Sikkim needed to be kept in Tholung. Lhatsun Chenpo travelled back to Tibet in search of trustworthy caretakers for the same. He chose one of his Jindas<sup>5</sup>, Jo Tshongpo Dabla and his brothers, as the caretakers of the artifacts and sent them to Sikkim. Dabla and his brothers mistook a place in Nepal called Wolung as Tholung and settled there. Lhatsun Chenpo learnt of this misdirection and re-directed them to Tholung Sikkim which took them 4 years on yak and foot. The family of the caretaker Dabla has been known as the 'Tholung Family' entitled 'Nangpa Family' since. The Chogyal had given them the privilege of being the only non-Lepchas with the right to own land and property in the indigenous land of Dzongu. They have been granted with equal rights as the Lepchas and villagers in Dzongu. .

There are many beliefs of how this remote area came to be chosen as the place for safekeeping of the precious artifacts. It is said that during the reign of Chogyal Tenzing Namgyal (1769-1793), the Gorkha invasion from Nepal had caused fear to the Buddhist monks in West Sikkim. This caused the re-incarnate of Lhatsun Chenpo, 'Jigme Pao' to transfer all the precious artifacts belonging to Lhatsun Chenpo towards Tholung in North Sikkim. While on the other hand, most believe that during the rule of Chogyal Tenzing Namgyal, Jigme Pao, the re-incarnate of Lhatsun Chenpo, had predicted the Gorkha attack and had persuaded the King to perform a religious ritual to ward it off. The King however did not pay heed to his request, hence the dismayed Jigme Pao decided to shift Sikkim's precious artifacts from Rabdentse, West Sikkim (the second capital of Sikkim) to Tholung. Soon after, as predicted, the Gorkhas attacked and it is said that

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5 Jindas – Sponsors of a monk

the artifacts were kept for some years in a place called Pentong in Upper Dzongu before it was transferred to Tholung, also located in Upper Dzongu. These precious artifacts were collected by the Tholung Monastery in small quantities over a period of time.

During the 1950s, when Sikkim was a Kingdom, the task of taking care of the artifacts were given to the then Government of Sikkim, the Sikkim Durbar, along with the assistance of the Lepcha Monks and the Tholung Family. A three day religious ritual is performed every three years called the 'Kamsel' in the Tibetan dialect and 'Tendam' in the Bhutia dialect, which both means the airing and sunning of the artifacts. During the process of airing and sunning these artifacts, these precious items are also shown to the public who visit Tholung for this religious ritual.

**KAMSEL:** A decade ago, this ceremony used to take place in the month of April every three years. But considering the extreme weather conditions and harsh terrain of the area, the ceremony was postponed to the month of October. This religious ritual is the airing out of the artifacts of Lhatsun Chenpo and other treasures of Sikkim. It is an occasion where the artifacts are displayed to the public who visit Tholung Monastery during the time of the Kamsel to pay their respect and prayers to the local deities. The invaluable artifacts of Lhatsun Chenpo and Sikkim are sealed in 20 wooden boxes which include rare thangkass<sup>6</sup>, clothes belonging to Lhatsun Chenpo, hand-written manuscripts of the monk, horse saddle belonging to the monk, to name a few. The relics of Late Chogyal Tshudphud Namgyal<sup>7</sup> are also placed on the ground floor of this monastery. These boxes are safely kept in the Tholung Gompa, which is a feature that distinguishes this monastery from many others in Sikkim. This monastery has been built and renovated

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6 thangkass - Buddhist religious painting on Silk

7 King of Sikkim from the year 1793 - 1863



Tholung Monastery - Then



Tholung Monastery - Now



The Ancestral Nangpa Clan (Caretakers of Tholung Monastery)



After the Earthquake of 18th September, 2011, Sikkim

four times at the same location. The first monastery was merely a shed, the second was renovated into a bigger place built with mud and stone. The third monastery had an added structure on top of the previous one, while the present one is the fourth Monastery. The fascinating aspect of the storage of these artifacts is that there has been no use of artificial preservatives or modern conservation techniques. It is believed that the local deities of Tholung protect these relics from deteriorating. Pilgrims from all over the state, young and old, make tremendous effort by taking the 5 hour trek starting from Bey, 13 kms away from Tholung, and also the last place with a settlement to participate in the Kamsel ceremony. The relics and artifacts are displayed to the pilgrims under the supervision of an eminent Rimpoche<sup>8</sup> and the Lepcha monks. The pilgrims stand witness to the Kamsel with the faith that their sins would be forgiven and to be blessed with longevity and prosperity.

Tents are set up for accommodation and pilgrims huddle in groups occupying the existing houses which include a house owned by the Tholung Family. Everyone is accommodating in terms of shelter and food. The pilgrims also explore Tholung, visiting sacred water bodies, especially the holy spring, where water is collected in bottles by pilgrims and taken back as holy water. There are many sacred sites in Tholung with historical significance like the imprints of Guru Rimpoche's elbow, and feet. A formation of holy manuscripts can be seen embedded in rocks and stones along with holy caves that are used for meditation by the holy monks even today.

There are stories and past incidences, which have made people believe that visitors coming with a negative mindset or evil intentions experience misfortune while at Tholung. There are incidences where people have attempted to steal these precious artifacts and have lost their way in the

forests. Eventually they are forgiven by the deities only after they return the belongings of the monastery. The visitors are told not to carry a single item, even if it was a leaf belonging to Tholung, back to their homes; such is the sacredness of this place.

Tholung reminds us of Thomas Hardy's poem - "*Full many a gem of purest ray serene, the dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear; full many a flower is born to lush unseen and waste its sweetness on the desert air.....*"

Even today, Tholung, a well-known place in Sikkim has been untouched by modernity in order to keep its sanctity intact. Kamsel is believed to empower pilgrims and sanctify the holy landscape of Tholung and spread prosperity and health on all sentient beings. The responsibility of the Tholung Gompa and Kamsel is now been taken over by the Ecclesiastical Department, Government of Sikkim. Although the protective deities are believed to be the protectors of the precious artifacts, iron gates have been installed in the monastery to further secure the artifacts signifying the decline of socio-religious shields and the rapid growth of modernism. At present, the Government of Sikkim is carrying out the renovation, as extensive damage was inflicted on the monastery by the earthquake that occurred on the 18th of September 2011.

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8 Head monk



Thugs in prison at Aurangabad," a print from 'Le Tour du Monde', Paris, 1869

## Phansigars

*Anirudh Chaudhry*

Oral traditions wither away on account of different factors. Local languages and dialects are the vehicles that transmit cultural traditions in general and oral traditions in particular. Evolution of society, shift in trends, technology, socio-economic changes, globalization, role of the government etc. are all factors that impact the sustenance of oral and folk traditions. Ironically, education has played

a significant role in the extinguishing of a large number of oral traditions, largely on account of its much needed attack on superstition and quackery using the tools of logic and reasoning. The only hitch being the fact that logic and reasoning, though being exceptional tools, are limited by the horizons of discovery of facts, methods and ways that have been attained by those tools. It has been a relatively

recent period where these tools have been utilized to make sense of some oral and folk traditions that empirical evidence has found to be of great use to society.

During the British Rule, in the later part of the nineteenth century, British folklorists had begun the gathering of folktales in the subcontinent and this received further impetus by the desire to govern by a benevolent system of administration. Various administrators and expatriate wives had spent a lot of their time in curating information about local cultures. However, one oral tradition was brutally eradicated by the British government. It was a brutal tradition that could possibly have been eradicated only by the heavy hand of the law. It was the tradition of 'Thuggery.' The tradition may or may not have lasted in its original form on account of the development and evolution of the Indian society but it may very well have grown and evolved in to something more sinister. It took a series of Acts enacted between 1836-48 known as Thuggee and Dacoity Suppression Acts which totaled eleven in number coupled with strong, cunning and efficient executive action by the officers to effectively stamp out Thuggee.

Philip Meadows Taylor had come to India aged 15 and had subsequently joined the service of the Nizam of Hyderabad. He carried out various administrative roles during his career and also wrote Indian novels. His first book 'Confessions of a Thug' became the first best selling Anglo-Indian novel and gave the word 'Thug' to the English language. It is said to be based on Syed Amir Ali *alias* Feringhea, the thug who was captured by William H. Sleeman and had been made to turn approver. Sleeman wrote three books about the Thugs: a) *Ramaseeana*, or a Vocabulary of the peculiar language used by Thugs; b) Report on the Depredations Committed by the Thug Gangs of Upper and Central India; and c) *The Thugs or Phansigars of India*.

## Origins and Lexicon

Sleeman traces the origins of Thuggery to seven Muslim tribes but this might very well be a surmise based on general interrogation of his suspects. The Hindu Thugs did claim their origins from the legend of one of the forms of the Goddess Durga ( *Maa Bhawaani* or *Kali Maa*) in the story of her battle with *Raktabeej*, the *Asura* (demon) whose every drop of blood would raise another *Asura* as it fell on the ground. To help her she is supposed to have created two humans from her sweat and armed them with *Rumaals* or handkerchiefs to strangle the *Asuras* and thereby kill them without spilling their blood. Sleeman wrote in his book *Ramaseeana* in 1836:

"After their labour was over, they offered to return to the Goddess the handkerchiefs with which they had done their work, but she desired them to keep them as instruments of a trade by which their posterity were to earn their subsistence and to strangle men with their *roomals*, as they had strangled their demons, and live by the plunder they acquired; and having been the means of enabling the world to get provided with men by the destruction of the demons, their posterity would be entitled to take a few for their own use."

Whether the origins of Thuggee stemmed from a Hindu group or a Muslim group is an immaterial argument in my opinion. The fact of the existence of Thuggee, of its growth over a period of time and its development into a cult is the significant point. Sleeman's emphasis on the vocabulary of the Thug as described in his book *Ramaseeana* (supra) is nothing short of remarkable. The words or terms used by a Thug were euphemisms that would be recognised and understood only by a Thug initiated into the cult and to others, they would be commonly used words in the vocabulary of a common man. For instance, Sleeman explains how a Thug was *Aulae* and any other person was *Beetoo* while explaining the meaning of *Aulae*:

Coloured drawing of Thugs strangling a traveller on the floor. (From the British Library)



*"Aulae* – A Thug, in contradistinction to *Beetoo*, any person not a Thug. When the Thugs wish to ascertain whether the persons they meet are Thugs or not, they accost them with, *"Aulae Khan Salam,"* if Musulmans: and *"Aulae Bhae Ram Ram,"* if Hindoo. This to any one but a Thug would seem the common salutation of "peace to thee, friend," but it would instantly be recognised by a Thug. Any many that should reply in the same manner would be quite safe."

### Rites of Passage

So how did one find one's way into Thuggery? Martine van Woerkens and Catherine Tihanyi in their book, *'The Strangled Traveler: Colonial Imaginings and the Thugs of India'* refer to the depositions of the apprehended Thugs and to the *Ramaseeana* (supra) and propound that birth alone did not turn one into a Thug. A rite of passage existed that was usually undergone in the presence of the father of the recruit or his replacement if he was deceased or not a member of the profession. The rite happened when the recruit was between ten to thirteen years old. There were apparently three graduate stages; by the end of the first expedition, the child was exposed to the idea that theft took place; the second stage involved him to suspect murder and by the end of the third stage, he was aware of everything. In the initiation, the recruits were therefore conditioned 'gently', if the word could be used with reference to Thugs, into the process. Some who would blunder onto a stage before they were truly conditioned, could not come to terms with the realisation and it affected them deeply. In this initiation, the most crucial role was that of the *Guru* as depicted in Taylor's book and it is indicative of a very strong *Guru-Shishya* (Master-Student) relationship wherein the *Guru* enjoys a higher pedestal than even the parents of the Thug being initiated.

### The Modus

Notwithstanding the minor deviations in execution of the plans of the Thugs on account of individual style and facts

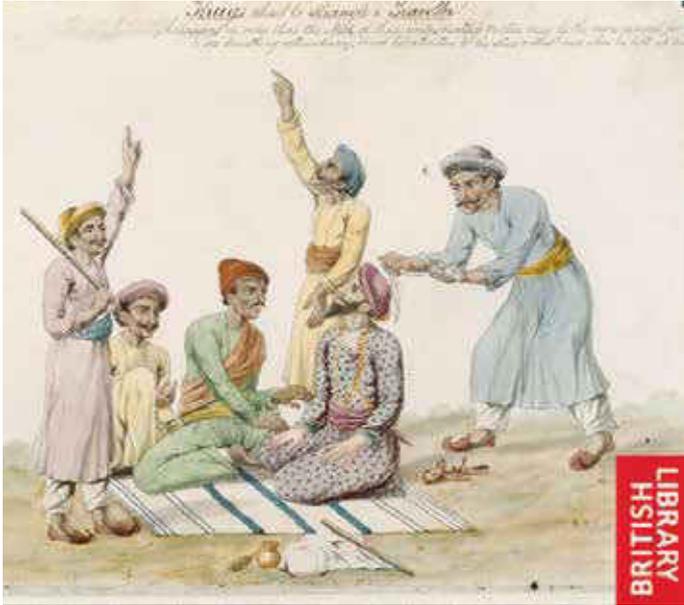
and circumstances, the basic element in the modus of the Thugs was deceit. A narrative closest to the facts without the embellishments of a story-teller could be found in a General Order issued by Major General St. Leger who was commanding the forces at *Cawnpore* (Kanpur) on the 28<sup>th</sup> of April, 1810, excerpts from which are reproduced below:

*"It having come to the knowledge of Government that several Sepoys proceeding to visit their families on leave of absence from their Corps have been robbed and murdered by a description of persons denominated Thugs.....*

*.....and the insidious means by which they prosecute their plans of robbery and assassination having been ascertained, the Commander of the Forces thinks it proper to give them publicity in General Orders to the end that Commanding Officers of the Native Corps may put their men on their guard accordingly.*

*It has been stated that these murderers, when they obtain information of a Traveller who is supposed to have money about his person, contrive to fall in with him, on the road or in the Sarais ; and under pretence of proceeding to the same place , keep him company and by indirect questions get an insight into his affairs, after which they watch for an opportunity to destroy him."*

Narrations of the typical set of actions that form the climax of the usual method of the conspiracy of the Thugs are given in Taylor's book and give a more dramatized narrative but one which is chillingly close to reality. A group of Thugs had roles demarcated clearly amongst themselves and they set out on their missions after a very detailed practice or rite wherein omens played a very crucial part and a bad omen could delay or altogether cancel a venture. Assuming that all went well to their satisfaction and the Thugs went about their usual business, the crucial roles were allocated and they and other relevant terms and are



Coloured drawing of two Thugs pointing upwards to the sky to distract their victim, whilst another creeps up behind ready to strangle him.

#### Defined in *Ramaseeana*<sup>1</sup> as under:

- a. *Sotha*: The person employed to inveigle travellers; always the most eloquent and persuasive man they could find.
- b. *Bunij*: Literally merchandise or goods; technically a traveller or any other person whom the Thugs consider worth murdering. The Thugs' stock-in-trade.
- c. *Beyl*: Place chosen for murder of the victims.
- d. *Kutoree*: Also the place of murder. If the Thugs felt that *Beyl* would arouse suspicion, they would say, "*Jaao kutoree maanjh lao*" which literally means to go and clean the *kutoree* or small bowl but technically meant for them to go and choose the place of murder.

<sup>1</sup> *Ramaseeana*: or a Vocabulary of the peculiar language used by Thugs by *William H. Sleeman*

- e. *Bhurtote* and *Bhurtotee*: A strangler and the office of strangler i.e. a strangler of the highest rank in the gang.
- f. *Lugha* or *Lughaae*: The diggers of the grave.
- g. *Lughouta*: The dead bodies of the victim.
- h. *Kuthowa*: The man who cuts up bodies of the victims before they are buried to prevent them from bloating and from raising a stench.
- i. *Pallu* or *Roomaal*: The cloth with which the victim was strangled.
- j. *Tambaaku khaana*: To strangle; one of the signals for murder.
- k. *Bojha*: The one who carries the body of the victims to the grave.

#### Sustenance of the Practice

Thuggee was a practice that survived over a long period of time and at the time Sleeman and Taylor published their works, it was doubted by many whether the practice had been stamped out in its entirety. It is a wonder that the practice lasted and in fact blossomed for such a long period of time but when you examine the possible reasons in their entirety it does not seem that remarkable that it did survive for so long. Firstly, the Thugs left no witness alive as dead men tell no tales. Even the British were able to stamp out Thuggery on account of a practice of plea bargain wherein the captured Thugs were encouraged to tell on the others in return for a reduced sentence. Secondly, the sociological, economical and political development of the times greatly enabled the Thugs to ply their wares. Settlements were few and far, travellers would need to pass geographically difficult terrain, the modes of communication were only physical, travel was full of all kinds of dangers and disappearance of a traveller could be put down to a number of reasons including illness. Thirdly, it can be argued that the legend of the Thugs being protected by *Maa Bhawaani* (Goddess Durga) around the

17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century was a good enough reason for the many rulers to avoid delivering the death penalty for the fear of drawing the wrath of *Maa Bhawaani* upon themselves. In his book, *Thugs or Phansigars of India*, Sleeman wrote:

“..Native chiefs who would have readily punished a gang of thieves when apprehended, were deterred from doing so by superstitious dread. The Thugs always endeavoured to impress the belief that they were acting according to the injunctions of their deity Bhowanee, and all who opposed them would feel the vengeance of their goddess.”

“It has unfortunately in several instances occurred that after punishing Thugs, the chief himself, his son, or some relation has died within a short time: whether some of the Thug fraternity took secret means to insure such an occurrence, cannot be ascertained; but they seized all such opportunities to substantiate the belief which they endeavoured to inculcate.”

### **Eradication**

The East India Company established their Thuggee and Dacoity Department which was then inherited by the British Government. The spread of the British Rule and the codification of the laws against Thuggery by way of various enactments went a long way in stamping out the practice of Thuggery which was an Oral Tradition that followed a *Guru – Shishya* vehicle of transfer of the tradition. The Thuggee and Dacoity Suppression Acts was a series of eleven Acts with the first one being enacted in 1836 and the eleventh being enacted in 1848 by which, the British Government outlawed Thuggee and Dacoity and improved upon the procedures for Trials of Thuggees to be conducted, of dealing with people accused of murder by Thuggees etc. Subsequently, the Criminal Tribes Act was also enacted in 1871 and under the act, ethnic or

2 Parama Roy (1998). *Indian Traffic: Identities in Question in Colonial and Postcolonial India*

social communities in India which were "addicted to the systematic commission of non-bailable offences" such as thefts, were registered. They were described as 'habitually criminal' and their movements were restricted. At the time of Indian independence in 1947, thirteen million people in 127 communities faced search and arrest if they were found outside the prescribed area. The Act was repealed in August 1949 and former "criminal tribes" were denotified in 1952, when the Act was replaced with the Habitual Offenders Act 1952 of Government of India.

The Thuggee and Dacoity Department existed till 1904 after which, it was replaced by the Department of Criminal Intelligence.

### **Recent Views**

In recent years views regarding the existence of the Thuggee cult have been revisited, notably by Martine van Woerkens in her book and they have been given credence in India, France and the United States of America in some quarters but in Mike Dash's 'Thug: the true story of India's murderous cult' these views have been challenged. Dash rejects scepticism about the existence of the Thuggee cult after examining in detail Sleeman's thorough documentation. The documentation of Sleeman is no doubt extensive and the documentation of legal proceedings and other documents available in the public domain leave no doubt in my mind about the existence of Thugs. Moreover, the stories that were told to us by our grandmothers and some of the tales that still survive, albeit sporadically, do take our imagination back through time to the jungles of India and the travels that posed great danger to the populace. Remnants of the past have also found their way into our language and dialect; all of us have come across so many occasions where our acquaintances have casually remarked, "*Wo toh thug liya gaya*" without fully realising the import of the word, Thug.

# Oral Tradition in the Context of Kathak

*Guru Shovana Narayan*

In the context of social and artistic historical mapping in India, oral tradition has always been dominant as also the belief in cyclic philosophy of life. Preservation is not an issue in India for life is taken to be a continuous cycle. This is different from the Western concept where Western scholarship places emphasis on 'preservation'. This basic philosophy of cycle of life and its continuum is evident in rituals at *Navratri*, *Ganesh Chaturthi*, marriage rituals and such others, where no attempt is made to preserve frescoes, wall paintings or old idols and their '*shringar*'. It is also evident in the practice of cremation. All of these are not very conducive to the spirit of preservation that identifies western culture and philosophy. If this basic philosophy is understood then it answers several questions and misconceptions that essay the minds of Western scholars or Western inspired scholars, where due emphasis has not been given to the spirit of innate strength, genuine adaptability of traditions and multi-level, multi-polar existence, as also the undeniable spirit of evolution that is continually changing outer garbs. Several scholars today agree that it is a Euro-centric approach that tends to view the writing of history based largely on scientific methods such as written records and archaeology without giving

sufficient importance to oral traditions that is equally important. However caution has to be exercised. As stated by Steve High and David Sworn in their article on "The Interpretive Challenges of Oral History Video Indexing", "Body language, emotions, silences, narrative structure, the rhythm of the language and people's relationship to their own words have to be carefully analysed with a clinical mind uncluttered by personal biases or prejudices".

It is also to be understood that in this constant evolutionary state that signifies life as stated in the Upanishad verse "*carai'eti carai'eti*", those practices that pass the test of time become part of tradition and those that do not, die natural death. Another fact that is equally applicable in the Indian context is the multi-polar approach rather the linear approach, which is alien to the Indian way of thinking. This flexibility is applicable to terminologies as well as surnames. Information on cultural continuity is provided by oral history, a history that through recording of memory and interpretation of historical information tinged with personal experiences, biases and prejudices actually do the task of preserving a valuable aspect of intangible heritage. The fragile nature of oral tradition compared to a written record, is an accepted fact. Yet within this fragility lies the inherent strength of information being passed from one generation to another.

In the context of *Kathak*, the existence of more than eight *Kathak* villages in the region between Varanasi and Gaya indicates a pulsating tradition of the vocation of '*Kathikas*' that must have existed at some point of time. These "*Kathiks*" sought to narrate legends and myths through





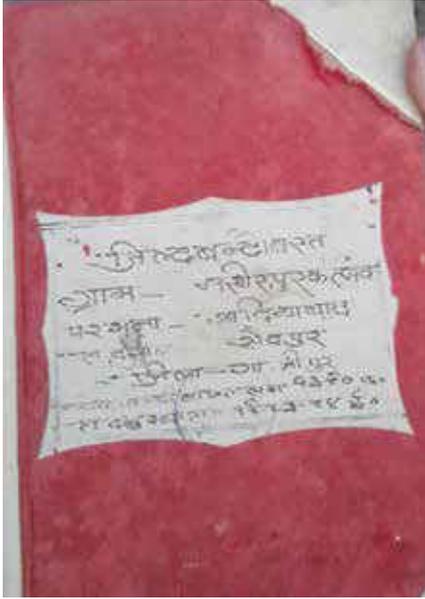
the use of mime and gesticulation. Through interviews with Mahants and local people, it clearly emerges that oral tradition very succinctly distinguishes between the communities of Kathaks (synonymous with the terms *Kathikas*, *Katthaks* and *Kathakars*) from the community of “*Kathakvachaks*”. Urban discourses try to find different interpretations between the terms *Kathak* and *Kathik*, between *Kathak* and *Katthak*, and between *Kathak* and *Kathakar* whereas oral traditions do not differentiate between these terms. In fact *Kathak*, *Katthak* and *Kathik* have been considered synonymous making a mockery of such efforts at scholastic compartmentalisation.

In Ayodhya, Mahant Mithileshnandanji made a distinction between *Kathaks* or *Kathiks* and *Kathavachaks*. Coming from the Vyas tradition, the three tiers of narrators were defined by him as the following: The narrators such as the *Veda Sammit Updesh* that propounded teachings from the Vedas in seated manner to the disciples (teacher-taught relationship) and the *Purana Sammit Updesh*, a conversational teaching between two equals (such as the Mahabharata dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna) were entirely different from the *Kanta Sammit Updesh* that sought to evoke emotional response through the path of performing arts. Under the third category came the *Kathaks* or *Kathiks*. The propounders of *Veda Sammit*

*Updesh* and *Purana Sammit Updesh* were the *Kathavachaks* as they evoked intellectual response. According to them the terms *Kathak*, *Kathik* and *Kathakar* were synonymous while strongly emphasizing that this group was distinct and different from the *Kathavachak* group. As per the Mahant, Luv and Kush, sons of Lord Rama were among the earliest examples of *Kathiks* or the *Kanta Sammit Updesh* narrators.

So where does the difference lie? There seems to be a subtle indication that the genre of enactment is absent in *Veda Sammit Updesh* and in *Purana Sammit Updesh* and once this enactment enters the fray, it gives rise to the term “*Kathak*” or *Kathik*. When regard to Kallu Kathak from Lambhua who had been a regular performer in the temples of Ayodhya till before his death, a curious distinction was made in references to him. As long as he was a performer, he was Kallu Kathak but later in life when he just retold stories without supporting enactment, he came to be known as Kallu Kathavachak. This supported the view of Mahant Mithileshji.

In “*Miracle plays of Mathura*”, Norvin Hein has mentioned that “The *Kathaks* are the expounders of the *pooranas* and other *shastras*. They sit on a *vedi*, or raised seat and address the audience on incidents appertaining to the *Shastras*, supplementing the same with explanations of their own,



and singing songs bearing on the subject treated. This is done by one individual among them. Shreedhur Kothok was the most distinguished of these men and composed several songs of great merit". He then goes on to state that these narrators are known as 'Kathavachaks', distinct from *Kathak*, and supports the

view and understanding of Mahant Mithilesh ji.

Yet again, the strength of oral tradition provides an insight into the skill, migration and nature of patronage. The thriving urban *Kathak* tradition is borne out by recordings of several rhythmic patterns by Sri Pandarika Vitthala during his stay in Akbar's court. The popular usage of Sanskrit terms as recorded in the 2000 year old *Natyashastra* treatise by rural *Kathaks*, ignorant about the treatise, indicates to a continuous handing down of skill through oral dissemination. All would agree, that those terms such as "gopuchha", "mridanga", "strotovaha" and "samayati" are extremely technical in nature. But these terms have been used casually by the *Kathaks* in oral dissemination of the art form. This negates the urban scholastic psychology of putting a wedge between the *Natyashastra* and the practice of *Kathak*.

Oral history reinforced the fact of patronage that had been given to the *Kathiks* (community of *Kathaks*) that led to the establishment of villages in various areas. These were Nasirpur Kathak Village, Paraspur Kathak Village,

Chak Kathak Village, Kathak Purwa Village, Gaur Kathak Village, Jagir Kathak Village, Kathak Bigha and Kathak Gram in eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar that once seemingly had a thriving rural tradition in *Kathak*. These have been faithfully recorded in the first organised census of 1891-92 by William Crooke. The total number of *Kathaks* in the province of Oudh of colonial times, excluding the ones in Bihar's Gaya region, as per William Crooke's census in 1891-92 is 2034. Of these, the eastern most districts after Benaras had 988 *Kathaks* (Mirzapur-11, Ghazipur-25, Ballia-13, Gorakhpur-569, Azamgarh-215, Faizabad-6 and Pratapgarh-149). Compare this with the popular reference to "Nau Sau Navasi Kathiks" (ie 989 *Kathaks*). See how the numbers match! Oral tradition thus is being borne out by census figures.

The spell-binding skills of the *Kathaks* in mime and rhythmic patterns are yet again borne out by another rural saying.

*"Bairagiya nala julum jor,  
Nau Kathik nachawe teen chor,  
Jab table baje dhin dhin,  
To ek par teen teen"*

(The *Bairagi nala* is harsh; nine *Kathaks* waylaid by three dacoits, perform to the 'dhin dhin' of the percussion; each dacoit is thus being outwitted by three *Kathaks*!)

In the above popular rural saying where the *Kathaks* got the better of thieves, we find indication of the great levels of skills of the *Kathaks*.

Careful scrutiny of oral dissemination of rhythmic patterns as well as text ('*sahitya*') utilised by the *Kathaks* of yore will reveal changing social mores and practices. The introduction of the term '*nathiya*' and '*ghunghat*' in medieval period that found echo in dance mudras reveal the changes taking place in social mind-set of the medieval

period. Romance was suggestive and was personified by shy glances of the eyes (*'nazar'*), quivering lips and trembling hands and long tresses of hair in contrast to the explicit references to romantic fervour in ancient period literature. Thus, *"ghunghat ki gat"* (gait showing the drawing of a veil across the face) and various kinds of glances through the diaphenous veil became part of the *Kathak* repertoire.

*"ghunghat ke pat khol re tohe piya milenge"* (Kabir)

("Draw the veil away from your face for your beloved stand before you". Here, the beloved refers to God).

*"kabahun mile naina gori se, ghunghat kaadhe ot khari re"*

(When will my glance meet the eye of my beloved as she stands with her eyes veiled )

The '*solah shringara'* (or the sixteen steps in beautification) also became part of folklore, giving an insight into local customs too.

Once again speaking as a *Kathak*, the patronage of performing arts in the Muslim courts of later period of medieval India led to the evolution of the musical genres of *"Thumri"* with Radha-Krishna as the central motifs and the *"Tarana"*, both of which became part of the repertoire of *Kathaks*.

Another factor that oral tradition reveals is that the *Kathaks* were held in good esteem. In one popular saying is that because of the prowess and skill of *Kathaks* in his court, Pt Durga Prasad and Pt Thakur Prasad, father of Pt Bindadin Maharaj, these Brahmin performers were allowed, contrary to the then prevailing court-etiquette, to perform bare-headed (*"topi maaaf"*) in the court of Oudh (Awadh) in the newly built capital of Lucknow in early part of the nineteenth century.

Another example of high esteem given to *Kathaks* by the patrons of 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries is borne out by not only the grant of revenue free land grants but also the fact that they were regular performers in the temples on various festivals and in social festivities. Later, the changing nature of patronage and the emergence of sway of women public performers led to pressure on migration of *Kathaks* aggravated by growing lack of patronage. In one curious saying it shows a solitary incident where a patron tried to prevent migration. It is evident in the following saying in Azamgarh district:

*"Kathik Niranjan Handiawala,  
Jiska ladka Ram Sahay,  
Kathak nachawe bungale mein  
Taaki chhataa kahin na jaaye"*

(*Kathak Niranjan* from Handia, whose son Ram Sahay was made to perform in the Bungalow so that the other six would not leave)

But these were isolated cases. In village Kathak Gram at Amas, Gaya, with some 50 to 60 houses that had once been thriving with *Kathaks*, today is depleted due to migration of *Kathaks* owing to lack of patronage. According to locals here (the new inhabitants of the *Kathak* Village) these *Kathaks* had been pursuing dance and music as careers, performing in and around the Surya and Shiva temples. Late Kanhaiya Mallik had himself traced his family tree and the practice of *Kathak* from the time of the Saam Veda. He had stated that according to the accounts of his ancestors, *Kathaks* had been living in this village for almost close to thousand years. He had also mentioned that according to oral history, their family had migrated from western regions to the eastern regions after the period of Saama Veda. Unfortunately, his son and grandson have taken to other professions owing to lack of patronage for the traditional art form.

This process of migration from western regions to the eastern regions of UP and Bihar, in an oblique manner gives credence to the legend stated in Chapter 36 of the *Natyashastra*. According to this legend, after entreaties to Lord Shiva by Raja Nahush of Pratihthanpur, performing arts was first introduced on earth in Pratihthanpur (modern day Jhusi near Allahabad) from where it spread to other neighbouring regions.

In another oral transmission of practice, learning today is still being imparted in the traditional '*guru-shishya parampara*' that literally means 'guru-disciple tradition'. This phrase encompasses an entire philosophy for it goes beyond the dry imparting of techniques and grammar of an art form. In olden times, the disciple stayed in the *guru's* house, observed him and learnt from observation and experience, the spirit and flavour of not only the art form but the unspoken spirit behind it. This led to the development and growth of the disciple, not only as an artiste, but as an individual. The initiation ceremony speaks volumes about symbolism associated in the ritual. When a disciple is initiated into the learning of dance (I speak as a *Kathak*), after the prayers invoking the blessings of the Lord, the *guru* ties the sacred red string around the student's wrist. Thereafter, the student is offered '*gram*' followed by 'jaggery' to eat. Significance of the thread is the '*sankalp*' (solemn vow) on the part of both *guru* and disciple that from thence onwards, both are tied together to serve the cause of arts honestly and with dedication. The eating of the '*gram*' signifies that the path is not rosy. As the chewing of '*gram*' requires effort, so does the practice and meditation of art! However, once the '*gram*' has been chewed, then its taste can be enjoyed and so is the case with the practice of dance. Involvement in it gives an enjoyment that cannot be described. Therefore, the 'jaggery' that is sweet!

Even today, in spite of globalization, oral dissemination is still the practice in handing down skills and expertise of

this 2500 year old dance form. In this process, emphasis is also laid on the fact that each succeeding generation of performers should equip themselves in all aspects of performing arts besides dance. This should include awareness and knowledge of music, literature, philosophy and should be able to exhibit their creative skills through creation of new rhythmic patterns, new musical pieces and through myriad expressions scaling various dimensions of interpretations in '*abhinaya*' (expressional sequences). This demand on a *Kathak* is reflected in a popular saying related to Pt Achhan Maharaj wherein how several hours flew without anyone being aware of it as Achhan Maharaj ji delineated to just one word "lal"! This brilliance in the '*upaj ang*' evident in the '*bhav batana*' aspect was later matched by his younger brother Shambhu Maharaj. Totally improvisatory in nature, wherein a line or word from the text is interpreted in a hundred different ways in '*bhav batana*', depending upon the imagination of the dancer ranging from the mundane to the spiritual and the ethereal, Shambhu Maharaj with his most well-known exposition to the *thumri* '*kaun gali gayo Sham?*' i.e. "which path was taken by my Shyam" remains a legend to be reckoned with.

The tradition of oral history is fraught with some innate flaws. Since it is reflecting not only information on practices and traditions, but also personal prejudices with respect to communities, experiences tinge the stories that at times may distort actual facts. It is here that judicious balance of oral traditions with written records and archaeological finds assumes importance.

# Water Divining - A Living Art

*Chitkala Zutshi*

During my stints as a young officer of the Government of Maharashtra in Vidarbha, I had often heard of the water diviners and their skill at locating deep-water aquifers, many hundreds of feet under the soil. I had, however, not met any of them. It was only in 2010 when my husband and I had an orange orchard outside Nagpur, and we were afraid of falling short of water during the scorching central Indian summers, that we thought of tapping ground water by sinking a bore well. We talked it over with our Manager, Rajendra, and asked him whether he knew of any good water diviner in the area. This was how we got acquainted with Dnyaneshwar (the Marathi version of the Hindi Gyaneshwar) Ramchandra Zode, age 52 years and a resident of the hamlet of Sonkhamb in the Katol Tahsil of Nagpur District. Dnyaneshwar had quite a reputation in our area for being "sure shot" water diviner with a failure rate of zero. He turned up at the farm, an unassuming man with a silver beard, white shirt, worn trousers, *chappals* and the inevitable *pancha* tied around his head as a protection against the sun. Over tea and biscuits he told us he was an agriculturist like his father and had studied in the local primary school in Sonkhamb and then at a secondary school 3 km away from home.

When Dnyaneshwar started working on his farm of 14 acres he realized that he did not have sufficient water. He had heard that some "breached babies" (babies who had decided to come into the world feet first, unlike most of us,) had an aptitude for water divining. Since he was a breached baby himself, why not try in his own words, "The very first time I stepped out to divine water on my farm with a fresh coconut placed horizontal on the palm of

my hand, I could feel the downward pull of the water the moment I was standing over a water source underground. We dug a bore well and sure enough found water at around 150 feet." According to Dnyaneshwar, the water in the underground aquifer exerts a pull on the water in the fresh



coconut: the more the quantity of water underground, the stronger the pull on the coconut in his palm. If there is a lot of water, the coconut could crack and the water within it would flow out! He could even judge the depth at which, water will be found by the strength of the pull.

His experiment on his own land having borne fruit, he went from success to success and hasn't looked back since. When people came to know of his success, they started availing themselves of his services and he has never failed. He has helped find more than 50 water sources, all in Nagpur District. The deepest source he has found so far was at 400 feet. He says, "This is God's gift to me. I use it to help farmers in need of water, as I once was. This art cannot be taught or passed on to others. I enjoy my work and do not charge for it. I enjoy helping others and do not exploit this God given gift for commercial purposes as I know how it feels to be without water."

Now we step out into our orchard to locate our own source of water. Dnyaneshwar takes a fresh coconut on the palm of his hand. He then begins a meticulous circumambulation of the area. I am carefully watching the coconut, which lies steady on his palm. Suddenly, at a particular spot, it begins to twitch and comes upright in the center of his palm. He circles the area and pinpoints the spot where we should sink our bore well. This process is repeated on a different part of the orchard where again, he pinpoints the spot for our second bore well. We get a drilling rig and sure enough strike water at both the spots. Once again, Dnyaneshwar is successful in his attempt.

May God grant Dnyaneshwar and his fellow diviners long life and many happy and fruitful years of divining the hidden sources of water and helping farmers.

This area has no lady diviners. If you know of one, would love to have her reference.



# Vrindavan: A Land of Living History

*Paridhi David Massey*

Vrindavan, a small town in the Mathura district of Uttar Pradesh, India, is a land that claims for itself a long and rich historical lineage. It is reverently placed in the Hindu textual traditions that articulate the rich diversities that have surrounded it. In the present scenario, the historical past of *Braj* or *Brajbhoomi*<sup>1</sup> is a contested terrain for claiming ‘many’ sacred histories, featuring in the micro-histories of the lives of uncountable saints and religious traditions that both contribute and depend on Braj for claiming historicity. Although the land of Braj claims for itself a rich, ancient historical past, much of what is remembered of the town of Vrindavan carries a strong reminiscence of the prevalence of rich syncretic traditions of the subcontinent’s medieval pasts. The present paper seeks to build on a similar premise, wherein it tries to trace a cultural history of Vrindavan as articulated through the presence of

a strong Gaudiya Vaishnav community in the region from medieval times. This history is corroborated by a rich legacy of textual traditions that has given way to the rise of a world of folk and oral traditions in the land of Braj and Vrindavan. The prime intent of the article is to unravel the layers of this unique ‘remembered’ past of Vrindavan and the way it has designed and sculpted the social life of the town from historical to present times.

## **The Gaudiya Vaishnav Connect**

One of the most significant chapters in the history of Vrindavan was the one that marked the advent and presence of the Gaudiya Vaishnav community in the region beginning from the medieval period. The history of Gaudiya Vaishnavism finds its origin in the Nawadip

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<sup>1</sup> *Braj*, popularly known as the *Brajbhoomi*, refers to the area around Mathura-Vrindavan, is well demarcated culturally. This area stretches from Mathura, Jalesar, Hathras and Aligarh



or Gauda region<sup>2</sup> of Bengal in the Indian subcontinent. The community traces its beliefs to the life sketch and devotional movement that began under the spiritual leadership of Chaitanya, popularly accorded the title of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu<sup>3</sup>. The philosophic basis of Gaudiya Vaishnavism is rooted in the beliefs of devotional worship (*Bhakti*) towards Radha and Krishna, who are believed to appear in several forms and incarnations. Chaitanya himself is believed and most reverently remembered as the “Golden *avatara*” (The Golden incarnation) and the earthly manifestation of the combined forms of Radha and Krishna in one human body<sup>4</sup>. The Gaudiya Vaishnav remembrance of Vrindavan’s past has a strong connect with the life and preaching of Chaitanya who as the texts describe, was forever in a transcendental mood “*absorbed in the thoughts*

2 The Gauda (Bengali) region was a territory located in Bengal in the ancient and medieval times, believed to be a part of the Gauda kingdom.

3 A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *Teachings of Lord Chaitanya, The Golden Avatara*, The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1991, Los Angeles, California, *Lord Chaitanya, His Life and Teachings*, The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, Mumbai, India

4 It is believed in the Gaudiya Vaishnav philosophy that when Krishna wants to enjoy his own pleasure potency, he manifests himself in a separate form of Radha, and when he wanted to understand himself through the agency of Radha, he united with her in the form of Chaitanya.

of Sri Vrindavan”<sup>5</sup>. It’s noteworthy that these texts describe Vrindavan with the prefix “Sri” symbolising the reverent status it is accorded in the Gaudiya Vaishnav religious and cultural world.

### Vrindavan: A Living Entity

The above mentioned reverence accorded to Vrindavan is interesting in diverse ways. These are jewelled with the emotions of passionate romanticization and glorification of the town’s past and present, according it a divine status. So, Vrindavan, as described by Vaishnav literatures and scriptures transcends the temporal status of a geographic entity, but is believed to be the earthly manifestation of “Krishna’s heavenly abode”. The belief goes that when Krishna descends to the earth for the performance of his *leela* or “transcendental pastimes”, he brings with him his own eternal abode known as Goloka Vrindavan<sup>6</sup>. It is believed that Goloka Vrindavan or “Krishnaloka” is supreme among all the planets in the universe<sup>7</sup>. In Krishnaloka, the land of Krishna, there are three distinct divisions-Mathura, Dwarka and Vrindavan, all three believed to be fully engaged in a transcendental loving reciprocation between Krishna and his devotees. Of the three, the supremacy of Vrindavan is propounded through the various texts and tales composed in its glory<sup>8</sup>. It is said that in Vrindavan, everything is conscious. The ground is made up of *chintamani* or wish-fulfilling jewels, that every speck of dust is living and conscious, which is silently meditating on the pleasures of Krishna. Every tree in Vrindavan

5 Loknath Swami, “Lord Chaitanya Visits Vrindavan”, *Back to Godhead*, November/December 2015, Vol. 49, No. 6, The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust International.

6 Rahasekhara dasa Brahmachari, *The Color Guide to Vrindavana*, Vedanta Vision Publications, Ramco Press Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi

7 Radhanath Swami, *Vrindavan Yatra with Radhanath Swami, The Six Goswamis of Vrindavan*, Vol. 1, Tulsi Books, 2010, Mumbai.

8 There is a plethora of literature compose through the different periods of history by devotees, teachers and Goswamis of Gaudiya Vaishnav community. A list of many such texts include, *Vraja-Riti*, *Cintamani*, by Visvanath Cakravarti, *Mathura Mahatmya* and *Sri Vrindavanstaka* by Srila Rupa Goswami, *Sri Vrindavana Mahimamrita* by Prabhodananda Saraswati.



is believed to a *kalpavriksha*, or the desire fulfilling tree. The flora and fauna of the town is believed to be fully involved in this celebration of *Krishna-leela* or pastimes of Radha and Krishna.

*'The breeze of Vrindavan is eternally presenting herself just for the pleasure of Krishna and His devotees. The birds are singing, the peacocks are dancing, the monkeys are playing, the gopas, the gopis, the river Yamuna, Govardhan<sup>9</sup>-everyone is simply manifesting his or her desire only for the pleasure of Radha and Krishna...<sup>10</sup>'*

9 The Govardhana Hill is a eight kilometer long hill located in the Braj region of Uttar Pradesh, India, known as Govardhan or Sri Giriraj, the hill has a prime location in Vaishnav mythology and is believed to be the natural form of Krishna.

10 Radhanath Swami, *Vrindavan Yatra with Radhanath Swami, The Six Goswamis of Vrindavan*, Vol. 1, pp 3, Tulsi Books, 2010, Mumbai.



The literature composed by the Gaudiya Goswamis and devotees regularly visiting and living in Vrindavan is filled with passages dedicated to an ardent romanticization of the town. Much of these writings on Vrindavan are deeply reflective of the pain of the emotions of separation from Vrindavan felt by these devotees when they are located in different cities like Puri or Prayag. One such Swarup Damodar Goswami, a contemporary of Chaitanya compares the opulence of Vrindavan to that of Dwarka stating, *'The opulence of Vrindavan is like an unlimited vast ocean, in comparison to which the opulence of Dwarka in Vaikuntha<sup>11</sup> are not even a particle of a single drop.<sup>12</sup>'*

### The Vrajasis

Another very interesting aspect visible in the textual and oral traditions of Vrindavan is the way they describe the inhabitants of the town. It is natural to assume that the divinity accorded to the city and all its natural phenomena percolates to the lives of its human inhabitants as well. The inhabitants of Braj/Vraj or Vrindavan are popularly known as the *Vrajasis*, and as the historical and oral traditions testify, it is no ordinary thing to be born as one! Being born

11 Meaning of Vaikuntha- the heavenly abode

12 Radhanath Swami, pp 6



in the land of Vrindavan or anywhere in Braj is regarded as one of the most fortunate events in one's life. 'All the sins accumulated through many births can be destroyed in a second by staying in Vrindavana.'<sup>13</sup> The *Vrajvasis* as the texts say are no ordinary people, but are believed to be important participants and characters in the ever-lasting *leelas* of Radha and Krishna. Prabhodhananda Saraswati, the composer of Sri Vrindavana Mamamrita prays that he may be engaged in the devotional service of the 'moving and non-moving residents of Vrindavan.'

*'He who has his house, clothing and food in sacred Vrindavana is pious a million times over. He becomes liberated and he liberates others. He who resides in Vrindavana, the spiritual abode of the nectar bliss of pure love, easily attains wonderful love from the beloved of maharaja Vrsabhanu's daughter (Radha)'<sup>14</sup>.*

It is believed that Vrindavan is non-different from Krishna himself, whereas his brother and friend Balarama reincarnated himself as the abode of Vrindavan. Stories capture how it is only through the exclusive permission granted by Vrinda-devi (on whose name the forest or *vana* of Vrindavan is named), that one is allowed to take birth

13 Rahasekhara dasa Brahmachari, *The Color Guide to Vrindavana*, pp 3, Vedanta Vision Publications, Ramco Press Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi

14 Prabhodhananda Saraswati, *Sri Vrindavan Mahimrita*, ISKCON Media Vedic Library

or step in the territory of the holy city<sup>15</sup>. To be born in Braj or living there like a *Vrajvasi* is regarded a position of supreme elevation in both textual knowledge and popular belief. As the belief goes, even the trees, plants, and monkeys of Vrindavan are those *Vrajvasis* and devotees who are born again in Vrindavan for the sheer love of the land. It is believed that the residents of Vrindavan are blessed with the inherent wisdom of understanding the magnificence or *aishvarya* of both Radha and Krishna, because the deities choose to reveal themselves in special ways exclusively to the residents. What comes out of this reciprocal relationship is a pleasurable spectacle. The *Vrajvasis* cannot fathom Krishna just as a deity. Their devotion is seeped in the sentiment of what they describe as the "*madhurya bhava*" which is expressed in an intensely personal relationship with Krishna. So, the *Vrajvasis* exercise this unique liberty in associating their relationship with their favourite deity and they are not let down by Krishna himself who appears in multiple forms and relationships all over Braj. This makes me recall a beautiful anecdote of meeting an almost ninety-year old woman at the footsteps of Sri Radharaman temple in Vrindavan at the dawn of rainy morning. I paid attention to the small brass vessel in her hands filled with milk sprinkled with few leaves of Tulsi. As soon as the temple's main door opened and we headed towards the *garbha-griha*,<sup>16</sup> we captured a breathtaking glimpse of the tiny twelve inch tall Radharaman standing before his anxiously waiting devotees. The old woman made her way closer towards the deity and mumbled in low voice, "*Lalla, uth jao, mai doodh lai hu, bhog lagao!*" (Asking *Lalla* (baby Krishna) to wake up and taste the milk she has to offer). The image of the woman remained with

15 The Vrindavana forest is named after Vrinda-devi, who is believed to have performed penances here for around 60,000 years. Born as the daughter of King Kedera, she sanctified the forest of Vrindavan as a part of her penance and attained Goloka. Ever since, the forest has been known as Vrindavana. H.G. Deena Bandhu Prabhu and www.vrindavan-dham.com, Vaishnav Seva Kendra, Belgaum, India.

16 *Garbhagriha* is the sanctum sanctorum, or the innermost chamber of a Hindu temple where resides the idol of the primary deity.



me for long, and I collected later that she comes daily and offers her devotion to Krishna in a mother's form.

It is believed that every aspect of Vrindavan, every molecule is endowed and saturated with this *madhurya rasa* or divine nectar, and with this Krishna fulfills the most intimate desires of his devotees. A great number of narratives articulate this supremacy accorded to the lives of the inhabitants of Vrindavan, one such account is a story woven around the figure of Lakshmi, who is the wife of Vishnu in the Hindu pantheon of deities. The narrative describes a place in Braj named Srivan, where Lakshmi wished to perform *tapasya* or prayers for a long time but she wasn't allowed to cross the Yamuna river to enter the *rasa-mandala*. The one condition that was put on Lakshmi on entering Vrindavan was that she could not enter as the wife of Vishnu, but will have to follow the footsteps of the *gopis* in *madhurya-bhava*, and behave as their servant. There is a strong reiteration of the notion of the elevated position of the Vrajasis, and it's said that the only way of approaching Krishna in his original form is to follow the footsteps of the residents of Vrindavan.

### Chaitanya visits Vrindavan

An important chapter in the history of Vrindavan is the one that articulates its profound connection with the history of

Gaudiya Vaishnavism in Bengal in the medieval period. It is believed that followed by years of intense devotion and preaching, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu shared his intense desire of visiting Vrindavan. At many previous occasions he was dissuaded for this by many of his close friends and devotees who wished to keep away from the anguish of separation from their spiritual master. It is believed that in 1515, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu arrived in Vrindavan. The descriptions of his visit are vividly captured in scriptural form in the *Shri Chaitanya Caritamrita* by Krishnadasa Kaviraja Goswami who explains that it was Chaitanya's desire to experience Radha's love for Krishna that brought him to Vrindavan.

It is reiterated in the many narratives of Vaishnav literature that prior to the arrival of Chaitanya and the followers of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, Vrindavan was predominantly a land covered with thick Tulsi forest, hence acquiring its name, "Vrinda-vana". It is believed that it was Chaitanya Mahaprabhu who envisioned the dream of rediscovering the hidden spiritual spaces and locations associated with the life of Radha, Krishna and their *Vraj-leela* in the forests of Vrindavan. It was Chaitanya who rediscovered the famous Shyama Kunda and Radha Kunda near the Govardhana-Hill in Vraj. Overwhelmed by ecstatic love, it is believed that Chaitanya danced at the bank of the Radha-Kunda and drew *tilaka*<sup>17</sup> marks on his body with the lake's clay. The clay on the bank of Radha-Kunda is still very popular among devotees who don't forget to take a portion of it for applying *tilaks*.

### The Gaudiya Goswamis

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu is said to have passed his dream of rediscovering Vrindavan through the lives of six of

<sup>17</sup> Tilaka-In Hinduism, the *tilaka* is a mark worn usually on the forehead, sometimes on the other parts of the body as well, like the neck, hand or chest. Tilaks may be worn on a daily basis or while the performance of specific rituals.



his devoted Goswamis. A biographical study of each of these six goswamis reveals startling similarities. Each one of them from the Gaudiya community migrated to Vrindavan at some point of their lives. This move towards Vrindavan was marked by a renunciation of all previously held worldly attachments. Each of them was driven by the cause of Chaitanya's mission and moved by an ardent desire to experience the euphoria that Vrindavan seemed to promise. The six-goswamis of Vrindavan, popularly addressed as the "Shat-Goswamis" are associated with the six most popular and historically rich temples of the town. The history of Vrindavan is deeply rooted to the very history of these six Goswami temples, and these acquire a significant location in the textual, oral and architectural heritage of the town. Most of the myths and tales associated with the life of Vrindavan emanate from the heart of these temples.

### Sri Sri Radha Madan Mohan Temple

One of the earliest Vaishnav *acharya* or teacher, Sanatan Goswami, was born in a Brahman family in Karnataka. From childhood itself, young Sanatan was inclined towards philosophic and spiritual matters. It is believed that Chaitanya appeared in a dream to Sanatan asking him to renounce the worldly life and shift himself permanently

to Vrindavan. Sanatan's life in Vraj is documented in the many writings and scriptures composed by devotees in the said historical period. As the stories unfold, Sanatan was very close to the vrajvasis, and each one knew him at a personal level. Sanatan Goswami is credited for the establishment of the oldest temple in Vrindavan, the Radha Madan Mohan temple, the first that appeared in the thick forest of Vrindavan.

It is believed that the deities of Madan Mohan were absorbed in a *leela* of remaining unmanifested in this world. The real deities of Sri Madan Mohan were worshipped by a Brahman named Choube, who kept them like his own children. It is believed that after Sanatan's arrival at Vrindavan, the deity of Madan Mohan himself desired to live with Sanatan. Madan Mohan appeared in the dream of the Brahman and said, "As you have many children, and Sanatan has none, so please give me to Sanatan."

*'Sanatan Goswami then brought Madan-mohana to Vrindavan, to the place where he did his bhajana situated on the top of the hill named Dvadasaditya, and kept the deity in a nearby tree. Sanatana regularly offered simple dried chapattis, but one day Madana-mohana suddenly asked for some salt. Sanatana then told Madana-mohana, "Just see, now you want salt and tomorrow you will want sweets; I am an old man and have so many books to write so please just accept this dry chapatti."<sup>18</sup>*

The narrative goes that on the same day, a wealthy merchant named Krishnadas Kapur from Punjab made his way towards Agra through the Yamuna river, while carrying with him a boat-full of salt for sale. While passing the famous Kaliya-ghata, the boat got stuck on a sandbank and refused to move. In response to his cry for help, Madan-mohan appeared to him in the form of a cowherd boy and advised him to take help from Sanatan

<sup>18</sup> Rahasekhara dasa Brahmachari, *The Color Guide to Vrindavana*, pp 46, Vedanta Vision Publications, Ramco Press Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi



Goswami who lived nearby on a hill. Sanatan advised the merchant to pray to Madan-mohan. As he prayed a storm appeared resulting in heavy rains, thus swelling the river and miraculously freeing the merchant's boat. As a gesture of gratefulness towards the help given by Madan-mohan, Sanatan asked Krishnadas Kapur to help build the first temple dedicated to the deities of Madan-mohan. It is said that the deities of Madan-mohan appeared alone without the deities of Radha and this absence of Radha greatly troubled the devotees all over Vrindavan. The son of king Prataparudra in Jagannatha Puri, Purushottam Jana, sent the deities of Srimati Radharani to Vrindavan along with many devotees. She along with her paraphernalia was welcomed by a grand festival by all the vrajvasis. It is believed that the real beauty of the feet of Krishna is perfectly replicated in the feet of the Madan-mohan deity. The deities of Madan-mohan are of supreme significance to the Gaudiya Vaishnav belief system all over the world. Out of the three forms of relationships that a devotee establishes with Krishna- *sambandha*, *abhideya* and

*prayojana*, Madan-mohana manifests the *sambandha* form. He establishes the devotee's relationship with Krishna. At the same time Sanatan Goswami is fondly remembered as the *Sambandha-acharya*.

It is said that the original deities of Madan-mohan were taken to Karauli in Rajasthan as an attempt to safeguard the deities in the advent of a Mughal attack on the city of Vrindavan<sup>19</sup>.

### Sri Sri Radha Govinda Temple

Another very important Goswami in the Gaudiya Vaishnav *sampradaya* or community who is credited to the task of writing and rediscovering the lost treasures of Vrindavan is Rupa Goswami. Incidentally, Rupa Goswami was the brother of Sanatan Goswami. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu explained to Rupa Goswami the science of devotional service and the importance of worshipping in *madhurya-bhava* in Vrindavan. He asked him to expand his work of writing and shift to Vrindavan.

"I have given you a service. Go to Vrindavan; search out the holy places of Krishna's beautiful pastimes; excavate those holy places, and make Vrindavan a holy place of pilgrimage. Construct temples and conduct beautiful Deity worship. Discover the ancient Deities lying hidden in Vrindavan and install them in your temples..."<sup>20</sup>

A biographical account of the lives of both Sanatan

19 The deities of Madan-mohana were taken to Jaipur where they were worshipped by the discipic descendents of Sanatan Goswami. It is said that the daughter of the king of Jaipur was in deep love with the deities of Madan-mohana, and worshipped them most dearly. Her marriage was arranged with the prince of Karauli, but the thought of her separation from Madana-mohan anguished her so much that she demanded that Madan-mohana be shifted to Karauli along with her. The kings came together and decided that the a temple be established in Karauli where Madan-mohana would live forever.

20 Radhanath Swami, *Vrindavan Yatra with Radhanath Swami, The Six Goswamis of Vrindavan*, pp 111-112, Vol. 1, pp 3, Tulsi Books, 2010, Mumbai



and Rupa Goswami in Vrindavan reveals a beautiful retelling of the many *leelas* of Radha and Krishna that was personally experienced by them. In one such *leela* rests the story behind the appearance of the deity of Sri Govinda Dev, the *abhideya* deity of Vrindavan. Sri Govinda Dev is responsible for the second stage in devotional relationship with the Lord, followed by the *sambandha* relation. Govinda means the one who gives pleasure to the cows, the land and the senses. Rupa Goswami through the study of diverse Vaishnav texts realised that the deity of Govinda Dev was lying hidden in Vrindavan. Despite desperate attempts of searching the hidden deity, Rupa Goswami couldn't succeed in his endeavour. As the story goes, Krishna himself appeared to Rupa Goswami as a small Vrajvasi boy and directed him towards the location of the real Govinda Dev's deity hidden at the Gomati hill. The deity of Govinda Dev was installed in a small temple made with the help of the vrajvasis.

The major construction of the temple took place under the guidance of another important Goswami named Raghunatha Bhatta Goswami and his disciples headed by Raja Man Singh of Jaipur around 1570. The temple flaunted a tall seven-story structure, and was officially completed in 1590. Similar to Madan-mohan, the deity of Govinda Dev appeared alone without the deity of Radha, which was

later installed under the patronage of king Purushottam Jana from Jagannatha Puri. '*When she arrived in Vrindavan, all of the Vrajvasis and the Goswamis were jubilant-so joyful-and they installed Her on the left side of Sri Govinda Dev.*<sup>21</sup>' The original deities of Radha Govinda Dev have been shifted to Jaipur in the wake of an attack on Vrindavan by the Mughal forces. At the time, the descendent of Raja Man Singh, named Raja Jai Singh offered shelter and refuge to the deities of Vrindavan. Here Govinda Dev became the personal Lord and master of the devotee King Jai Singh who arranged the whole kingdom of Jaipur to be centered around the deity of Sri Govinda Dev who is till present worshipped by the original descendents of Rupa Goswami.

### **Sri Sri Radha Gopinath Mandir**

The temple of Sri Sri Radha Gopinath speaks of the vision and devotion of another important Goswami, Raghunath das Goswami. It is said that out of the six Goswamis, Raghunath was the first to meet Chaitanya Mahaprabhu personally and stayed with him for around ten days. Like the other two Goswamis, Raghunath too was asked by Chaitanya to meditate on the names of Radha and Krishna in Vrindavan. Raghunath das Goswami was deeply pained at the death of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and decided to end his life in Vrindavan. It's only after reaching Vrindavan and associating with other vaishnavs like Rupa and Sanatan that he got inspired to join the two in their quest for rediscovering the hidden treasures of Vrindavan. Raghunath das Goswami resided on the banks of Radha Kunda in Mathura where he immersed himself in *kirtan* and ecstatic moods for around twenty-two hours in a day. Raghunath das Goswami was the first goswami to have laid the foundations of the *Bhajan-Kutir* system in Vraj. These were small thatched huts made for austere living and meditation acquired by sages and those renouncing mainstream life. The Bhajan-Kutir system is an important

<sup>21</sup> Radhanath Swami, pp 145



part of the Vraj history and heritage and hundreds of these can be spotted all over the *Vraj-Chaurassi-Kos* area (the eighty-four miles area of Vraj).

As Gopinath, Krishna is the Lord and master of the *gopis*. Narratives of the *raas-leela* describe how during the full-moon night of the Sharad season, Krishna enjoys the loving exchanges with his beloved *gopis* of Vrindavan. Here Krishna is depicted as playing the flute on the banks of the river Yamuna.

‘Hearing the sweetness of the transcendental vibration of His celebrated flute, all the *gopis* would leave whatever occupational duties they were engaged in. Whether it be feeding their children, whether it be feeding their families, whether it be sleeping, whether it be cleaning, whether it be milking the cows—they simply left everything, because they knew that the Lord of their life, Sri Gopinath, was calling them...<sup>22</sup>’

The deities of Gopinath establish the *Prayojana* form of

<sup>22</sup> Radhanath Swami, *Vrindavan Yatra with Radhanath Swami, The Six Goswamis of Vrindavan*, pp 192, Vol. 1, pp 3, Tulsi Books, 2010, Mumbai

relationship with Krishna. This is regarded as the ultimate stage that establishes unalloyed love or *prema-bhakti* for Krishna. It is believed that the deity of Gopinath was carved by Vishwakarma on the request of Vajranabha, the great-grandson of Krishna. Accounts reveal that the face of the deity of Gopinath is identical to the face of Krishna himself. It is said that the deity of Gopinath was lost for a long period of time, and was rediscovered by a devotee named Parmananda Bhattacharya who located the deity under a *vamsivat* tree in Vrindavan. Alike, Madan-mohan and Govinda Dev, the deity of Gopinath appeared without Radha whose deity form was added later.

### Sri Sri Radharaman Temple

Sri Sri Radharaman temple is one of the most popular Goswami temples situated in the heart of Vrindavan. The temple is dedicated to the loving service of Gopal Bhatta Goswami who shifted to Vrindavan from South India in the medieval period. When Gopal Bhatta first met Chaitanya in his childhood at Srirangam, he was completely infatuated by him and could not give up his association with Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Gopal Bhatta too was instructed by Chaitanya to go to Vrindavan and become a close associate of Rupa and Sanatan goswamis. While in Vrindavan, Gopal Bhatta narrated the pastimes of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in Srirangam to the eager *vrajvasis*. It is believed that at a place called Sanket, the Bhajan-Kutir of Gopal Bhatta Goswami continues to exist.

The story of the appearance of the deity form of Radharaman is credited to the devotional activities and life of Gopal Bhatta Goswami. It is said that Gopal Bhatta Goswami had worshipped the *shaligram-shila* form of Krishna which he had brought from river Gandaki in the Himalayas. Gopal Bhatta Goswami on the other hand, was filled with an intense desire to worship the *vighraha* or deity form of Krishna. So, Gopal Bhatta Goswami prayed that if Krishna desires, he will allow him to worship his three-



fold bending form. The story goes that a on a morning while Gopal Bhatta was taking a bath he found that one of his *shilas* was missing, and his most beautiful Damodar Shila had manifested itself in the form of Krishna. It is said that,

*‘This deity had such beautiful, meticulous fine, lotus-like eyes and lips and fingers, and had little teeth in His mouth. How his body was curved do sweetly! He was about twelve inches high, but so enchanting, standing curved in three places, His tribhanga form, and playing upon His flute..<sup>23</sup>’*

It is said that a part of the original *shila* is still visible in the body of Sri Radharaman from which he manifested. As far as oral histories are concerned, it is believed that while the other important deities were shifted to safer areas in the wake of the Mughal attack on Vrindavan, Sri Radharaman is the only one who never left Vrindavan. It is said that since he appeared very small in size, he was easily concealed and nobody ever found him.

<sup>23</sup> Radhanath Swami, *Vrindavan Yatra with Radhanath Swami, The Six Goswamis of Vrindavan*, pp 124, Vol. 1, pp 3, Tulsi Books, 2010, Mumbai

The service of Sri Sri Radharaman is a flamboyant affair with the present day goswami families located in the Radharaman-ghera of Vrindavan. Gopal Bhatta Goswami had envisioned a line of devotees and descendents in his disciplic order who would be instrumental in the preservation of the rich culture of worship over centuries. The temple has an array of meticulously organised rules and norms to be followed in deity worship of Sri Radharaman, popularly addressed as “Radharaman-lalla<sup>24</sup>” by devotees. It is believed that till day, Sri Radharaman has never missed an offering or *bhog*. It is also said that none of the little pieces of jewellery adorned by *lalla* is ever been lost. In order to reach the store where Radharaman’s jewels are kept, the *pujaris* have to obtain keys from the three different families of present day goswami families.

### Sri Sri Radha Damodar Temple

Sri Sri Radha Damodar is considered to be one of the most important temples of Vrindavan. It is believed that the original deity of Sri Damodar was hand crafted by Rupa Goswami himself, which he later handed to Jiva Goswami, another prominent name in the Gaudiya Vaishnav community. It is believed that the deity was first worshipped here in 1542. A prominent Vaishnav text called the *Bhakti Ratnakar* explains beautiful anecdotes of personal interaction of Sri Damodar with Jiva Goswami himself. *‘He would say, “Please give me bhoga. I am hungry.”<sup>25</sup>’* It is said that once the Mughal emperor Akbar visited Vrindavan, and observed the *darshan* of Jiva Goswami. Akbar is also believed to have offered huge amount of donations and patronage to many temples of Vrindavan, highlighting the presence of syncretic traditions prevalent in the medieval

<sup>24</sup> The word *lalla* (in Hindi) is used to address Krishna in a small child form, usually used by mothers for addressing their sons.

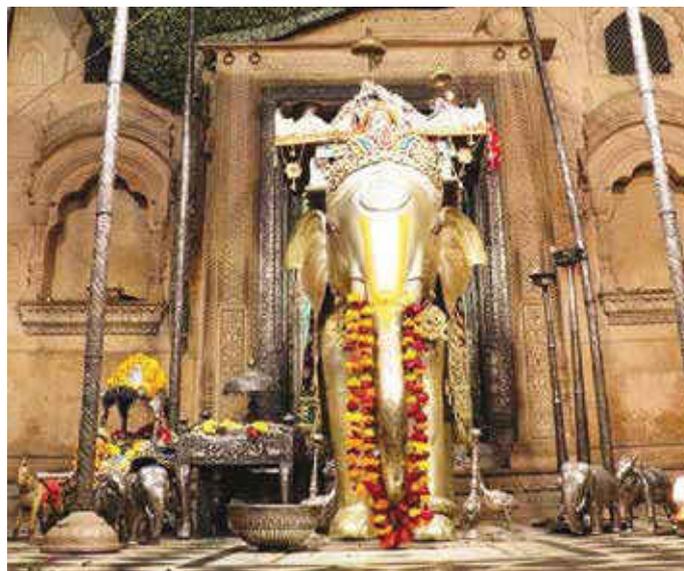
<sup>25</sup> Radhanath Swami, *Vrindavan Yatra with Radhanath Swami, The Six Goswamis of Vrindavan*, pp 248, Vol. 1, pp 3, Tulsi Books, 2010, Mumbai

period. The temple has the existence of three more important deities named Sri Radha-Vrindavan Chandra worshipped by Krishnadasa Kaviraja Goswami, Sri Radha-Madhava by Jayadeva Goswami and Sri Radha Chalachikan by Bhugarbha Goswami. The temple is also very famous for a *shila* kept within its premises, as the legend goes; the *shila* bears the imprint of the footprint of cowherd Krishna.

Sri Sri Radha Damodar temple is the originating point of many legends and stories that added to the rich mythological past of Vrindavan. One of the legends that attracts millions of devotees from all across the world to the temple relates to Sanatan Goswami. It so happened that Sanatan Goswami as part of his daily vows to Krishna used to circumambulate the Govardhana hill in Mathura, even in his old age. Seeing this, Krishna had mercy on him and he appeared to Sanatan in the form of a small cowherd boy. The boy stepped on a small stone and started playing his flute. The sound of the playing flute was so enchanting that the stone began to melt and the boy's footprint got impressed along with the hoof print of the calf. It is believed that Krishna himself gave this stone to Sanatan Goswami, which was a tiny part of the Govardhana hill and asked Sanatan to circumambulate this *shila* instead. Since, then, millions of devotees, especially those in the old-age circumambulate the Radha-Damodar temple where this *shila* is placed, believing they are circumambulating Govardhana itself.

### **Sri Sri Radha Shyamasundar Temple**

Perhaps it wouldn't be wrong to say that the legend behind the foundation of this temple is one of the most intriguing and beautiful of all tales discussed so far. This temple was founded by Shyamananda Pandit and its one of the most important temples associated with the Gaudiya Vaishnav community in Vrindavan. It is said that Shyamananda Pandit was popularly known as *Dukhi Krishna das*, the reason being that as an infant he would



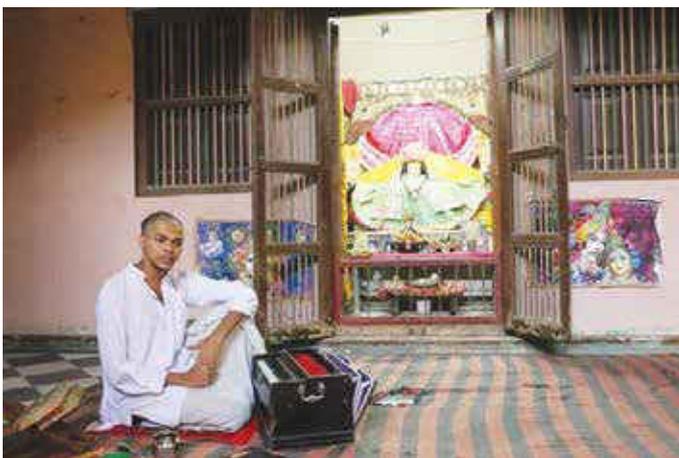
get intensely emotional on hearing the name of Krishna. In Vrindavan, Dukhi Krishna dasa would spend most of his time chanting the name of Radha and Krishna and took the daily service of cleaning the forests and groves of Vrindavan. As the legend goes, one day while cleaning the *Raas-Sthali*, Dukhi found a beautiful stone jewelled anklet under a small grove. The anklet shone most amazingly and gave transcendental beauty. Seeing it, Dukhi immediately realise that it can not belong to someone ordinary and understood how this anklet that must have adorned the foot of Radha, must have slipped and fell down somewhere in the grove.

In the meantime, an old woman appeared to Dukhi in search of the lost anklet complaining that her daughter lost hers'. Dukhi understood the transcendental *leela* of Srimati Radharani and went along with the woman. It was soon revealed that the old woman was Lalita Sakhi, Radha's closest friend and companion. Lalita Sakhi went away and after a few minutes appeared Radha. Shyamananda or Dukhi Krishna dasa saw her and returned the anklet to her. Radha who was very pleased with him, pressed the anklet against his forehead and created a *tilak*.

It is said that the smaller deity of Sri Shyamasundar is actually the deity gifted by Srimati Radharani to Shyamananda. The main deity of Radha Shyamasundara was personally worshipped by Srila Baladev Vidyabhushan. The temple premises also house the small *bhajan-kutir* of Shyamananda Prabhu, which is dug deep inside the ground. Just across the street of the temple lies the Samadhi Mandir of Shyamananda Pandit, the place where the famous anklet was discovered, known as the “*Nupur-prapti-sthala*”.

As my Vrindavan *Yatra* goes on, I have realised that Vrindavan has a lot to offer; above all it's a place which

testifies how stories and narrative becomes an important part of weaving the fabric of history and historical thought. Much of what is historical in Vrindavan is not only remembered, but is also being lived on a regular basis. There is a continuous invocation of the past, which is relived through the many legends and narratives that keep attracting people from all across the world to Vrindavan and Vraj. History of Vrindavan, which is steeped in love, is re-lived every morning everytime that old mother arrives at the doorstep of Radharaman temple waiting to wake up her *lalla*-Krishna and feeding him!



# Vignettes on Nazhu

## The Festival of the Pochury - Naga of Müluori

*Sentila T. Yanger*

Atop the verdant high mountain ranges perched under the shadow of Mount Saramati, the highest peak defining the border between India and Myanmar, lies the old village *Azhiewi-Ri* of the Pochury-Naga of Müluori/Meluri, Nagaland. Here stands one of the last bastions of the *Laniri Nale Kütsotü* (believers of the indigenous faith), practitioners of the primeval faith of the Pochury-Naga.

### Origin Narratives on Müluori

In the oral narratives of *Müluori*, the people who migrated to their present habitat from Rengma area in the distant past, is a tradition well entrenched in their oral history. The legendary narratives mention of an incident on a day, when the women folk were drying paddy in their courtyards, a white stag (*akhruo*) appeared in the middle of the village and bolted across several bamboo mats before escaping into the wild. On seeing this, a few men who were home that day came together to give chase and stalk the strange animal. After three days of relentless chase, whenever the exhausted hunters considered giving up, the elusive animal would reappear intermittently within striking range and the chase would once again resume drawing them further afield. At the end of the third day, the weary hunters were met by their families, who had trailed them hard on their heels with food and drinks. The tired party rested there for some time and henceforth, the place is named *Riehze*, meaning “to lodge” or “to relax”. However, the inhospitable condition created by the presence of ants forced them to abandon the place. *Riehze* was later nicknamed *Mietsaluo* meaning

“ant’s field” or “ant’s ground”. What is today the original settlement of the present *Müluori* village, the scouting party found groves of bamboo in the vicinity. In the folk narratives it further tells the story of chopping the bamboo down to get a better view of the surrounding landscape. To their utter astonishment grains of paddy gushed forth from the chopped hollowed bamboo. True to its name, that particular species of bamboo is called *Atsuo* meaning paddy. In connection to this phenomenon the people named themselves as *Müluori*, which literally means “people of abundance, plentiful or bountiful”. A *Hieüh* (stone monument) at the highest point in the village center *Hiezü* marks the site commemorating the founding of *Müluori*.

Several groups of people also migrated to *Müluori* after the first Rengma settlers established the village. Some of the other people who arrived after the Rengmas were *Sapo*, *Khury* and *Küjury*. In due course of time they became bona fide citizens of *Müluori*. Though different cultures had merged and evolved into a common identity as people of one village, traces of their cultural distinctiveness are still conspicuous in the forms of folk tunes, folklores, organization of clans, and use of personal and family names. The people of *Müluori* were animist practitioners of *Laniri Nale Kütsotü* before the advent of Christianity in 1946. Today the majority of the Pochury-Naga of *Müluori* professes Christianity.

The belief by the *Laniri Nale* (animist practitioner) in one Supreme Being who is omnipresent and omnipotent



The Hieüh commemorates the founding of Müluori

is reverently addressed as *Nyi Nyiaza Küjiwa*. In the conventional expression of the name *Nyi*, is a courteous form of address used in addressing the grandfather. It connotes the highest degree of respect and honour in social and kinship relationship. In the same way *Küjiwa* means ‘the Great One’ referring to the greatness of *Nyiaza* who is God himself. All prayers are addressed to *Nyiaza* alone and when prayers are offered the name *Nyi Nyiaza Küjiwa* is called. In that sense, *Nyiaza* enjoys the exclusive prerogative of worship and reverence by the people. For example, before every meal a prayer would be offered, “You are the first to eat and drink, may you shower your blessings upon us”, and then a portion of beverage and victuals are placed on the ground as offering to him. The attribution of a human form or personality to a god in the analogical association of *Nyiaza* with a wide variety of natural phenomenon, elements, matters, rituals and beliefs is indicative of its transcendent and inherent nature that diffuse itself into the entire cosmos.

There are many festivals in the agrarian calendar of *Müluori* but the festival of Nazhu Khou is the most important and celebrated by both Christians and animist believers of the ancestral faith. In the traditional past, the announcement of Nazhu Khou festival would be made known on the last day, when the feast of merit was performed. After the feast,

the dates for the Nazhu Khou Festival was announced not necessarily coinciding with the present schedule. Nowadays, the dates for Nazhu Khou festival are fixed with collective consultations by the village community, hence 20<sup>th</sup> February is the fixed date for the Christian majority to start the preparations for the festivities. The small community of the *Laniri Nale*, however, observes Nazhu Khou according to their primordial schedule from 24<sup>th</sup> February to 5<sup>th</sup> March.

### **Nazhu Khou - Festival**

The Nazhu Khou (festival) of the Pochury-Naga of *Müluori*, is a ten-day event from 24<sup>th</sup> February to 5<sup>th</sup> March, and observed in all its primeval rituals and ceremonial practices by a small group of 28 households, who barely manage keep alive the ancestral faith. Early Christians of *Müluori*, disassociated from observing Nazhu, because their belief in the Christian credo conflicted with that of their primordial past. However, in the last few years, the mainstream Christian community of *Müluori* has loosened its grip, and revitalized the celebration and recognition of Nazhu Khou as a cultural heritage to be safeguarded in their present worldview. The festival is celebrated without observing the animistic rituals. On the other hand, the practitioners of the ancestral religion remain steadfast and celebrate Nazhu Khou as decreed in their primordial ethos.

In the days leading to the festival, the community members of the *Laniri Nale* start the preparations for the festival. Once Nazhu festival begins, all domestic chores, weaving, craftwork, fieldwork, making rice wine and carrying of firewood are considered a taboo.

Therefore, women pound huge quantities of rice and millet for consumption and make large quantities of rice brew to last the festival period. Men do not stay idle and craft new bamboo mugs for drinking rice beer and engage



Women stock up and carry fire wood



Pounding large quantities of rice and millet at the village square



Artisan engaged in basketry

in basketry work for sale, gifting, as well as for field use to replace old ones. All these activities stop on the eve of Nazhu Khou, and are resumed once again when the festival ends - ten days later.

Nazhu Khou is marked with festivities, feasting, songs and dance, playing indigenous games such as, tug of war, between the male members and their female counterparts of the village, *khels* (sectors), conduct of rituals, and *genna* (taboo) observation periods to purify the self and



Crafting bamboo rice beer mug and finished products.



Weaver at the loom

collective habitat defined with various functions and stages of preparation. The most symbolic and unique element common to all, is heralding in of Nazhu Khou with the erection of a bamboo totem called *Awuthrüu*, that resembles a wind chime hung from a tall bamboo. In Christian homes the totem is erected between the 20<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> February. For the *Laniri Nale* (animist believers), the totem goes up on the 24<sup>th</sup> February, after all the rituals demanded for this day has been completed.

Erecting the wind chime *Awuthrüu* is an intrinsic signature of Nazhu festival and eligible only to households where there is a male child or boy till the age of 14-15 years. The *Awuthrüu* allude to a male head count and sends out a signal in the collective habitat registry with a message to say - '*here is a resident who can be accounted for in the male head count*'. In the primordial past, the erecting of *Awuthrüu* also sent a message to the enemies of *Müluori*, to take heed that the village had the potential of future warriors. This came as a powerful statement at a period in the early history of the community as well as other communities, when enemy raids and death from epidemics were factors that kept the population growth rate at a low count. Men who had taken enemy head trophies were not eligible to erect the totem because in their act of valour they had attained the status of merit.

### Crafting the *Awuthrüu*

The totem is made from a straight and tall bamboo having no imperfections. Only men go into the forest to select the perfect bamboo plant. After a bamboo is selected it is chopped down, trimmed of ancillary branches with the tapering end of the bamboo left intact to hang *Awuthrüu*, the wind chime.

The *Awuthrüu* is made from *atheku* a dried hollowed gourd, with the bottom sliced in half to create an inverted bowl. On the tapering half of the gourd, several holes are drilled around the circumference where tubes of *aluoti* similar to



Selection and harvesting of the bamboo



Returning with the harvested bamboo



Three generations of a family returning home with a bamboo to hang the *Awuthrüu*

elephant grass reeds, and measuring approximately 8-10 inches in length is attached with bamboo twine to dangle around it.

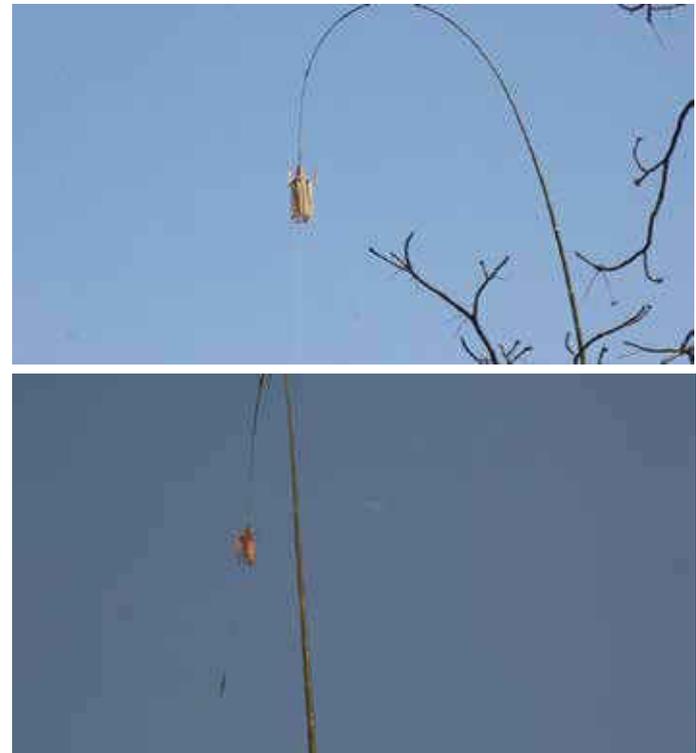
Right down the center of the gourd hangs an *awakhu*, an elongated diamond shaped pendant cut out from two overlapping bamboo bark and stitched together with



*Various stages of crafting the Awuthrüu*

a thin bamboo twine. To give the chime a balance, two bamboo sticks are inserted at the tapering end of the gourd in a cross section, with two reeds attached to the four ends to further give it equal balance. When the pole is erected, the wind chime is steered by the *awakhu* as it twirls widely in all directions in the passing breeze. The Pochury of *Müluori*, allude to the chimes of the reeds clubbed with the twirling movement of the *Awuthrüu* – ‘the dance of the male child’.

In the evening, the families who have erected *Awuthrüu* after all the house work is done, will offer food to *Nyi*



*Awuthrüu swaying in the wind*

*Nyiaza Küjiwa* the Supreme being, by tying food offerings wrapped in *arunga* leaf on the totem. Each parcel contains sticky rice and 6 pieces of pork fat. Prayers for blessings are

invoked to the Supreme being as the food offerings are tied to the totem. Depending on the number of male children in the family meriting it, that many parcel offerings of *Nyiazakhuo küthuo* to mean - ' hanging of *Nyiaza* (God's) basket' is offered to *Nyi Nyiaza Küjiwa* the Supreme being. It is important to the animist believers that the erection of the totem is completed by the 24 th of February.



*Road leading to the old village of Müluori, with several wind chimes against the skyline*

Although Christians put up the bamboo chime *Awuthrüü*, they disassociate from the rituals of food offerings but participate in the symbolism the totem stands for- a male head count registry in the collective habitat and ushering in of *Nazhu Khou* festival. The ten day festival continues with specific functions to celebrate in dance and song, feasting, merry-making, observation of taboo periods, until the last day when the head man of the *Laniri Nale* announces the new site for the year's cultivation and the festival draws to an end. The *Awuthrüü* is brought down with the end of the festivities until the next *Nazhu Khou*.

# Where the God's go Visiting

*Uma Devi Jadhav*

From the famous Kullu Dussera where all the deities of the valley congregate to pay their respects to Lord Rama to the Renuka fair in Sirmaur where it is believed Parashuram, an incarnation of Vishnu comes to visit his mother Renuka every year, to yet another important fair held at the 16th century Bhoot Nath temple in Mandi, that celebrates Mahashivratri every February in honour of Himachal's presiding deity, Lord Shiva. Where all the god and goddesses come to pay homage to HIM; to the 15th May birthday celebrations of the demon queen and Bhima's wife, Hidimba in her 24 meter tall multi-tiered wooden tower temple at Dhungri at the edge of the forest in Manali- The God's go visiting!

In this abode of the god's, each village has a presiding *Devi* or *Devta* and sometimes a *Rishi*. There are also several *Shakti peeths* like the Jwalamukhi, Bhimkali and Chintpurni in Kangra where according to our legends it is believed Sati's tongue, forehead and ear fell. Naina devi,



an incarnation of goddess Durga in Bilaspur is where another ear is supposed to have fallen.

There are temples dedicated to Hanuman - the Jakhoo temple in Shimla where, the Vayuputra had stopped on his way to fetch the Sanjeevani herb that saved the life of Bhagvan Rama's beloved brother Laxman. It is here that rishi Yaaku had briefed him on the location of the rare Himalayan herb. The Sankat Mochan in Shimla was also set up by Neem Karoli Baba. What keeps these temples alive are the beliefs of the simple yet sturdy village folk who collectively make these gorgeous temples, which have a distinct architectural style suitable to the terrain.

Hidimba temple with the backdrop of the Dhungri forest, Manu Rishi's temple at Shanishar and Tripura Sundari mandir at Nagar are elaborate multi-tiered temples that dot the Beas valley in Kullu. Quaint temples like the Gayatri Mandir at Jagatsu and those of Gautam Rishi and Nag Devta at Goshal village are simple structures built on a stone plinth with a gable roof. But the power they emanate as you step in cannot be described. The canopied roof is very popular made from locally sourced deodar wood and some of the temples have several floors. Food grains of the village are invariably stored in the bottom floor; where cattle are also tied in the winter months and the priests live above. The god's reside on the topmost floor under the canopy - their chambers seem as if they are floating in the clouds.

Legends can be heard till date about how the Pandavas roamed in the Panduroopa range of mountains and made the little stone Gaurishankar temple with their own hands.

The only temple dedicated to Manu, believed to be the creator of the human race is in Manali.

Apart from the *shakti peeths* there are interesting tales, which have led to the “sthapanas” of ancient Devi temples in this land rich in mythological past. At Kothi in Kinnaur is the Chandika temple where four devotees lift the Devi’s idol and constantly dance. The Tara Devi temple near Shimla is 250 years old and a fair is held every *ashtami* day of *Navratri* where wrestling is an important tradition. Ma Sharvari, 5 km from Mandi on the banks of the Beas is the ‘*kuldevi*’ of the Kullu family. This “*roop*” of *Durga* is carried every year to Kullu during Dussera to meet with Raghunathji.

There is of course a pecking order of how the processions will come in at the various temples heralded by the traditional trumpets, cymbals, drums and the camaraderie of the god’s subjects. Seating for the palanquins that arrive is organised just as we read in our ancient scriptures about the heavenly courts. There is also a list of those who do not attend. Rishi Vashisht of Vashisht village known for his miraculous healing power of the sulphur springs does not attend the Dussera festivities ever, to honour Lord Rama, as he is the Lord’s Guru.

Just as we want to live close to our loved ones, the people of Himachal live their daily lives with their Devis and Devtas amidst them and take their gods with them on their visits. Generally only the men go out of town and the Devtas resplendent in their gold crowns, jewellery and finery are carried in colourful palanquins. These processions are fast paced, with music drawing awe, wonderment and curiosity.

With dancing and chanting, music and prayer, the palanquin bearers take turns to carry the god’s tilting and swaying yet wonderfully stable as they race down the slopes. The processions stop at places to rest, sip tea



and water and let the people welcome the god’s and offer their prayers by way of ‘*aartis*’ and *tilaks*. At nightfall the neighbouring villages and towns would welcome the guests and let them stay in their homes and in the village’s common areas. In olden days this was also a way of meeting other villagers, exchanging news, ideas, consulting with village headmen, learning new methods be it about terrace farming or orchards or rearing their animals and generally gathering news of the entire valley to relay back home to eagerly awaiting families. The major fairs held at the temples were also ideal for trading wares, fixing marriage alliances, showcasing new skills, art, discussing and making predictions.

As a child I have always been attracted to Goshal village, across the Vashisht village and a small climb up from the meandering Beas, which has changed course over the years. Now I have realised why a city slicker like me values that village. It’s their ancient custom of prediction- every year during Uttarayan in January the residents close the door of Rishi Gautam’s temple and put a heap of mud along the ‘*chowkhat*’-door frame. After this there has to be no sound in the village- everyone observes silence, complete silence! All residents talk in whispers, even at home, no switching on of radios in those days and after

the advent of television none of that too. Vehicles didn't come, as there was no road, so the noise was less. There is no construction activity to be done, no hammering of nails – the village seems eerie and dead but the people are happy, contented and glowing.

Then at the appointed date and time the door is opened and in the heap of mud lies their future. This simple heap foretells the year ahead of them- condition of their crops, impending floods, earthquakes and landslides. Here is ancient seismology in action, no use for expensive high tech equipment. Earth tells you how earth is going to behave if you just care to listen and observe are the belief and legend here.

Today Goshal's world is changing as there is major planning to make roads, on which there is so much congestion, that road rage will soon become the norm. Rishi Gautam can only look on helplessly as tourists will walk up or drive in large numbers and loudly demand comforts and litter

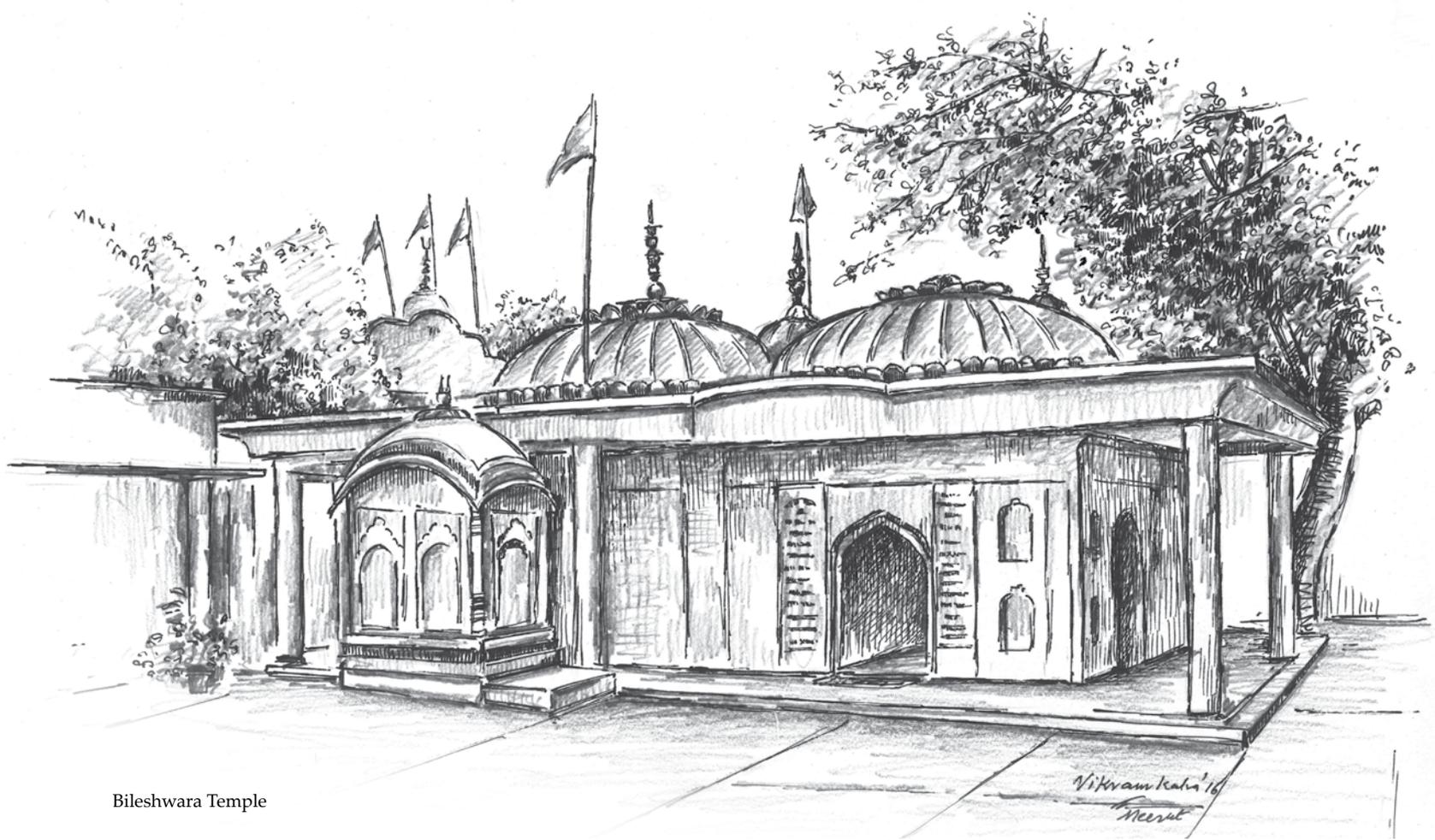


as if they own the Himalayan range. Since the village is quiet, with zero noise pollution levels, the supposedly discerning will pompously demand to know rates of land so that plotting can start and change the very ethos of this once quaint place on earth.



In other parts the god's shall continue to visit in their palanquins- no longer carried lovingly by their subjects but seated on loading autos and 4 wheel drive vehicles that jostle with the utter chaos of the streets. The trumpets announcing their arrival shall have to compete with the horns of their modern 'vahans'. Resting places shall no longer be in mutually reciprocated homes of the villages they pass but in rest houses and seedy hotels catering side by side to tourists coming for salvation to a *Dev Bhumi* that they can no longer find.

The closeness the people of Himachal felt for each other, the selfless way in which, they helped the visitors stuck due to landslides no longer holds as news is flashed on television and not through word of mouth. Help is not sought from people who are busy filming a drowning person or car rolling off a cliff but by holding on to the new God of the modern age – the wonderful Iphone manned by the yakshas in the avatars called Reliance, Idea, Vodafone, Airtel and promise to let us all Jio while making a movie of us all dying.



Bileshwara Temple

## Mayarashtra Myths and Stories on Meerut

*Vikram Kalra*

It is said that the city of Meerut was established by demon king Maya who named it Mayarashtra. Maya was the father of Mandodari, consort of Ravan, the demon king of Lanka. According to legends, the Bileshwara temple of Lord Shiva dates back to the Ramayana period. It was at this temple that Mandodri, the wife of demon king Ravana, used to worship. Maya is also said to be an architect of

the demons. There are certain areas of Meerut, which are still known as *Mahidant-ka-Khera*. The present day temple is situated at the Bhinsali grounds of Meerut. At that time, this area was a forest, which was covered with *Bilav* trees. It is also said that Mandodari, met Ravan for the first time at this temple.

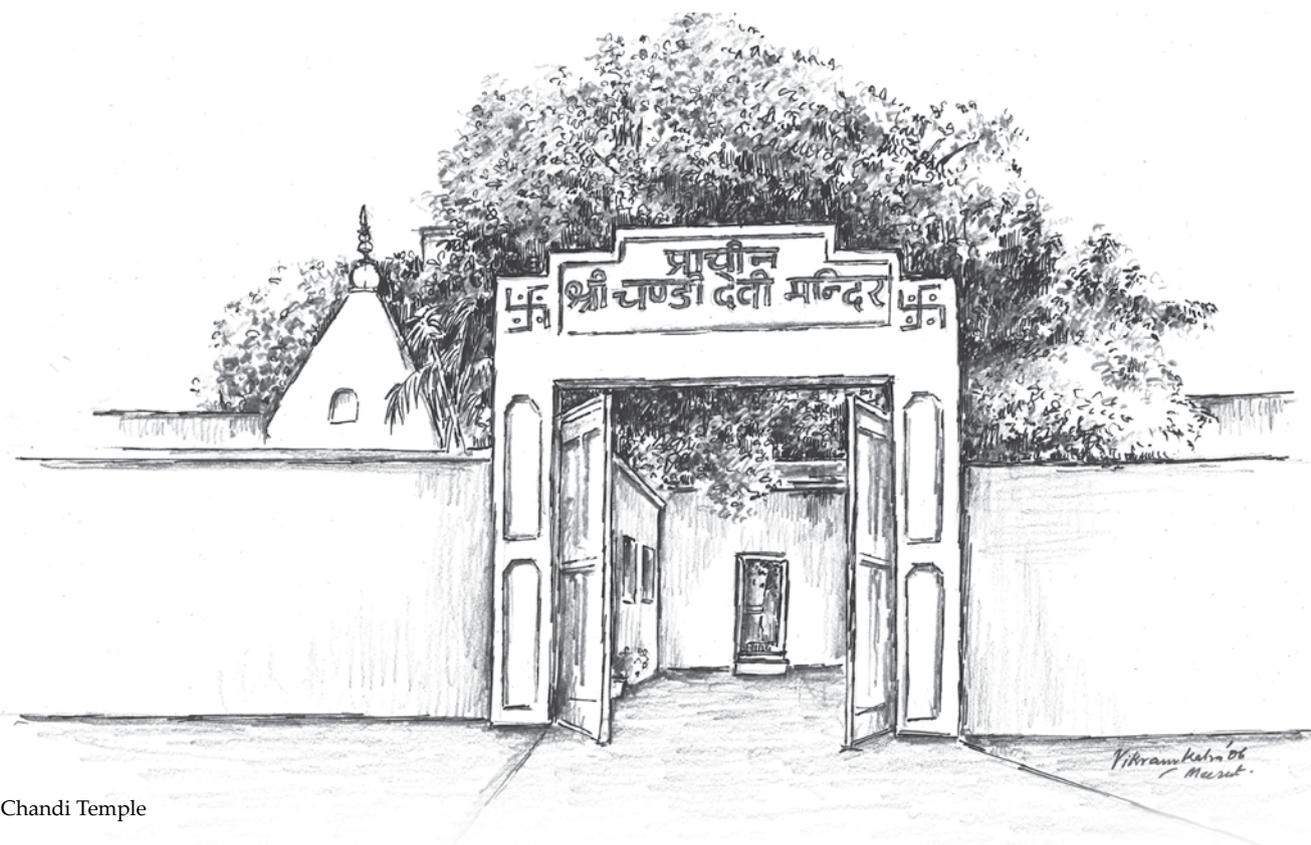
The temple of Nav Chandi is also said to be established by Mandodri. The famous *Nauchandi mela* happens around this temple on the second Sunday after Holi. The history behind the *Nauchandi mela* is debatable; some say that it began as a cattle fair way back in 1672; others suggest a British revenue-collection fair as the precursor of the *mela*. Many Hindu devotees believe that it is a festival to commemorate the building of this temple in Meerut. This is one of the biggest, most colourful and interesting fairs, which is held on a 4 sq km area.

Gagol is one of the two places of pilgrimage in Meerut. It is believed that Sage Vishwamitra had performed his *yajna* in this village, near the pond. As he was not able to perform his *yajna* due to the terror of the demons, he asked King Dasharatha, father of Lord Rama and Lakshmana to send

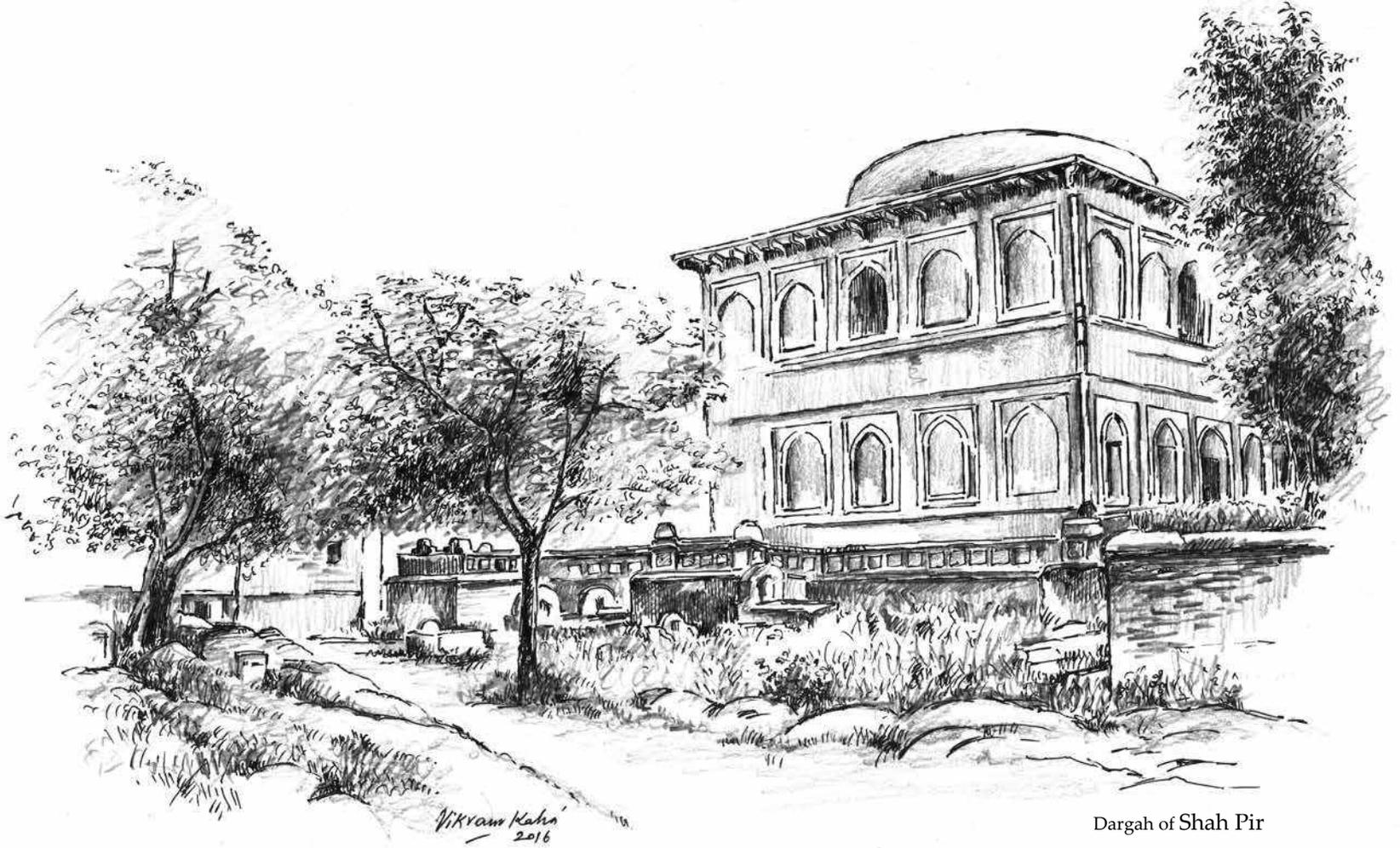
them for help. The two brothers destroyed the demons and the *yajna* was completed.

Another such village, Baleni near Meerut is the place where Sita, wife of Lord Rama lived in exile with her two sons Luv and Kush in the ashram of Mahrishi Valmiki the author of epic Ramayana. Numerous ancient burnt bricks with religious motifs engraved on them are strewn all around the temple dedicated to Valmiki. According to the local tradition, the village has five guardian deities.

Meerut was also known as Mai Rashtra, the name given to it by Mai, a distinguished architect of King Yudhishtira. Mai built *Andar Kot*, a brick fortress, the remains of which are still traceable. In Mahabharata, 'Mai' has been mentioned as a renowned city planner and architect of Indraprastha. He



Nav Chandi Temple



Dargah of Shah Pir

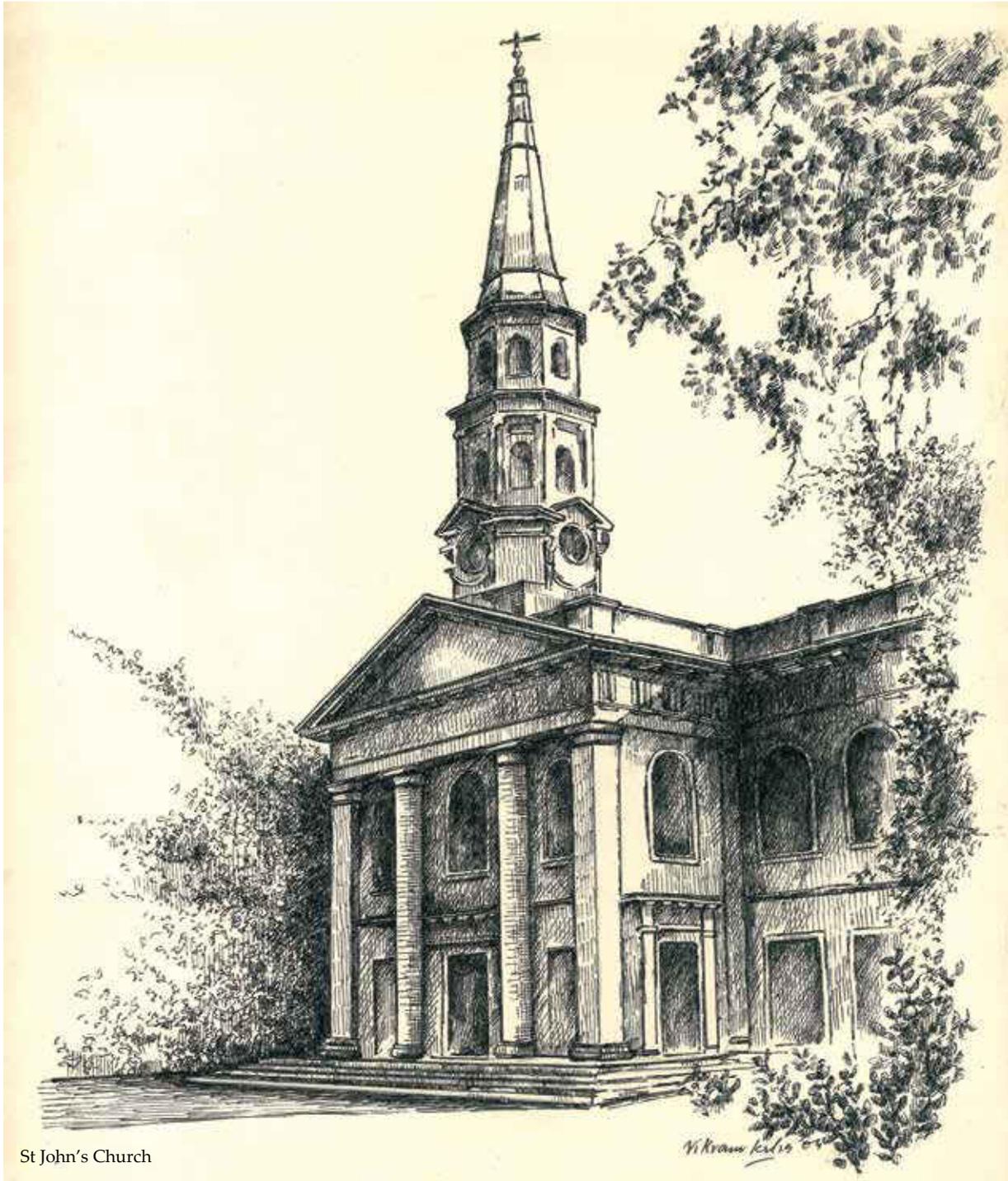
designed unique assembly halls and other regal buildings in Indraprastha for King Yudhishtira and in appreciation of his workmanship, King Yudhishtira gifted him a piece of land. With passage of time, Mai Rashtira came to be known as Meerut.

Mai Rashtira was a vedic town, which served as a stopover station between Indraprastha and Hastinapura. The *Kurus* abandoned it in favour of Kaushambhi near Prayag. It finds mention among sixteen *Mahajanapadas*, and Hastinapur is also mentioned in the list of ten capital cities of ancient India.

In Mahabharata the *Kaurava* prince, Duryodhan had built a *Lakshgriha* (wax house) to kill the *Pandavas*. "The

*Lakhsagraha Kaand*" happened at a place called Varnavata, this city was later called Barnawa. To avoid the battle, *Pandavas* had asked the *Kauravas* for five villages, Varnavata being one of them. This is the place where one can still see the canal made by *Pandavas* to protect themselves from *Kauravas* and enjoy the tracks to ride on the small mound.

The small town of Parikshitgarh near Meerut was the capital of King Parikshit, the grandson of Arjuna who ascended the throne of Hastinapur after the *Pandavas* decided to renounce the kingship. King Parikshit incurred the wrath on Sage Shamik by garlanding the Sage with a dead serpent and he was then cursed by the Sage to die by a snake bite. After his ordained death by the fangs of *Takshak Naga*, his son Janmejaya became the King and held



St John's Church

great sacrifice to annihilate the *Nagas* out of the passionate feelings of revenge.

Hastinapur, located near Meerut was the capital of the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas*. Here, Yudhishtir lost his brothers and Draupadi along with his wealth in the game of gamble. It was here that Krishna had visited the court of Dhritrashtra being a peace messenger of the *Pandavas* and after winning the Mahabharata, *Pandavas* made Hastinapur their capital.

It is also said that Lord Mahavira had visited Kuru's capital city and had preached its king Shivaraja. During the time of King Ashoka in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, Buddhism also flourished here. It is said that Mairashtra was transformed into a flourishing Buddhist town, which played host to Lord Buddha. Emperor Ashoka, in recognition of its rich Buddhist past, installed a *Dhamma Stambh* to immortalize the visit of his master Buddha to this town; henceforth, the city was known as 'Mirath' in Buddhist Literature. Buddhist documents state that Hastinapur was the capital city of Kururattanam and it soon became a flourishing area. Lord Buddha is reported to have graced Mairashtra. The Buddhist Mirath was located around the *Dhamma Stambh*, the area now occupied by *Kotwali* in Subhas bazaar.

Emperor Harshavardhan (606-647 C.E.) was the last Buddhist ruler of north India. Meerut passed into the hands of Hindu *Rajas* from Tomar and Chauhan dynasties. A few pagodas survived among rubble as late as 1858. The existence of this pillar or *Ashoka Stambh* and the discovery of Buddhist remains within the city leave little room for doubt that Meerut was an important centre of Buddhism during Ashoka's reign.

The Jats of this area say that it was founded by one of their clansman and some people also believe that King Mahipal of Delhi named this place. Its documented history is available from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC.

Muslim historian Firishta writes that Mahmud Ghazni attacked Meerut in 1017. Raja Hardatt paid a large sum of money as penalty and thus Meerut survived the fury of Mahmud. The third attack on Meerut was by Qutub-ud-din Aibak. Meerut had a fort known for its strength. This fort was captured and a *Kotwal* was appointed to take charge the fort, and all the idol temples were converted into mosques. Baley Miyan was the commander of Qutub-ud-din Aibak. He later left his job with the ruler and became a holy man. After his death, his *Dargah* was built by Qutub-ud-din Aibak in 1194 and many worshippers pay visit to the *Dargah* regularly. During the *Navchandi* fair a *Urus* is organised every year at the *Dargah*.

The *Dargah* of 'Hazrat Bale Mian', and the Temple of 'Navchandi Devi' are situated in such a position that they face each other. From the ancient times, the *Baley Miyan Dargah* and the *Navchandi* fair acts as a mark of unity between two religions.

Meerut was again attacked and captured by Taimur in 1399. Later, it passed into the hands of Lodhis and then the Mughals. During the days of Akbar, Meerut was a part of *Subah* of Delhi and the Mughals established a mint of copper coins here. During the reign of Emperor Jahangir, Meerut was a favourite place of Queen Nur Jahan. She was a devotee of Shah Pir, a noted saint of Meerut. As a mark of royal favour, in 1620 she built a mausoleum in honour of the saint.

From the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 to the British conquest in 1803, Meerut remained in a state of permanent anarchy. The historical city of Meerut is about 80 kms from Delhi in the state of Uttar Pradesh. It lies in the Upper Ganga-Yamuna Doab. Meerut and the territories of Saharanpur, Muzaffarnagar, Bulandshahr, Aligarh and beyond were ceded to the East India Company by Daulat Rao Scindia of Gwalior on 30<sup>th</sup> December, 1803. The Company established its garrison here in 1806.

In May 1857, the troops stationed here had a higher proportion of British soldiers than any other cantonment in India. The 6<sup>th</sup> Dragoon Guards, H M's 60<sup>th</sup> Rifles, a light field battery and a party of Horse Artillery. The Native Troops consisted of 3<sup>rd</sup> Native Light Cavalry, 11<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Native Infantry and some sappers and miners.

Rumours were rife in Sadar Bazar and among the native soldiers that the new cartridges were greased with the fat of cows and pigs, and the flour sold in cantonment

shops was mixed with powdered bones. The Hindu and Muslim troops of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry assembled for mutual consultations at the Gol Bhatta. They took oath in the name of Holy Ganga and the Quran respectively not to use the cartridges. This cavalry unit had several battle honours to its credit.

Col G M Carmichael Smyth issued an order on 23<sup>rd</sup> April, 1857 for a parade to teach the troops the mode of tearing instead of biting the new cartridges. Out of the 90 sepoy

St John's Church Cemetery



present, only 5 of them took the cartridges; the remaining 85 refused. The Colonel dismissed the parade. The martial court was held on 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> May where all the 85 sepoys were convicted and sentenced imprisonment with hard labour. A punishment parade was held on 9<sup>th</sup> May, and the soldiers were stripped of their uniforms. Each sepoy was heavily ironed and shackled and were paraded in the city and later sent to jail.

Mees Dolly was a European woman and a widow of a sergeant in the Bengal Army. She ran a refreshment shop in Sadar Bazar of the cantonment. She and her girls had come unofficially to be recognized as regimental women of the Light Cavalry. On the evening of 9<sup>th</sup> May, Mess Dolly's girls did not extend the usual welcome to the troops; instead, they taunted and sneered at their manhood. They told these sepoys to go and rescue their comrades who had been imprisoned. This incident has been distinctly stated by J.C. Wilson in his 'Moradabad Report'. Later, she hid herself in Babugarh, but was caught and hanged in Meerut on charges of 'egging on the Mutineers'.

On 10<sup>th</sup> May, 1857, the British troops and their families had gone to St John's Church in the Cantonment. The sepoys went there and killed almost all the Europeans who had assembled for the prayer. After that day went in the streets of sadar bazar area and later got all their comrades released from the Jail. This incident in Meerut in 1857 was the beginning of the first war of Independence in India.

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# The Nyash Taranga of Bengal

## A Lost Musical Instrument

*Prabhat K. Ghosh*

Thanks to All India Radio (AIR), classical Indian music received a fresh lease of life and national following. Earlier, practitioners were mostly dependent on royal patronage, whether under Moghul rule, or of selected native states, the audience confined to courtiers, landowners and rich merchants, with the *aam janta* getting mere rare glimpses, depending instead on the popular forms of folk and religious songs. AIR by virtue of its hugely popular programmes, could reach a very wide circle of music-lovers. This accounts for the survival and documentation of various schools of Hindustani music, particularly the variant forms of the ragas linked to different schools.

There was further infusion of energy when the Festival of India held in different countries, took off, with the Prime Minister's active sanction and the pioneering work of Mr. S.K. Misra, the Festival Director General at the time. But for this, certain art forms would have become extinct, an example being *Pandavra*, a form of mono acting which would hardly have been known outside certain areas of Chattisgarh. Various other art and music forms also revived and got recognition.

However, some musical traditions did not get this opportunity and were extinguished before Government initiatives took centre-stage.

The present write-up is about one such musical instrument of Bengal, totally forgotten in this century. Its name is *Nyash Taranga*. Once a ready choice for classical performances by

the musicians of the *Bishnupur Gharana*, the *Nyash Taranga* is now a distant memory. The instrument faded out in the year 1980, with the death of its last recognized exponent.

The instrument was considered important enough to be selected for the presentation of a recital before His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales, when he came to India in December 1921. It will be interesting to quote the programme schedule as published in the Government Gazette at that time.

*"Nash Tarangaa:- To be played by Professor Satya Kinkar Banerjee of Bistoopore, Bengal."*

*The Nash Tarangaa is a peculiar instrument. It has to be placed on the throat, upon the vocal chords, and produces a clear reedy note. It is believed that an instrument of this description is scarcely to be found in any other part of the world."*

Incidentally the spelling of the name of the instrument given in that gazette notification is based on local pronunciation and not on the spelling warranted by any Sanskrit dictionary.

The Bangla Academy of Bangladesh has published an encyclopedia of music known as *Sangeet Kosh*. There is an entry on *Nyash Taranga* in the collection. The writer has provided some explanations for the name, *Nyash Taranga*. It is mentioned that earlier there was a convention of ending the rendering of a particular Raga, at a particular note fixed for it. The word *Nyash* signifies staying fixed at a particular note for a while. A characteristic of *Drupad*, one of the forms

of Hindustani music, is the steady development of the raga in a slow tempo, which distinctly presents each note without any overshadow of any other note or what is called “*Kan*”. Therefore, the element of *Nyash* was quite predominant in the *Drupad* genre.

*Nyash Taranga* might have had its origin in this aspect of Drupad music. The fact that the *Bishnupur Gharana* was famous for the cultivation of *Drupad* as a musical genre also points towards the instrument being important for this *gharana*.



The *Nyash Taranga* was always played in a pair. Each is a conical horn-shaped structure, with a hollow bore of small radius. The narrow end has the shape of a tiny bowl, generally made of German Silver, with a pouch attached to it. This pouch is supposed to have been made from the organic

material in which spider eggs are encased, biologically called a spider egg sac.

From historical accounts, it is known that the two horns were placed firmly on the throat of the artist, on either side of the Adam’s apple in close proximity to the vocal chords. The artist would then hum the notes, producing music through the *Nyash Taranga* which by virtue of its unique construction changed it tonally, and provided a different musical performance. This was an independent instrument, and not an accompanying one as the *Sarangi* is.

In Indian musicology, musical instruments have been divided broadly under three categories:

*Ataddha* - percussion instruments,  
*Anaddha* - strumming instruments,  
*Sushira* - wind instruments.

The *Nyash Taranga* has been put under the third category. Questions may be raised about its categorization, because of its process of musical delivery. It is not played with the power of the lungs. Nor does it have fissures for the production of different notes. The instrument’s role is to transmute the humming of its exponent, taking cues from the vibrations of the vocal chords.

Pramit Maitra, a young friend, who is a bright physicist, as well as a trained classical musician, has provided some clarificatory observations.

A look at the instrument immediately makes clear the fact that it cannot be classified as a traditional wind instrument. Wind instruments are used to produce music by the player modulating the length of the air column within the instrument, and by closing different holes, say in a flute, or by manipulating the valves of a trumpet, to produce different notes. The artist’s musical skill lies in blowing into such an instrument, and changing the air pressure by

using the fingers to adjust the instrument's capability. These instruments have parts which can be adjusted to produce different notes emanating from the musical instrument itself. In the case of the *Nyash Taranga*, there is no scope for modulation of the instrument. The modulation occurs in the vocal cords of the artist, and the instrument amplifies the humming of the artist, although imparting a distinct quality to the final sound produced.

The closest categorization that can be thought of, for the *Nyash Taranga*, is a class of instruments known as idiophones - musical instruments that create sound primarily by the instrument vibrating as a whole. One such instrument which is widely popular in Carnatic circles, called the *Morching*, can be used for comparison.

Keeping this in mind, we may explore a few questions regarding the functioning of this instrument:

1. Why are there specifically two horn-like structures?
2. What is the role of the pouch attached at the narrow end, which is placed on the throat of the artist?

One argument for having specifically two horns could be purely for the symmetry of input and output. Since the thyroid gland sits right in the middle of the throat, and the vocal cords are behind it, one would imagine that it would be impossible to place a single horn on the centre of the throat, to produce loud enough sound. The two regions on either side of the gland provide more access to the instrument to pick up the vibrations from the artist's throat, and thereby they project the sound symmetrically to the audience. One should keep in mind the absence of electronic amplification, using microphones, in the period when this instrument was prevalent, and that the volume of the music produced was an important factor to be considered for performances.

Another possible reason for having two horns may be explored by examining the structural similarity of the two

horns. It is possible that the two horns were supposed to produce a stereo effect, one of them picking up the base frequencies and the other one amplifying the treble. This can be confirmed by checking if there is any difference in the radius of the bores in each horn, or the length of the horns.

The function of the pouch is also an interesting question to take up. It appears to be playing a role similar to that of the eardrum, picking up minute vibrations, and passing them on to the air column within the instrument for amplification. This can be confirmed by further study of the mechanical properties of the material, specifically its stress-strain curve, and its response to vibrations over the range of frequencies producible by human vocal cords.

We have the following names of accomplished players of *Nyash Taranga* - Gopeshwar Bandyopadhyay, Surendra Bandopadhyay and Satya Kinkar Bandopadhyay - all belonging to the same family from Bisnupur. There are two other names, one being Neelmadhav Chakraborty and the other Aftabuddin Khan, brother of the legendary Allaundin Khan. Satya Kinkar Bandopadhyay was the last known exponent of this art form. The use of this instrument faded away after his death in the year 1980.

There are some predominant reasons for the demise of this instrument, chiefly:

- a. It was a difficult instrument to master and perform.
- b. It was widely believed to harm the vocal chords.
- c. Electronic and mechanical means of amplification may have hastened its neglect, and obscured the fact of its unique timbre.

There are other instruments that are becoming rare. Amongst these, three are worth a mention here.:

- a. The North Indian *Veena* - an instrument that is difficult to make and even more difficult to play.

- b. *Sarangi* - an instrument with a falling number of exponents.
- c. *Pakhwaz* - though it had become unpopular, this instrument has recently shown signs of revival because of vocalists wanting to use it alongside the Tabla to get a deeper bass.



A forgotten instrument with its lost music, the *Nyash Taranga* serves to remind us of the likely demise of other musical traditions. Research is necessary to trace the history of its evolution and the reasons for its fading out. The study of its rise and flowering in Bishnupur, which is not even a district town (with due credit going to the patronage of the then ruling Malla Deb royal family), and the *Nyash Taranga's* subsequent extinction, will hold salutary lessons for other musical traditions desperately needing to be preserved. We do not know much about the geographical areas to which this instrument had travelled, or whether it can be revived, but hopefully there will be some work on this in the future.

Today, the *Nyash Taranga* has almost assumed the character of a myth, with its strange, in fact unique, form and use, finding mention in the recorded past, but without any living exponent. We need to keep alive its memory and history and to draw the necessary lessons that will contribute to preserving other traditions that face extinction. Each death of one of our myriad traditions, impinges on the inherent richness of Indian classical music and reduces its depth.

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Inputs from Pramit Maitra, Physicist and Musician.

# Craft Shakti

## Tagore's Legacy at a Time of Crisis & Opportunity

*Ashoke Chatterjee*

Thirty years ago the Crafts Council of India (CCI) held its 1986 National Meet at Visva-Bharati in Santiniketan, as a gesture of respect to a profoundly influential craft ethos. Perhaps CCI was also in search of tranquility in a turbulent year that had altered India's history: the siege of the Golden Temple and injustice to Shah Bano. Gurudev's vision of an India unbroken by "narrow domestic walls" seemed then, as now, to be under siege. All these years later, India's artisans and their crafts are in crisis as well as on the cusp of new opportunities.

Artisanal wisdom and skill were central to the vision on which Visva-Bharati, Sriniketan and Shilpa Sadan were founded by Tagore. India's craft renaissance began there, and also at some distance away in Sabarmati Ashram. Dialogue between the Mahatma and Gurudev on India's craft heritage reflected their concepts of freedom and modernity and the catalytic role, which hand production would come to play in the struggle for independence. When freedom came, Nehru integrated crafts into development planning, the first demonstration of its kind anywhere.

### **A Sunset Syndrome**

To succeeding generations, including activists and craft communities brought together by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and others, artisans and craft were as indelible as the tri-colour. Then about a decade ago, something changed. Craft heritage was rapidly becoming an empty mantra. From high places CCI was told that hand-made products and their makers comprised a

"sunset industry". Indeed, India's global image of handicraftsmanship had become an embarrassment, akin perhaps to snake charming. Progress was now imaged as Singapore or Silicon Valley, and handicrafts were clearly out of step. Let them fade gently into the night as artisans are turned to contemporary 'sunrise' callings that better embrace Silicon Valley aspirations. The shock of these new attitudes was profound. India had demonstrated that crafts were not just beautiful products, but a strength that had helped topple an empire and had then demonstrated a creativity that helped communicate India's message to the world. Acknowledged as the second largest source of Indian livelihood, artisans also represent communities and locations still at the margins of development. To what alternative occupations can these multitudes flock? New technologies have demonstrated models of jobless growth. The IT industry, so ingrained in that Silicon Valley mindset, represents less than 3M jobs. If not food and hand production, what else can India suggest as a future path for millions?

Against such speculation, a penny dropped. Neither Government nor activists had an accurate idea of the size and economic significance of the sector activists wanted to protect. Without robust data, dismissive attitudes could flourish and disastrous decisions made with impunity. In 2008 the 'sunset' syndrome brought CCI and partners together at a Kolkata conclave. There Gopalkrishna Gandhi observed that Government's heart could only be influenced through Government's mind. Without economic evidence,

all other craft arguments social, environmental, cultural, political and even spiritual would fail. The immediate task was to demonstrate craft impact on India's economy. Yet CCI experience had so far been driven by cultural and aesthetic values, not economics. Economists were now needed as partners. Three years followed of research and methodological experimentation in selected locations. Vigorous advocacy of results finally encouraged the national Economic Census 2012 to include artisans and crafts, for the first time ever.

### **“Life in its Completeness”**

While Economic Census numbers are under review, preliminary indications of scale far exceed past official estimates of about 11 million artisans. Some calculations reach over 70 million, others reaching 200 million. Clarity is now expected from a census designed specifically for the hand-production sector. It will go beyond the Economic Census constraint of independent entrepreneurial establishments in the official list of selected crafts. A watershed in sector awareness and action may be ahead. That prospect encourages a re-visit, within a changed India and in another century, of Gurudev's mission of transformational livelihoods.

Tagore rejected progress understood as accumulating material riches. Like Gandhiji, he advocated an ethic of trusteeship: protecting nature's resources for future generations and putting people, particularly the deprived, at the centre of decisions for change. For this, Gurudev advocated an approach to education that “makes our life in sympathy with all existence”. Visva-Bharati, Sriniketan and Shilpa Sadan were expressions of this dream. Its endurance now requires testing relevance in such changed circumstances. Contact with the earth, the element that brought Tagore to Santiniketan is now being lost as the countryside decays and migration thrusts millions into urban slums in search of survival. Village communities

have local as well as urban ambitions, fueled by competing lifestyles. Today's crafts emerge from urban slums as much as they do from rural cottages.

Hazardous notions of progress are imbedded elsewhere as well. One example emerged in the midst of CCI partnership with Economic Census authorities. An unusual directive emerged from the Ministry mandated to protect Indian craft. An electric motor was recommended for handlooms. The stated objective was to improve 'productivity' and 'incomes' for languishing weavers, through handlooms converted into 'modern' power-looms. At one stroke, an astonishing Indian advantage with global demand would be destroyed. Weavers were not fooled by crocodile tears, or by the powerful pro-mechanization lobbies operating from the wings. Throughout the country, weavers rose in revolt. Possibly because a national election was around the corner, this scheme was dropped. Yet the threat remains, reappearing with regularity and most recently with recommendations that jacquard looms should be motorized for 'productivity'.

Secure livelihoods give real meaning to sustainability, as well as to those other qualities that make craft so unique as a development force. Responding to craft threat with craft opportunity demands thorough comprehension of the values upon which Gurudev's efforts were founded. He wanted “to bring life in its completeness into villages”. How can that mission be sustained within rapid urbanization and new aspirations? How can Tagore's ideal of education as 'learning by doing' be taken not just to villages but also to towns and cities? Can handcraft become an engine for self-reliance, with creativity and aesthetics making artisans job creators rather than job seekers? While Gurudev spoke more eloquently on aesthetics, Gandhiji too regarded creation as an art. For both, craft as art had to have profit-yielding livelihood at its base. Tagore wanted handmade products to have economic value “at home and commanding a ready sale outside”, embracing utility

with creativity and drawing for inspiration on universal sources. These early directions need to be remembered because all these years later, limited marketing capacities challenge every craft opportunity. Hand production must be founded on management capacities that can deliver sustainable livelihoods within conditions of constant change and accelerating competition. Yet after a century, the absence of professional marketing systems remains the greatest of all challenges for the future of Indian craft. As early as 1924 Sriniketan was conducting market studies, and by 1937 Netaji had inaugurated a Sriniketan emporium in Calcutta. Aware of competition and change, Tagore and Gandhi understood the need to both respond to demand as well as to create and mould it.

### **Where the Future is Handmade**

At the time CCI and its partners were subjected to that 'sunset' shock, a pleasant surprise emerged from within the European Union. From there, a new slogan had been coined: "The future is handmade". On enquiry, it was explained that survival in today's competitive markets requires creativity and innovation. These resources and capacities are rooted in traditions of craftsmanship, as demonstrated by Japan and the Asian Tigers. Unless revived, the loss of Europe's handicraft traditions could mean sacrificing tomorrow's markets. Another welcome shock was delivered at the World Crafts Council 2014 assembly, held in China. Delegates heard that a decade earlier China had identified two "sunrise industries" as essential to its ambitions of economic power: IT and crafts! The contrast with India, the largest craft resource in the world, could not have been more striking.

### **A Transformational Agenda**

Another opportunity for positioning craft industries comes in 2016 with the ratification by UN members of its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Several of its 17 goals -- integrating economic, social, environmental

and rights issues -- offers an agenda close to Gurudev's acknowledgment of crafts as an opportunity for "life in sympathy and harmony with all existence". The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) thus recall the holistic understanding of human wellbeing that impelled his efforts at Santiniketan. They reflect a growing consensus on progress and modernity understood as decent lives lived out in conditions of equity and justice: "where the mind is without fear and the head is held high". SDGs offer relevance as well as urgency to the vision that created Tagore's institutions. Away from glitzy images of Singapore and Silicon Valley, tomorrow's dreams could be of a major transformation if key issues are confronted with Gurudev's wisdom and courage.

- What is the modernity India should seek in this new millennium?
- What actions can restore crafts as central to Indian wellbeing?
- Can crafts have relevance outside village societies and economies? Can Gurudev's objectives be brought to crowded urban communities?
- How can education help foster a value for crafts within today's attitudes, aspirations and priorities?
- What can be done to provide dignity and respect for artisans and for their wisdom, and for building their capacities as job-makers?
- What collaborations can help move artisans from 'sunset' to 'sunrise', toward a future that is 'handmade in India'?

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# Uncaged Souls

## Roots of Bengal's Folk Culture

*Dipak Rudra*

Sometime in the late 1980s a policeman friend gave me a live recording of the legendary “*quawal*” Zafar Ali Khan Badayuni. The songs were all compositions of the Sufi poet Amir Khusrau, in the Khari-boli of Eastern Uttar Pradesh. One remarkable *quawal* opened with the words “*Kirpa Karo Maharaj*” and went on to allude throughout to the Radha-Krishna motif of divine surrender.

This instance of a syncretic transfer of imagery across faiths is by no means uncommon in the composite culture shared by followers of the two main religions of India. In my part of the country, Bengal undivided and divided, a seamless fusion of religious practices, creative impulses drawn from commonly held beliefs and customs, folklore and oral history, and an overarching interdependence in terms of livelihoods and survival strategies, have developed over more than five centuries. A few illustrations of Bengali heterodoxy would seem appropriate:

In an early Satyajit Ray film, “*Devi*”, a Muslim fakir sits on the steps of a Kali temple, and renders a soulful shyama-sangeet.

Hindu Bauls singing *Marfati* and *Nabir-gaan* (songs in praise of the Prophet) are a regular feature of the Pous *Mela* in Santiniketan and the Ghoshpara *Mela* in Nadia District.

Fisher /folk of both faiths invoke the protection of *Badr-pir* and offer “*Shirni*” to the Five Pirs, before venturing into the Bay of Bengal.

The first preceptor of the boy Gadadhar (Later Shri Ramakrishna Paramahansa of Dakshineswar) was a poor maulvi living in a ruined mosque near Garh Mandaran, in Hooghly district.

Minor deities once worshipped by low-caste Hindus only, like *Manasa* (snake goddess), *Shitala* (protector from small-pox, Ola-bibi to Muslims), *Satyanarayan* (Satya Pir to Muslims), *Bon-Bibi* (forest goddess) and *Dakshin –Ray* (tiger god), are now the common pantheon of marginal Bengalis of both faiths.

Interestingly, after the fall of the Sen dynasty to Bakhtiyar Khilji in 1203, the arrival and succession of the pre-Mughal Muslim rulers, and the stirrings of the Bhakti movement before and after Shri Chaitanya almost co-incided without any major conflict or contradiction. When Hussain Shah held sway in Gour (1494-1519), his generals Roop and Sanatan were in fact both Vaishnavas and their master, who sometimes travelled in the guise of a “*darbesh*”, was reputed to be moved to tears by Vaishnavas poetry.

As in Kashmir, Islam came to Bengal, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century or even earlier, through Sufi Pirs and preachers who taught the rural poor to clear swamps and jungle and till the land, to plant and sow and create settlements, while spreading their message, often musical- of tolerance, equality and a non-intrusive divinity ‘far removed from canonical Islam’. Therefore, it was seen as a benevolent and civilizing force, not necessarily an alternative religion.



After the Mughal conquest of Bengal in the last decades of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, 'Islamization' and 'peasantization' of the rural population proceeded apace, and the installation of maulvis in small mosques in the countryside hastened the process of bloodless conversion. Over the next 150 years or so, Muslims and Hindus lived side by side in relative acceptance of one another, even if the imperative of land revenue collection made the local satraps of the Moghuls seem oppressive and discriminatory. The seizure of effective control by the East India Company after the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and the Permanent Settlement

of 1793, made little difference to the plight of the Bengali peasantry, caught between the largely Hindu zamindars on one hand, and the Shariati-Brahmin clergy on the other.

What had earlier been a long-drawn out almost unobtrusive assimilation of values and intermingling of "folk Islam" with locals cults and rites now acquired a dimension of escape from rigidity and oppression. Researches like H.H. Wilson and Akshay Kumar Dutt insist that, from the Vaishnava- Baul- Fakir strands of dissent and quest for an innate purity in human lives, nearly 200 sub-sects, formed out of low-caste Hindu and poor Muslims, broke free of their temporal and secular tormentors and receded into forest lands, uninhabited deltaic islands, abandoned cremation and burial grounds, and such other sanctuaries. Such defiance would naturally not go unchallenged; particularly, the large-scale defection by namasudras and landless Muslim peasants from their mainstream societies to the *Baul* or *Fakiri* way of life prompted, in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, a severe retaliatory reaction from Kulin Brahmins, formal Vaishnav akharas, and conservative Shariati formations like *Wahabis*, *Farayzis* and *Ahl-e-Hadisis*. Numerous organized attacks were mounted on Baul-Fakir settlements in north and east Bengal, leading to further dispersal and formation of secret enclaves with their own mystic mythology and communication techniques.

Apart from the obvious desire to be different, among these breakaway groups of non-conformists - the *Auls*, *Bauls*, *Sahajiyas*, *Maramiyas*, *Murshidis*, *Marfatis*, *Darbeshis*, *Sahebhdhanis*, *Kartabhajas*, *Hazrat*s, et al – the spirit of liberations produced a whole range of news genres of gospel music that spoke of pure love and the search of a universal maker, the transience of life and human bondage. These musical forms have, for at least two centuries, been the staple for the "people's culture" (*Loka-Sanskriti*) of south and middle Bengal, particularly in the spheres of influence of Vaishnavas, *Bauls* and *Fakirs* of different denominations.

Since the practitioners of these syncretic, free-spirited belief systems were under attack, they were forced to develop their own defense mechanism in the form of alternative theologies drawn from their parent faiths. The emphasis, however, was always on transcendental connections between the individual and his chosen godhead. *Baul* and *Fakiri-Marfati* lyrics invariably stress the need of a *pir-murid* or *guru-shishya* nexus for the ultimate absolution, the fulfillment of “*Manav-Janma*”. Lalan Shah, the fakir-sage of Kushthia (in Bangladesh), sang incessantly of opening the human cage, of the fallow human field (*manav-zamin*) needing cultivation to yield gold. Till today, *Bauls* and *Fakirs* remain, despite the exuberance of their public performances, enigmatic and steeped in esoteric social ritual.

Elsewhere, in the districts of north and north east Bengal and Assam, in Rangpur, Dinjapur, Maimansingh, Sylhet, Malda and Cooch Behar, among the river – folk, and ‘*maishals*’ (bullock-herds) of both religions, other exquisite refrains - *Sari*, *Bhatiali*, *Gambhira*, *Bhawaiya* – were being born, songs of earth, sky and water, bird and beast, separation and survival, that knew no bonds of caste or creed, also became the shared legacy of both Bengals even after partition.

These unique strains of Bengal’s folk music, largely created by unlettered village bards and mystics, have been passed on orally from one generation of devotees to another, changed and refined, written down and set to notations by latter-day scholars and composers. Rabindranath Tagore, for example, was deeply influenced, as a young zamindar in east Bengal and later in his ashram at Santiniketan, by the songs of Gagan Harkara, Hassan Raja and Lalan Shah (*fakir*), among others and wove them into his own distinctive musical oeuvre.

The commercial acceptance, however and popularization of *Baul*, *Bhatiali* and *Bhawaiya* and such other genres has

taken place only in the last century. Gifted performers and inheritors of these folk forms like *Abbasuddin*, *Nirmalendu Chowdhury*, Sachin Dev Burman, Bhupen Hazarika and Purna Das Baul have taken the songs of rural Bengal and Assam not only to films, but also to venues like Woodstock and the Edinburgh Festival, where they have been widely acclaimed for their humanist and melodic content.

It will be important to remember that this special musical tradition is essentially a product of the spiritual and cultural yearnings of generations of seekers at the grassroots level and hence cannot be understood without reference to the sub-culture of harmony and union inherent is the *Vaishnav-Sufi-Baul-Fakir* continuum. For Bengalis – 25 crores, spread across the globe as the third largest language group – it has been, and continues to be, a major ingredient of their common heritage to be preserved at all cost against the onslaught of mistrust, bigotry and terror.

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## Varkari Tradition of Maharashtra

*Neela Satyanarayana*

The *Varkari* tradition has been part of Hindu culture in Maharashtra since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Bhakti movement was gaining momentum and Maharashtra was fortunate to have saint poets from all castes and creed who flocked to Pandharpur to seek *darshan* (blessings) of their deity *Vithoba* or *Vitthal*.

Ashadhi Ekadashi is the day when *Varkari's* (devotees of Vitthala) gather from Maharashtra and Karnataka, walking all the way from their homes to Pandharpur. A famous Abhang by Sant Dnyaneshwar says "*Kanadau Vitthalu,*

*Karanataku, Yene maja laviyala vedu*", which means Lord Vitthal of Karnataka has mesmerized me and is drawing me towards him. In Marathi, *Vari* means pilgrimage and the pilgrim is called *Varkari*. Vithoba, the presiding deity of Pandharpur is considered a form of Krishna and an avatar of Lord Vishnu. This association with Lord Vishnu makes this movement a branch of Vaishnavism.

There are several stories as to how Vithoba helped his devotees in their daily chores. Some of the devotees were servants and he helped the poor and the downtrodden,



therefore, he became the god of common man. When people flock to Pandharpur in a *Vari*, they accept ultimate equality among men. They live together, eat together and help each other during the journey. Some of the villagers on the route offer them shelter and food free of cost. There is a tradition of carrying *paduka* (footwear) of saints in a *palkhi* (palanquin). This tradition was started by the youngest son of Tukaram Maharaj, Narayana in 1685. Many women also carry *tulsi* (basil) plants on their head up to Pandharpur as *tulsi* is a symbol of Lord Krishna, another form of Lord Vishnu.

Many more rituals were added by 1820 by Haibatrabvaba, a descendent of Tukaram and a courtier of the Scindias. He was also a devotee of Sant Dnyaneshwar. Since Haibatrabvaba hailed from a royal family, it is not surprising to see adherence to military rules, design and discipline. A Panch Samiti was also appointed to manage the affairs of this *Vari*.

At present, approximately 40 *palkhi's* go to Pandharpur on *Ashadhi Ekadashi* and *Kartiki Ekadashi*. They are the 11th day in the month of July and November. Events such as *Ringan* and *Dhava* are held during the pilgrimage. An unmounted horse called *Maulicha Ashva* runs through the rows of pilgrims. It is believed that the horse is the soul of the saint whose *palkhi* is going to Pandharpur. *Dhava* is



another kind of race to commemorate the manner in which Tukaram first saw Vithoba temple at Pandharpur.

The *Varkaris* wear a *tulsi mala* and puts a vermillion mark on his forehead and some use bukka, a black teeka. Like many Vaishanva sects, they refrain from using garlic and onions in their food and also keep away from intoxicating drinks and substances. A *Varkari* is a strict vegetarian and many carry their families with them. They generally move in groups, irrespective of caste and creed and sing *bhajans* and songs composed by saints on the way. They follow rules of strict pious life during this period and fast on *Ekadashi* day.

“*Pundalik Varada Hari Vitthal*”, “*Jai jai Vitthal, Jai Hari Vitthal*” are the refrains.

### Some of the prominent Saints of Varkari movement were:

Dnyaneshwar	Tukaram
Namdev	Eknath
Nivruttinath	Muktabai
Sopan	Sena Navhi
Chokhamela	Soyarabai
Sakhubai	Janabai
Bhanudas	Savata Mali
Gora Kumbhar	Kanhopatra



### The places of importance are

Alandi	Dehu
Paithan	Saswad
Mehun	Trambakeshwar
Aran	Ter
Mangalvedha	

The modern day life has not diminished the attraction for *Vari* among people. The younger generations join the *Vari* for adventure and they are growing in numbers each year. The affluent are also attracted to this magical journey. They have started either walking with the common man or partly covering the distance by vehicles. They are surprised to see how different people live cordially forgetting their differences of caste, creed and religion. *Vari* is carried out in a very disciplined manner and is a great lesson in management, where millions of people are managed without fault.

The amazing fact about *Vari* is that it is a self-financing venture. In prosperous cities like Pune, the *Varkaris* are taken care of; however, in small villages they cannot take care of the large number of *Varkaris*, hence many groups bring their daily necessities with them, loaded in a truck



displaying a great example of efficient management.

“Once a *Varkari*, always a *Varkari*”, people try and adhere to this life style out of choice and many give up their addictions or bad habits forever for their Vithoba Mauli. The deity is called *Mauli*, it means mother. The God is believed to have motherly qualities, therefore he is called *Mauli*. He is a God for common man, he is simple and his clothes are similar to that of a shepherd that is why every man finds him close to his heart.

This year’s *Vari* had a special feature - a special drive for cleaning was undertaken after the event was over. It not only provided great relief to the local people but it also added to mass discipline. Maharashtra has many glorious traditions and *Vari* is one of the most important ones.

### Bhondla/Hadga

Another Maharashtra tradition, which is on the brink of extinction is a simple but sweet festival called *Bhondla*. It is a festival where of young girls get together. It is popularly known as *Hadga* or *Bhondla*. After the monsoons are over as the sun moves to the thirteenth constellation of the zodiac called *Hasta*, the young girls celebrate *Bhondla*. This period

coincides with Navaratri -the pious period of worshipping goddess *Durga* or *Kali*.

The young girls draw a picture of an elephant on a wooden plank and place it in the open yard of the house. The elephant is the symbol of prosperity and they decorate the surrounding area with rangoli. The young girls dress up to participate in *Bhondla* and their colourful clothes and beaming faces lend a special beauty to the festival. The girls hold hands and move in circles around the elephant motif singing traditional songs. It is a festival that is celebrated to thank nature for blessing the mankind with bountiful rains and prosperity.

The traditional songs begin with invocation of Lord Ganesha. Then they go on to describing the mother in law, the sister in law and the husband. All their complaints are expressed through the songs. In earlier times, girls would get married at very young age and did not get the opportunity to return to their parent's house during this period. They used to get together and spend some happy moments with each other, during this festival. The festival lasts for about ten days and ends on Dussera day.

Everyday, the girls gather at a different house and the host has to make a special dish, to be distributed as *prasad* after the songs are over. The *prasad* is called *khirapat*. The participating girls have to guess what would be the menu for the day and there is a competition amongst the various households to prepare delicacies to please their friends. This tradition is almost dying because of lack of space and lack of time. Some traditional households still follow the ritual but it is sad to see the beautiful tradition disappearing.

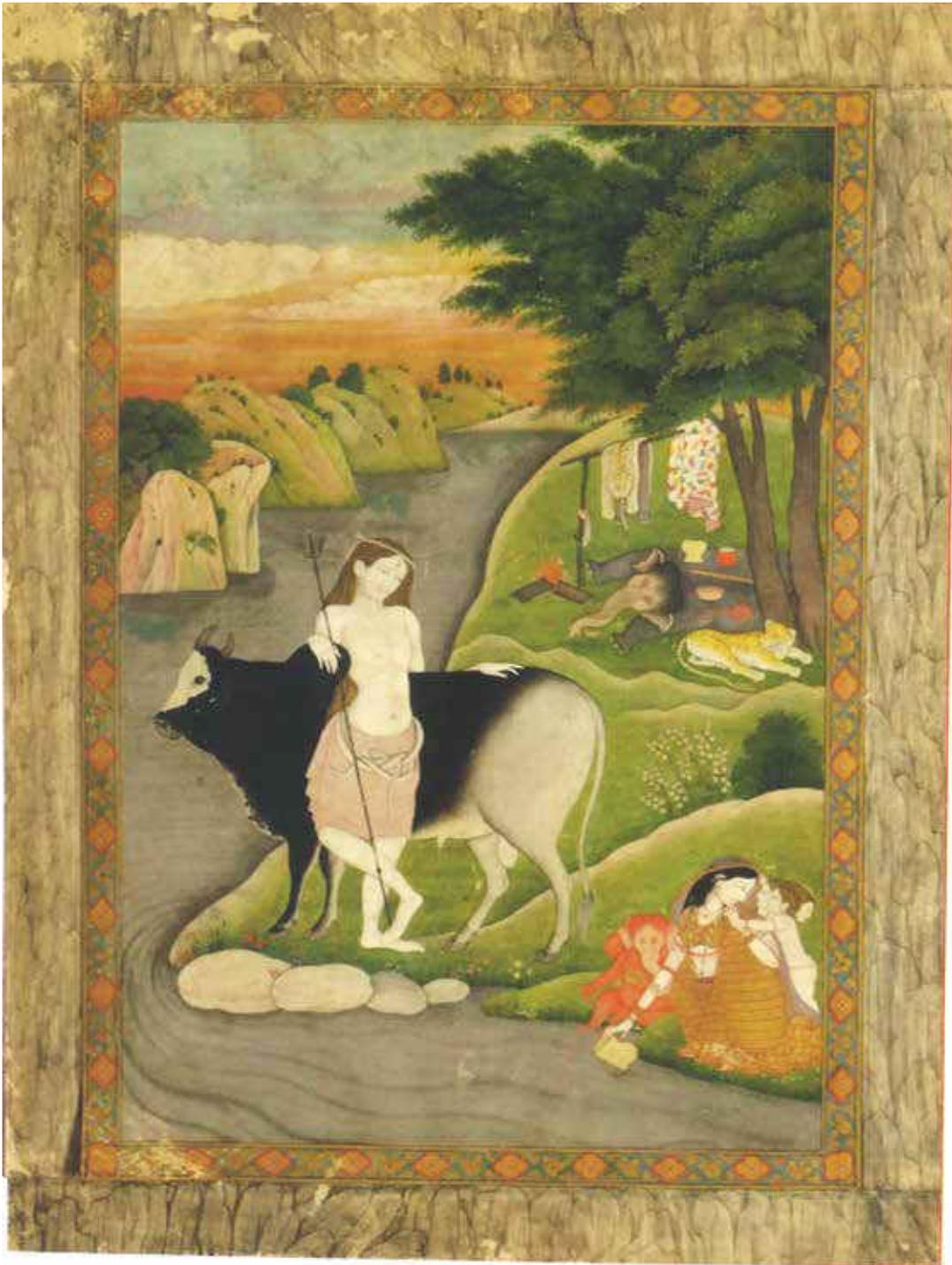
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# SHIVA AND HIS FAMILY

*Isolated leaf*

*Opaque watercolour and gold on paper*

*Pahari, from the Seu-Nainsukh family workshop; c. 800*

*31 cm X 23.5 cm (outer)*

*27 cm X 19 cm (inner)*

*Private Collection*

It is quiet evening. With the sun about to set, the sky is tinged with streaks of red. There is a ip in the air, judging from the small log-fire in the middle distance. A river descending from the mountains flows gently by. And on its grassy bank Shiva, having left his lofty abode in Kailash behind, has decided to settle for the night. His small family is with him, and their few belongings are all at hand. He might be Trilokinath—literally, ‘Lord of the Three Worlds’—but this is all he needs. In this quiet corner of the lower hills, he seems to be completely content.

There is an aura of utter calm around him. If fact seldom, if ever, has one seen Shiva as relaxed as he appears here. He stands bare-bodied but for a lilac-coloured cloth wrapped round the waist, weight resting on one leg, the other lightly crossed against it, leaning against his great *vahana*: the Nandi bull. His tall *trishula* is held almost casually in one hand, his arms snuggle against Nandi’s back, both elbows hidden. But the hands, with exquisitely tapering fingers, are fully visible, the one with the trident resting over Nandi’s hump, and the other disposed as if he were gently stroking the smooth, dark body of his beloved bull: a gesture of affection, for the bull need no hand to steady him, standing as firm and relaxed as his master.

Shiva’s form is slim and athletic —firm, long torso, narrow waist, glowing skin. His hair, held by a narrow headband, falls loose down his back; his head is slightly inclined to one side, gaze gently fixed on his family. As he appears here Shiva could be, the painter suggests, just a simple grazier— except that we know who he is. Majesty never leaves him: the trident apart, a thin crescent moon rests on his

locks, and a snake loops itself lazily around his middle, like a favourite waistband.

The eye now follows Shiva's gaze to the bottom-right corner of the painting where Parvati crouches by the riverside, filling water in a gourd-vessel for household use. She, a figure of utter charm—chiselled features with translucent, porcelain-like beauty; long, languid eyes; dark, flowing hair—is, unlike her husband, most elegantly dressed. Even in this near wilderness, she wears a gold striped skirt with a matching *choli*, and a veil to go with this ensemble. She is at the centre of an enchanting cameo, with the divine couple's two naked little boys playfully trying to divert her attention. Karttikeya, as many as three heads clearly visible, clings to her back and reaches for her veil while Ganesha, seated to her right, one foot idly dipped in water, wraps his little trunk round her right arm, pulling her in his direction. Face beaming with a mother's delight, she looks on.

It is an idyllic scene, with the father, Shiva, watching from a slight distance, bemused by what he sees, and Parvati, the mother, completely absorbed in her children's playful antics. It is as if the painter were transferring what he might have experienced in his own life to the life of the divine couple. What makes it all very special is the belief that folks in the Pahari area still entertain: that each year, Shiva leaves his Kailash home and descends to lower climes to keep an eye on his 'subjects', to live with them, and like them.

The leaf is dazzlingly coloured and the attention to detail is astonishing. One needs to notice, for instance, the little spot in the middle of the painting, under the shade of two trees, where the 'homestead' of the family is: things lie around casually—a calabash, a rod, an upturned vessel. Above them, draped on a makeshift clothes stand, hang the couple's 'garments', left there to dry after washing: Shiva's leopard skin and Parvati's patchwork wrap. On the ground is spread, carpet-like, the large skin that once was of Gajasura, the elephant demon, whom Shiva flayed alive with just the nail of his little finger. Parvati's *vahana*, the tiger, crouches there as if keeping watch.

Stray clouds hang in the sky even as the orange of dusk forms a streaky bank below them. The forms of the mountain rocks on the other side of the river reflect faintly in the water, and where the river negotiates a bend, at the bottom of this leaf, the flow suddenly picks up and streaky waves form on the surface of the water. Nandi, the noble bull, is a sight in himself: dappled black, grey and white, wavy

black dewlap spotted with white, alert of eye but placid of aspect.

There is brilliance in the detail but what one experiences above all else is the serene, supremely becalming air in which the entire scene is wrapped. Unlike Shiva's abode on Kailash, no cedar trees here are drenched by rushing waters; there is no odour of musk nor music of the *kinnaras* here, as the poets imagined on those high mountains. All that reigns in this corner of the hills is peace.

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*A detail demanding attention is the broad margin which surrounds the principal scene. It is easy to see it as extraneous to the painting but it is not: for it is made up, if one looks closely, of gently moulded mountain peaks, piled one on top of the other. These, modelled upon how Manaku rendered some high mountaintops in his own paintings, are possibly the painter's suggestion of the high terrain that Shiva has left at least temporarily, in favour of the lower hills with their grassy slopes and lush trees.*



# INDRA DANCING

*Detail from a Jain Panchakalyanaka pata*

*Pigments on cloth*

*Possibly Aurangabad, Maharashtra; c. 1700*

*1220 cm X 80 cm (entire pata)*

*Sena Gana Mandir, Karanja in Vidarbha, Maharashtra*

Unlikely as it might seem, Indra, the Vedic god who figures so prominently in Hindu myths (he is also known by the name Shakra), appears occasionally in Jain texts too. When he does feature, it is not in his role as the god of rain, thunder and lightning. In the Jain texts, he keeps an eye on the future, descends to the earth on occasion, and participates in significant rituals.

When a Brahmani conceives the future saviour of mankind, it is Indra who arranges for the foetus to be transferred to the womb of a Kshatriya princess; when a *tirthankara* is born, Indra descends with consort, Shachi, riding their mount, the great elephant Airavata, to celebrate the event; when a *tirthankara* plucks out all the hair on his head in a grand gesture of renunciation and detachment, it is Indra who receives, most reverently, that hair in the palms of his own hands.

There are no independent shrines dedicated to him in Jainism, but in Jain paintings he is seen now instructing Harinegameshi to effect the transfer of the divine foetus from one womb to another; now performing *snatra puja* in which he performs the *abhishek* (ceremonial bath) of the newborn, taking him to the Sumeru mountains; now standing before the *tirthankara*, bowing low to receive the plucked hair in his hands. Here, in this detail of a *pata*, we see him dancing with devotion and abandon.

In Hindu iconography, especially in paintings from Rajasthan and the Pahari areas, Indra usually appears with his entire body covered with countless eyes — there is a story connected with that in which a curse figures prominently. In this painting he is portrayed as a normal figure endowed with divinity—handsome and youthful.

The detail here is from a sixteen-panel-long *Panchakalyanaka pata*, relating to the first of the twenty-four *tirthankaras*, Rishabhanath. Like all standard *Panchakalyanaka* renderings, detailing the five most auspicious events in the life of a *tirthankara-garbha* (conception), *janma* (birth), *diksha* (attainment of knowledge), *kaivalya* (detachment) and *moksha* (release from the cycles of Rebirth)—this *pata* also goes into the celebrations at the time of the birth of the *tirthankara*.

Indra, who in the Digambara Jain tradition is named Saudharma Indra, leads the other gods in these celebrations. His court in the heavens is filled with great musicians and dancers, and when we see him descending from the heavens and taking part in the celebrations at the birth of the *tirthankara*, he takes on the role of a divine dancer himself. ‘Dancing Indra’s is a recurring theme in Jain belief and practice—for instance, in an early rendering one sees him in a fifteenth-century painting in a temple, Tirupparuttikum, on the outskirts of Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu. Even today, in a re-enactment of the gods’ celebration of the birth of a *tirthankara*, a layman takes on the role of Indra as he dances, and his wife that of his consort, Shachi.

In this superb rendering, Indra wears a beautifully crafted golden crown, and profuse jewellery on the body; his torso is flexed, head gently bent towards the right, upper part of the body bare except for a long scarf with broad end-panels in gold draped round the shoulders, lower part of the body in a blue dhoti with a pattern of stylized golden flowers secured with a short *patka* tied at the waist; and his legs are placed as though he is about to break into a slow dance.

But what draws instant attention to itself is the fact that he has multiple arms, as many as twenty on either side, which fan out to form a moving circular pattern. In some of the hands he hold blooming lotus flowers, but in more than half of them, resting on the palm, stand diminutive little figures of young women—Indra’s *apsaras*—some of them dancing, others holding musical instruments or clapping. They all look towards their Lord but he does not spare a glance for them, his face, instead, full of concentration.

Dwarfed by this large, beautifully painted figure, stand other figures—men with musical instruments in their hands: a *sitar*-like instrument, a *dafli*-drum, *veena*, *dholak*-drum, cymbals, and so on. All these figures are set against a plain scarlet-red monochrome background. There are other panels in the *pata*,

of course, 'documenting', as it were, the various episodes —birth, renunciation, lustration, delivering the great sermon, among others. Panel after panel succeeds the one above in rich succession.

Various styles seems to be at work here, names like Bikaner, Bundi, Golconda and Aurangabad come to mind. The art historian Saryu Doshi, who drew attention to this brilliantly conceived and painted *pata*, speculated about its stylistic affiliations —'Rajasthani palette with a Deccani slant, the Deccani treatment of landscape, the compositional elements from Bikaner as well as Golconda' —leading to suggestion that it was probably painted for some Jain family of Rajasthani origin which came later to settle for whatever reasons in Karanja, invited artists from the Deccan to execute this complex but dazzling work.

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*Two things about the figure of dancing Indra are striking. One, the manner in which the arms are fashioned, all emerging from the elbows rather than, as generally seen, from the shoulder. This is a treatment that is far more commonly seen in Kashmiri painting than in Rajasthan. At the same time, there is nothing else in the painting to suggest any connection with Kashmir. Second, to the left leg is attached a right foot, a confusion often seen, but generally in folkish rather than classical work. Both features leave one a bit puzzled.*



# THE VIRGIN AND CHILD

*Leaf from a Jahangir album*

*Opaque watercolour and gold on paper*

*Mughal, late Akbar period; c. 1590*

*21.7 cm X 13.7 cm*

*San Diego Museum of Art, Edwin Binney Collection*

The first thing he [the emperor Akbar] did was to go into the Church [set up in Fatehpur Sikri], which was well appointed with its perfumes and fragrance. On entering he was surprised and astonished and made a deep obeisance to the picture of Our Lady that was there, from the painting of St. Luke, done by Brother Michael Godinho, as well as to another beautifully executed representation of Our Lady by Fr. Martin de Silva from Rome, which pleased him no end.

This is what one of the Jesuit fathers who has come to the court of Akbar wrote in a letter to his principals in Goa. The letter goes on to say that after stepping outside briefly to discuss these pictures with his attendants, the emperor returned with his ‘chief painter’ and others, and ‘they were all wonderstruck and said that there could be no better paintings nor better artists than those who had painted the said pictures’.

This letter reflects some of the cultural aspects of Akbar’s court: the liberal monarch’s interest in, and respect for, other faiths; the excitement in the early years about the arrival of medieval Christianity in Mughal India; the coming of European paintings and other artefacts; and the seductive opportunities this encounter with them opened up for the painters working in the imperial atelier.

The chronicler Abu’l Fazl’s remark, in his chapter on the ‘Arts of Painting’ in the *Ain-i Akbari*, in praise of the great Mughal artists can be seen in this context. Their masterpieces, he wrote, ‘may be placed at the side of the wonderful works of the European painters who have attained worldwide fame’. The

implication is that European paintings had, in their own manner, set a standard, or at least thrown a powerful challenge to the artists of the Mughal court.

This painting, clearly based upon —if not exactly copied from — a European work is, though unsigned, clearly from the hand of one of the great Mughal artists —Keshava Das, Basawan, Manohar, among them — who were most drawn to the exciting new works which would occasionally arrive from Europe. Whatever its authorship, the painting is exquisitely executed.

The Madonna, in repose, with her Botticelli face and heavy-lidded, downward- turned eyes, reclines against a large bolster. She has a child at her breast, gently steadying him with a delicate hand. By her side, on a cushion placed on the intricately patterned carpet, lies an open book from which she has obviously been reading; a candle stand is next to the book. At the foot of the carpet, on the grassy ground, a gold carafe stands close to a flat golden bowl that captures the interest of an alert cat. A goat rests peacefully in the background, mirroring the repose on the Madonna's alabaster face.

There are suggestions and symbols here, but also 'effects'. In the background, virtually unrelated to its immediate surroundings, we can see a part of a building with heavy drapes tied at the side to reveal a vista in the far distance: at left a lone tree rises above a thatched structure, a masonry well and vines trained on a trellis. The sky above this vignette at top-left is filled with clouds against which tiny birds can be seen in flight.

The exact source of this painting remains difficult to establish, but the impact of Europe is evident everywhere: the Christian subject apart, one sees it in the Madonna's and the child's faces and figures, the rich oil-like colouring, the clothing, the treatment of the structure at the back, the drapery, the forms of the goat and the cat, the open book. But, engagingly, the sum of all these parts seem, somehow, to have a very Indian air. Although there is a great crispness of detail, everything is bathed in a melting warmth.

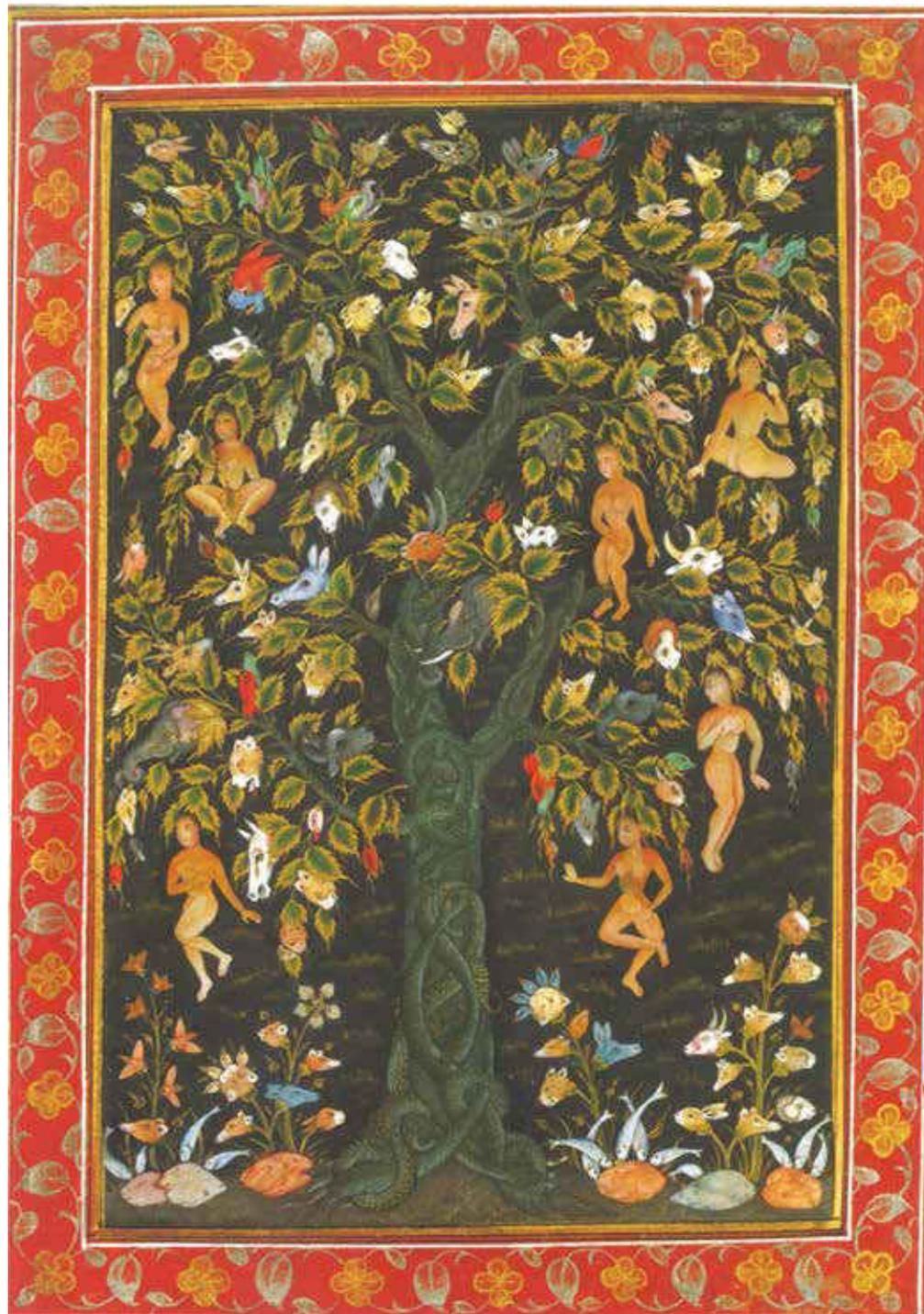
Of special interest is the fact that the Persian verses in the cartouches at the top and bottom —beginning

with the words, *mahi dar husn az khurshid zadeh*— seem not only to be related to the image but inspired by it in some manner. Roughly translated, they read:

A beauteous moon has been born of the sun  
And feeds upon the milk of its breast;  
A dainty bud floating upon the surface of the spring  
Of beauty with which the very face of heavens is washed.

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*The painting, hough unsigned, has been attributed differently by scholars. In the notes in Edwin Binney's hand on this painting in the San Diego Museum of Art, the attribution is to Basawan, the great painter at the Akbari court. John Seyller, however, argues for its being attributed to Manohar, Basawan's son, suggesting that the painter was leaning here upon his father's work for some details ad manner of treatment.*



# THE SPEAKING TREE

*Deccani (or Mughal?); early seventeenth century*

*14.6 cm X 9.5 cm*

*Islamische Museum, Berlin*

Among the legends popular in the Islamic world was one about the Speaking Tree which bore human fruit and was to be found in mythical lands or on an island by the name of Waq Waq. The great Firdausi speaks of it in the *Shahnama*; so does Nizami in *Iskandarnama*, one of the five poems in his celebrated work, the *Khamasa*. In both these works, Alexander—Sikandar as he is known in Islamic texts—figures not only as a conqueror but also as a philosopher-king, full of questions, always curious to learn. The story of him standing at the foot of a tree that talks has fascinated writers and painters alike.

Firdausi writes of Alexander reaching at the end of the world where he encounters a tree with two trunks. Male heads sprout from one trunk and speak during the day in a voice that strikes terror, and female heads from the other trunk talk sweetly at night. The male heads warn Alexander that he had already received his share of blessings, and the female heads urge him not to give in to greed; but both predict that his last days are near: 'Death will come soon: you will die in a strange land, with strangers standing by.' This is exactly what happens. Alexander dies in Babylon, far from his home.

The fascination with the legend has persisted over centuries even as it changes in different lands, and in different hands. Liberties are taken. Sometimes one sees Alexander on horseback close to the foot of the tree, straining to listen; at others, the conqueror is nowhere to be seen and only the tree appears, with human figures suspended from its branches. The tree is sometimes a symbol of prophecy; in other works it represents our inability to comprehend the mysteries that surround us.

The painter of this mystifying, somewhat eerie, work creates a surreal world in which, to begin with, nothing is quite what it appears to be. The tree, teeming with figures of humans and beasts—one can see heads of leopards and horses, deer and elephants, rams and foxes peeping through and the

leaves— is made up of a trunk that is nothing but snakes, intertwined and slithering, even as they turn into branches. What appear like bushes, close to the foot of the tree, bear heads of other animals rather than flowers; and resting their heads on a rock are fish that seem to have come from nowhere.

Here is the American poet Muriel Rukeyser describing the Speaking Tree very similarly in her poem:

The trunk of the speaking tree looking like a tree trunk  
Until you look again.  
There people and animals  
Are ripening on the branches, the broad leaves  
Are leaves; pale horses, sharp fine foxes  
Blossom; the red rabbit falls  
Ready and running.

She continues:

The trunk coils, turns,  
Snakes, fishes. Now the ripe people fall and run...  
flames that stand  
Where reeds are creatures and the foam is flame.

Close to the end of the poem come these lines:

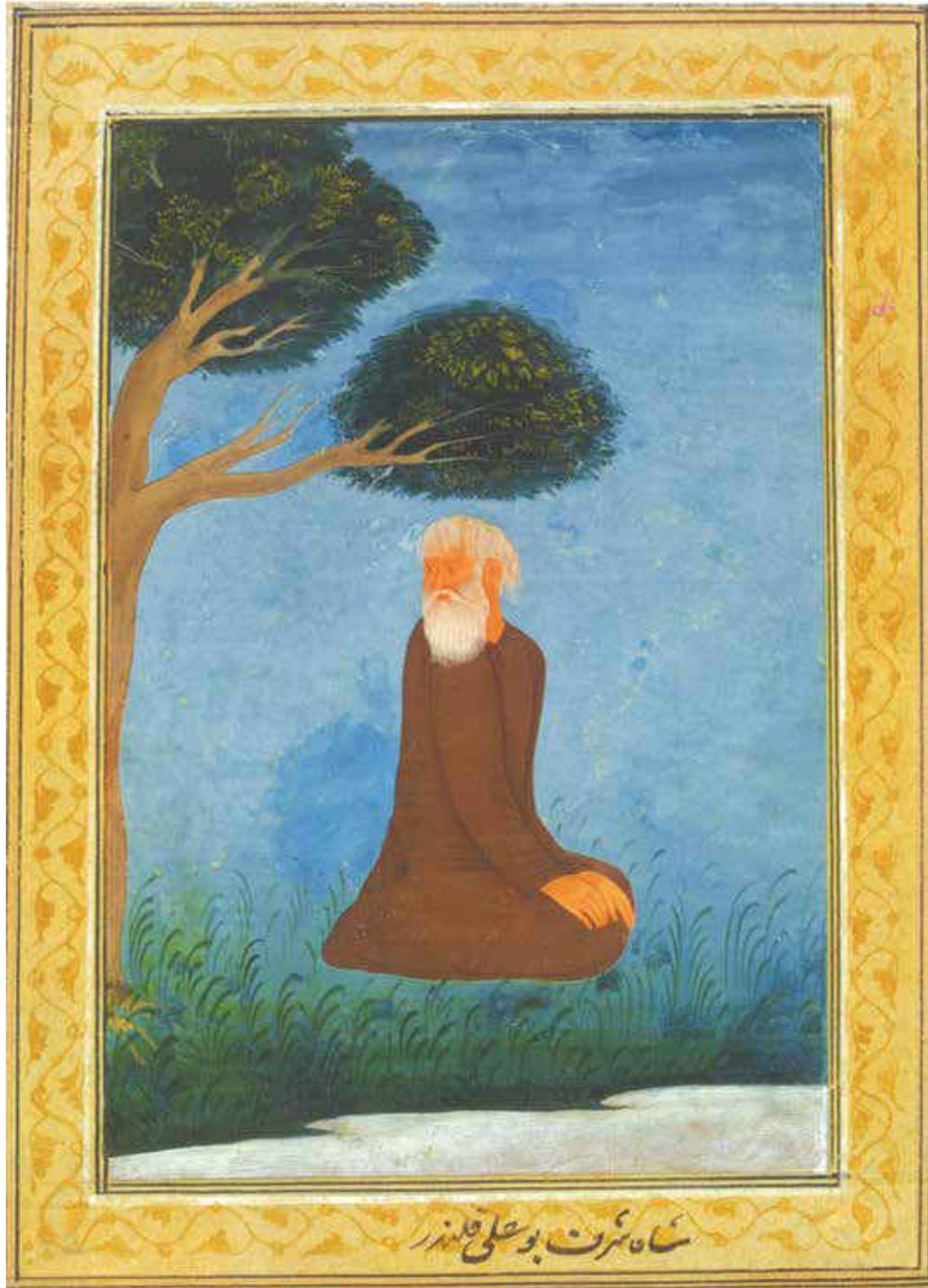
This is the speaking tree,  
It calls your name. It tells us what we mean.

This striking painting must have challenged the painter almost beyond straining point. It is generally regarded as coming from Golconda in the Deccan, although a Mughal ancestry cannot be ruled out. The Qutb Shahi Sultanate of Golconda was founded by Turkmen princes, and during the early years

of their reign, Turkmen artists seem to have settled in the region as well. They laid the ground for the style that came later to flourish in that soil.

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*The Speaking Tree as a theme appears to have fascinated painters all over the Islamic world, and vastly differing versions of it were painted, some stark and sparse, other rich and flamboyant. It figures in Arabic texts as well as in Persian ones. There is even a Thai version of the motif which has survived.*



# THE SUFI SAINT SHAH SHARF 'BU ALI' QALANDAR

*Isolated folio*

*Opaque watercolour and gold on paper*

*Delhi or possibly Haryana; c. 1750*

*22 cm X 17.4 cm*

*The British Museum, London*

*Shola-e yaad-e rukh-e pur noor u*

*Bu Ali sham-o seher mi sozadam*

The memory of the flaming sight of that resplendent face

Singers me all the time, day and night, say Bu Ali

The words belong to that highly revered, but now little-remembered, Sufi saint, Shah Sharf Bu Ali, who lies buried at Panipat in the state of Haryana. The resplendent face he refers to here is that of God, of course, but in the approved Sufi tradition, using the language and imagery of this world: that of lovers and beloveds. After all, true love —*ishq-e haqiqi*—is so different from *ishq-e majaazi*, love that is transient, illusory.

The name of his saint, born to Sheik Fakhr-ud-din, a renowned scholar of his times, was in fact Sharf-ud-din, but everyone, it seems, knew him by the pen name under which he wrote his poetry, 'Bu Ali'---the 'Fragrance of Ali', after the prophet whom he so revered. There is some uncertainty about his dates: some say he was born at Panipat in c. 1400, but there is credible evidence that he was in fact born at Ganja in Azerbaijan in 1209 and moved to India as a follower of the Chishti order of Sufis.

Legends of his power continue to be told. One recounts how he was able to solve the mystery of a ruler of Delhi, a virile man ordinarily, who would lose his manly powers whenever he sought to be close to his newly acquired mistress. It was through the agency of a wandering dervish that Bu Ali came to know the answer: the new mistress was, unknown to anyone till then, a daughter of the ruler himself from a woman he had abandoned a long time ago. The woman had died leaving the upbringing of the girl to a poor man from whose house the ruler had, unknowingly, picked her when she grew up into a beauty.

The fact having been established, Sharf-ud-din went looking for that dervish. The dervish turned out to be none other than the Sufi saint Qutb-ud-din Bakhtiar Kaki, the spiritual master of another celebrated Sufi saint, Farid-ud-din Shakarganj. The young Sharf-ud-din, till then only a scholar of religious texts, knew then that he had found his *murshid* (spiritual guide), and his calling. He left everything and turned into a dervish himself: a real *qalander*, free of all earthly possessions and concerns.

There is something quite moving about this image, inscribed on the bottom margin with the words ‘Shah Sharaf Bu Ali Qalander’. The painter—we know nothing about him or for whom he painted, unless of course he was personally a devotee of Bu Ali—sees and renders him as the simplest of beings. Dressed in a coarse woollen garment—*suf*, from which according to one theory, the term Sufi was derived—we see him seated under a roughly painted tree: an appropriate setting in the Indian tradition for men of learning and spiritual beings. Legs tucked under him, in the familiar *do-zanu* position, his hands rest on his knees. There is nothing else in sight. It is as if he is sitting in the wilderness, away from all habitation, in the midst of some rushes growing at the edge of a small waterbody. The Sufi has an unkempt air: coarse white hair on head and a rough beard. What strikes one the most, however, is the look in his eyes and the manner in which his head is turned to the right. At first one might think of this as not worthy of much attention—it could be he is simply turning his head as is often done during *namaz*. But there is, one feels, a different suggestion here: he is turning his head as if straining to hear a sound: an unuttered sound, perhaps, something coming from the Unknown. The look of concentration in the eyes, even puzzlement, certainly reinforces the suggestion.

There is possibly a reference here to a legend told about him: that he used to stand in water meditating for a long, long time until he heard a voice that told him his medications and penance were over, and it was now time for him to come out of the water and carry a message to the world.

In any case, this is the world which great Sufis inhabited: seeing sights unseen, hearing inaudible sounds. From the intensity but also the sheer artlessness of this image, it would seem that Shah Sharf Bu Ali belonged to that world.

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*Shah Sharf Bu Ali was a poet of no small merit. An entire dewan —complete works in verse— in relatively simple Persian, is attributed to him. It was published by the Islamia Steam Press at Lahore in a lithographed edition, undated but possibly more than a hundred years ago.*

# About the Authors

**AshaRani Mathur** is a freelance writer and editor. She has edited and produced books on aspects of Indian life and culture as well as art catalogues and written articles on subjects as far apart as restaurant food, travel and ancient India. She has authored books on textiles and jewellery; has worked in music as a producer for a music label and has also scripted documentaries for television.

**Dr. Nina Sabnani** is a Professor at the Industrial Design Centre of the Indian Institute of Technology, Mumbai. Earlier, she taught at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad for two decades. Folklore and storytelling are amongst a wide bouquet of areas of her study and research.

**Shailaja Chandra** was a former Secretary to the Government of India and former Chief Secretary, Delhi. She is the author of a recently published Status Report on Indian Medicine (2011 and 2013) commissioned by the Government of India. She was recently awarded a fellowship at the Institute of Advanced Studies, Nantes, France to research and write a paper on Probity in Public Life.

**Ashi Pempem Wangmo & Dr. Jigme Wangchuk Bhutia** are Assistant Professors in the Department of Tourism, (Central University of Sikkim), Sikkim University. The authors have their interest on researching the traditions and cultures in reference to Tourism in Sikkim. They mostly focus on the tangible and intangible heritage of the State especially in the rural regions of Sikkim.

**Anirudh Chaudhry** is a lawyer by profession and is also involved in sports administration. He frequently travels across rural Haryana engaging the residents on issues of social and political importance.

**Guru Shovana Narayan** is known as one of the best Kathak dancers in the world. She performs in India and around the world, and has been awarded the prestigious Padma Shri. She has authored several books on the subject of dance and is also a visiting lecturer to several Universities in India and abroad.

**Chitkala Zutshi** is a retired IAS officer (Maharashtra). After retirement in 2009 she has been involved in full time farming and also has a keen interest in trekking. Her current assignment is, as a Member of the statutory Maharashtra Water Resources Regulatory Authority, MWRRA for short Mumbai.

**Paridhi David Massey** is a history scholar in University of Delhi. She has a keen interest in the recent anthropological and cultural turns in historiography and history writing that take into account the experiential and social dimensions of life. She is planning to create a corpus of work on the historical traditions that brought the land of Braj in existence.

**Sentila T. Yanger** is widely acknowledged for her work with craft artisans and reviving natural dyes in Nagaland. She is a textile specialist and craft revivalist, alongside her contribution and role in the conservation and promotion of Northeast culture and heritage. She continues to be on board in State and Central Government committees and organizations. She was awarded the prestigious Padma Shri in the field of Art in 2008 and the INTACH-Satte Award 2009.

**Uma Devi Jadhav** is from Gujarat and is now based in Gwalior. She has taught Economics and Business Studies in India and abroad and is a freelance journalist. She has set up Deo Bagh, a Heritage Hotel.

**Vikram Kalra** is an artist, photographer & graphic designer. He has been documenting the history of Delhi & many other cities through his drawings and photographs for the past 25 years. He has held various exhibitions of his works in Delhi and abroad.

**Prabhat K. Ghosh** is a retired IAS officer (1967, Gujarat). He is the Chairman of the Ahmedabad Heritage Conservation Committee and Ex Convenor of the Gujarat Chapter of INTACH. He has been associated with various World Bank projects in Bihar and U.P and is an author of many heritage-related articles and manuals.

**Ashoke Chatterjee** has a background in the Engineering Industry, International Civil Service, India Tourism Development Corporation, and 25 years in the service of the National Institute of Design (Ahmedabad). He was the President of the Crafts Council of India for over twenty years and continues to serve CCI. An author and writer, his books include "Dances of the Golden Hall" on the art of Shanta Rao and "Rising" on empowerment efforts among deprived communities in rural Gujarat.

**Dipak Rudra** is a retired IAS Officer (1963, West Bengal). He was the Principal Secretary, Transport, Food and Supplies Co-operation, and Personnel and Administrative Reforms Department, and was posted as Additional Chief Secretary and Food Commissioner at the time of his retirement. He also served as Special Assistant to the Union Commerce Minister and Chairman and Managing Director, UCO Bank. He is an accomplished exponent of Rabindra sangeet and author of four collections of Bengali poems, represented in Sakitya Akademi and Indo-Bangladesh publication.

**Neela Satyanarayana** is a bureaucrat by profession and involved in poetry and music composition. She has written books on various subjects like forests, parenting, elections and also writes lyrics and stories for films. She

has published 23 books and has won several awards.

**B.N. Goswamy** is Professor Emeritus of art history at the Panjab University and a world-renowned authority on Indian Painting. He has written and lectured extensively, and been a guest curator of major exhibitions of Indian art all over the world. His awards and honours include the Padma Bhushan, conferred in 2008.