

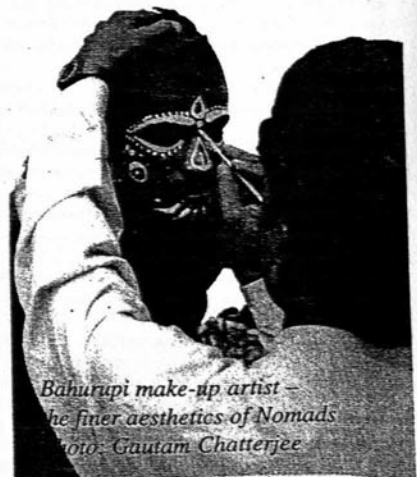


forests

■ Gautam Chatterjee

In the lap of nature within the deep woods they spent their childhood. Trees, plants and rivulets saw them growing. They are the children of the forests, yet they have no tangible rights over their Mother – meaning Mother Earth. Today, they live a marginalized life and acute deprivation is their way of life. They are face to face with the onslaught of development. Yes, we are talking about 9 crore Nomads and 6 crore adivasis of India. Their faces are rustic with

wrinkles of pain and pathos. Yet, their eyes are strikingly sparkling and they are outspoken with a touch of innocence! If you talk to them you will find a votary of energy and unfathomable depth in their faith. Nothing binds them more than their faith in themselves and the world unknown. I met Rup Chand – a Bhil from Baki village of Maharashtra who had received an invitation to attend the National Convention of Nomads & Adivasis organized under the



*Bahurupi make-up artist -
the finer aesthetics of Nomads
Photo: Gautam Chatterjee*

aegis of Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in collaboration with Bhasha Research, held at New Delhi between 21 to 24 April, 2005. Before setting out to attend the convention Rup Chand paid a visit to his village Goddess, Devi Mongey and Dongria Dev, their family God. Ceremoniously he offered a coconut as a normal practice, which he does every time he sets out on a journey beyond his village. Rup Chand also quipped that after the convention he would again return to Devi Mongey before going home. Such is the depth of his faith, which he even demonstrated by playing the sacred *paurie* or *dholak* (drum), which represents the divine dance of Shiva.

At IGNCA some 1300 tribals and nomads from 80 different societal identities came to New Delhi to discuss their traditional wisdom, and voice their protest in the convention through participation and not through *dharna* – for a change! They sported their traditional attire and demonstrated their art, aesthetics and acoustic capabilities at various performing levels. The splash of colour, energy and creativity spilled over the lawns of IGNCA as they left their

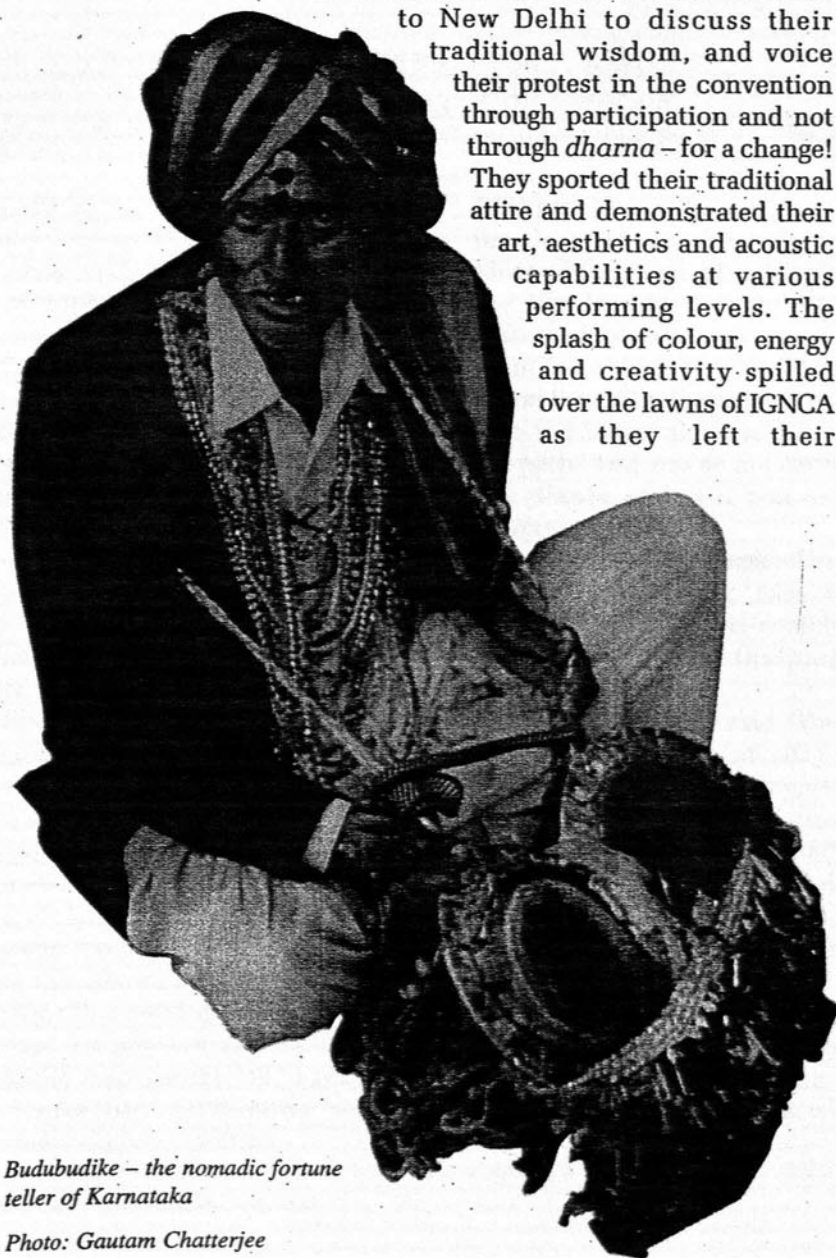
signature of excellence and New Delhi watched with silence and awe!

The convention was the first of its kind. Six simultaneous workshops were held which discussed the issues of identity and culture; resources and rights; Forest and land; migrations and displacements; languages and oral literature; and finally the issues related to tribal women, children and the aged. This convention was not limited to intellectual discourse of elite scholars but was participated in by all the so-called “non-urban educated products,” meaning the traditionally rich and outspoken tribals! In one workshop I heard a protest from a Bhil tribe who questioned why urban scholars wrongly romanticize the tribes and look at them as sub culture. He voiced, “When a girl is chosen by the boy and the girl elopes from the *mela* (fair) then it is an uncultured behaviour on our part but when your daughter runs away, you defend these acts as “love marriage”. Again when we eat *roti* keeping them on our palm we become uncultured but when you carry plates then you call it buffet”. He voiced that none should look at them through coloured glasses. He finally appealed to the scholars not to look at them through colonial viewfinders as they have their own faith in their customs and rituals.

Dr. K.K. Chakraborty, Secretary to the Government of India, Member Secretary, IGNCA asked the tribal audience “Don’t wait for some University Professor who would come someday and write your history, better you write your oral traditions and history without further delay”.

Toeing this perspective, when I asked Champa Behan Jayanti Bai Devi she said “In your history books we are not mentioned but we have our own history to tell and we have been listening to these stories while growing up and today we narrate the same to our children.” Such is the level of self-faith and determination, which we urban scholars seriously lack!

Dr Ganesh Devi of Bhasha, while setting the tone of the Convention said that India has six crores Nomads who, since ages, have been living a nomadic life and today because of their migrating life style they have not been able to develop the notion of their own land and subsequently became identity less especially when legally it is mandatory that every identity must be rooted to a piece of land! In the context of ownership of land



Budubudike – the nomadic fortune teller of Karnataka

Photo: Gautam Chatterjee

Dr. Devi argued that crores of adivasis are "rightless" in their own forest.

Social reformer, Medha Patkar, questioned the prevalent scenario about 'rights of adivasis' and quoted an incident of an octogenarian, Bhula Busha: An adivasi who was asked to prove his identity and that he belonged to the land of Brar Gaon. He replied, "my forefather's bones are buried in this land, I know the age of the trees with whom I grew, I know when the river changed its course, I know all about my

On the score of rights Dr. B.D. Sharma, who is the epitome of a legendary crusader for the rights of these marginalized classes, narrated a story.

In some forests in Madhya Pradesh, adivasis gathered at the office of DFO and asked him, "Sahab, Does this forest belong to you?" The DFO answered in the affirmative. Then an adivasi asked, "Do you know the paths of the jungle and can you travel alone?" The DFO answered with a yes and no. Dr. Sharma intervened and said, "No the

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surroundings, how else can I prove my identity?" The painful episode brought to the fore how oral tradition is ignored in the world of paper documents. Medha Patkar questioned how in 2005 can we be ruled by British Colonial Act of 1894?

During the convention, I interacted with many adivasis to understand their "marginalized" condition and tried to fathom their faith in themselves. One Adivasi woman from Gujarat, was well equipped with knowledge of medicinal plants. But today she cannot use this knowledge, as she is not permitted to use her own forest because of existing forest laws. She narrated that recently her son developed acute pain in his stomach but she could not gain access to *Angreji* (Western) medicine nor could she use her own knowledge because she has no rights over the forest anymore. So she waited for evening to clandestinely enter the jungle and bring some roots of plants to cure her son. Perhaps this shows how law is inhumane and on the other hand she demonstrated her medicinal knowledge and skill handed down orally from generation to generation, which scores the point towards "self faith" about their wisdom tradition.

DFO would ever be able to go alone in the jungle without the help of adivasis". Meanwhile, a naughty adivasi girl went into the jungle and brought some leaves of different plants and asked the DFO to identify any one of them. Then the adivasis asked the DFO, "Sahab you cannot venture into the forest alone as you do not know the paths and you do not know the name of the plants and still you say the jungle belongs to you?"

This story line was narrated in a lighter vein but has a strong message for the Government who has snatched away the rights of access to the jungle from the adivasis.

I met a *madari* who said "We can no more catch snakes, we do not afflict pain but the "animal lovers" of cities branded us as snake killers". He further questioned, "animal slaughter goes on unabated legally and when we catch a snake to take out poison and use them as medicines, we are termed as anti-animals. What an irony!" Bhula exclaimed.

Yes, who eats away forests? The contractors or adivasis; who loves animals? The pseudo animal lovers or *madaris*? This remains an open question which needs to be answered.

Gondalis – ancient worshippers of Mother Goddess

Photo: Gautam Chatterjee

Yes, the tribes nurture a deep faith in nature as they worship snakes, other animals, river and the trees, which are God for them.

Shri Jaipal Reddy Hon'ble Minister of Culture and I&B who had inaugurated the convention and voiced that this convention would pave the path for understanding the various aspects of intangible heritage of the wisdom tradition of the tribal world. He suggested that this opportunity (meaning convention) must be used for understanding modern science and wisdom tradition and validate them to redefine the new charter of research and revitalization.

Dr. K.K. Chakraborty, Member Secretary, IGNCA declared that this convention was a matter of strengthening the bridge of life, direction, knowledge and science. The aim was to make life full of arts and arts full of life. He appealed that oral history be recorded as *katha*, *kavya* and *darshan* (mythology, poetry and worship). IGNCA has used this occasion and documented some 200 hours of audio-visual footage, which included deliberations of the conventions, interviews and performances. All these are to provide an entry point for future history and further field study.

During the convention, Prof. Roy Burman, a veteran anthropologist took up the issue of wrongful classifications of "Criminal Tribes", which has stigmatized individual and groups and the process is still on.

*Bhil Tribes of Madhya Pradesh
in traditional attire*

Photo: Gautam Chatterjee



To unveil the deeper dynamics of tribal faith I interacted with many groups. One cornerstone of their faith was their gods and goddesses, which remains the pivotal hinge of their society. I tried to gather the names of heavenly bodies. Some of them are mentioned below.

Renukadevi, Yallomma, Durgagavva, Dya Mavva, Shakti Mate, Mangey Devi, Dongria Dev, Tulya Mata, Guru Dev Khandawa, Vira Dev, Beli Bani, Dalcha Beli, Lebe Jogri, Hidimbe, Mridula Mataji, Ujjalimata...

There are thousands of gods who are worshipped by the tribals. Each of the gods and goddess have their own myths, which need to be understood to fathom their relation with God, the forest and the nature around. A detailed account in this article is perhaps not possible. However, we will talk about one Nomadic group in some detail.

There is a nomad group called Gondhali who are also known as Budabudakern, Jaisarn, Gonaliga, Gondali. These Gondhali communities are spread in Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra. The Gondhali has many sub-communities like Parge, Panchamgi, Vakode, Tite, Bagale, Vashtar Ingale, Gokale, Dondate, Gurzore etc.

They live a nomadic life and their usual halts are choultries, temples, verandahs, village entrance etc. They eke out their living by singing Gondhali songs, narrating stories, entertaining people with musical instruments and by wearing masks.

However, with changing times, they have resorted to selling household utensils. In Karnataka they are engaged in carpet weaving and do common vending. Some of them have taken up the profession of fortune telling. Many others just beg.

Nevertheless, Gondaliyas are primarily singers. Thematically they sing devotional songs with a touch of righteousness. Some of their common musical instruments are *sambhal*, *budabudite*, *choundaki*, *shruti* etc. The main festival is Dussehra, where Durga is worshipped. All members of the Gondaliya community sacrifice sheep. According to the tradition once in three years Goddess Durga is worshipped in the woods. Sacrifice of sheep and community meals are taken in the forest. As a tradition the remains are buried in the soil as they return to a nomadic existence.

According to the *Shivand Panchangi* the origin of Gondaliya goes back to the time of mythology...

"The story is thus told that Goddess Renuka Devi's son, Parasuram, after killing Bettasur the devil, used his head as a *choundaki* and produced a sound "*thri, thrinam and Udho, Udho*" which was enjoyed by Parashuram. This itself is called *Gondholi*. Likewise, every nomadic group has its own oral history which needs to be recorded before they get erased with time."

Tribal faiths are not restricted to sacred mythology but touches upon all the aspects of wisdom traditions. Most of the nomads have no scripted language but a very rich dialect, which allows one to have self-pride in one's tradition though much is being faded out with time.

I talked to Rajender of Gondhri Jana Jati from Maharashtra. Rajender's dialect is *manjra*. He said wisdom of harvesting from sowing to the cutting of the produce is subtly enjoined in their songs. "There are many hidden meanings in *Gondhri Ruchki Geet* about life and living," said Rajender.

He even said that since ages they have developed sign languages or *mudras* incorporated in their dance form, which can communicate any meaning. Historically, Shivaji used their services to gather intelligence about the enemy positions and through *mudra* they communicated their gathered intelligence.

While talking to Shiv Kumar of Dhangar Somang of Maharashtra — a shepherd community— it is learnt that in earlier times there lived a shepherd, Shivru, who had shown British the path to Khandala from Bombay. Since then it is has been known as 'Dhangar Khandala Ghat'. So next time you listen to the popular Bollywood song, "*Aati Kya Khandala*" do remember the nomads of Dhangar Somang.

Another aspect of wisdom tradition, which came to light, was medicinal plants and their usage. Most of the people in their forties are unable to talk about them as coherently as their elders did. This has happened because the nomads and adivasis do not enjoy the rights of the jungle so they are unable to put to use their traditional knowledge about herbs, roots and plants. Perhaps for the next generation the total knowledge medicinal plants will be wiped off if the practice is not revitalized without further delay. Is somebody listening?

In the convention, New Delhi has seen that, despite their abject poverty and displacement, these nomads and adivasis



do enjoy life. Their lives are well punctuated with fairs and festivals with flavour of traditional culture and a dash of sacredness. Some 80 performances showcased at IGNCA made the modern bands shy. The acoustic pulses, thematically rooted to their conscious belief are a matter of pride for them. The Ghana dance of the Siddhis who came originally from Africa speak Gujarati but dance to their ancestral tune of the African Continent. The Swangla of Lahul Spiti dance with gaiety yet the melody swings with pauses and their graceful movements are studded with glamorous traditional costumes. The lively Bhils and the Chhatisgarhi tribals all simulated an atmosphere, which perhaps remain incomparable. They have portrayed their immense faith in themselves and showcased their identities with clarity.

On the last day of the three day performance by 80 tribal troops; I was strolling on the lawns of IGNCA at about 9.00 p.m. I found a young group of girls giggling and one girl, perhaps from Gujarat, was wearing a *sidda pallu saree* and trying out the solo ramp walk. I wondered, is this the shadow of the ongoing media hype event 'Lakme Fashion Week' or are these the reflections of aspirations nurtured inwardly by the generation next of the tribal world? ■

The author has been writing on Indian culture and tradition for the last 25 years. He has authored 11 books. Presently he is Research Associate and Script Writer with the Media Unit of IGNCA.

Tribals from Lahul Spiti – where tradition sustains even in sub-zero

Photo: Gautam Chatterjee