

NOMADIC NUANCES

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Traditional ironsmiths always on the move, the Gadulia Lohars from Rajasthan live in close-knit communities that travel from village to village, and now, even to the outskirts of metropolises, to set up camp for brief periods.



Gadulia Lohars, a nomadic tribe of Rajasthan, have been moving around North India in their beautifully carved wooden carts sporting traditional Rajasthani robes since the 16th century! These Lohars are a closely knit community and prefer to live in isolation. Their seclusion had helped them keep their identity relatively uninfluenced by urban technological culture. Since the distant past, their caravans have been wayfaring from village to village and city to city to earn them their livelihood. Today, at the outskirts of the cities, cart-wheels stop where they singularly champion their traditional profession of ironsmithy (*loha*) which is why they are known as lohars down the ages. According to hearsay, these lohars are the descendants of weapon-makers from the 16th century who used to shape the valiant Rajput swords. Since then much has been changed in the lifestyle of these lohars who are today reduced to poor ironsmiths and spend their life as mobile markets to meet the needs of the far-flung villages as well as to the well connected cities.

Gadulia Lohars claim that their ancestral home was in Chittorgarh. During the Mughal days, Maharaja Udai Singh used to rule Chittor as an independent ruler. Udai Singh was defeated in the wave of Mughal expansion and in 1568 Chittor fell into the hands of the Mughal army. Thus people abandoned the *quila* (fort) and fled to the Aravali hills. Maharana Pratap, son of Udai Singh, continued the valiant resistance to the Mughals and recovered some of the lost land of his father's kingdom. Gadulia Lohars were the soldiers of Maharana Pratap's army who fought the war to the best of their

ability. Before his death, Maharana Pratap took a pledge from his chiefs that Chittor would not be abandoned to the enemy. But fate had in store otherwise for the Rajputs. They had to give away Chittor to the vast Mughal army. After losing the battle, these Gadulia Lohars vowed to follow five principles till they could liberate the fortress of Chittorgarh. Today, when you visit the fortress, you will find a tablet bearing an inscription in Hindi proclaiming the five principles: Gadulia

Lohars vowed that they would not go up to the fort of Chittor until the *quila* was liberated. They would live a nomadic life and would not live in houses. Furthermore, they pledged not to sleep on cots (*charpais*) or to light lamps and also not to keep ropes for drawing water from the well.

The Chittorgarh inscription further states that since then these lovers of freedom have been living in their bullock carts and moving from place to place. They have been religiously fol-

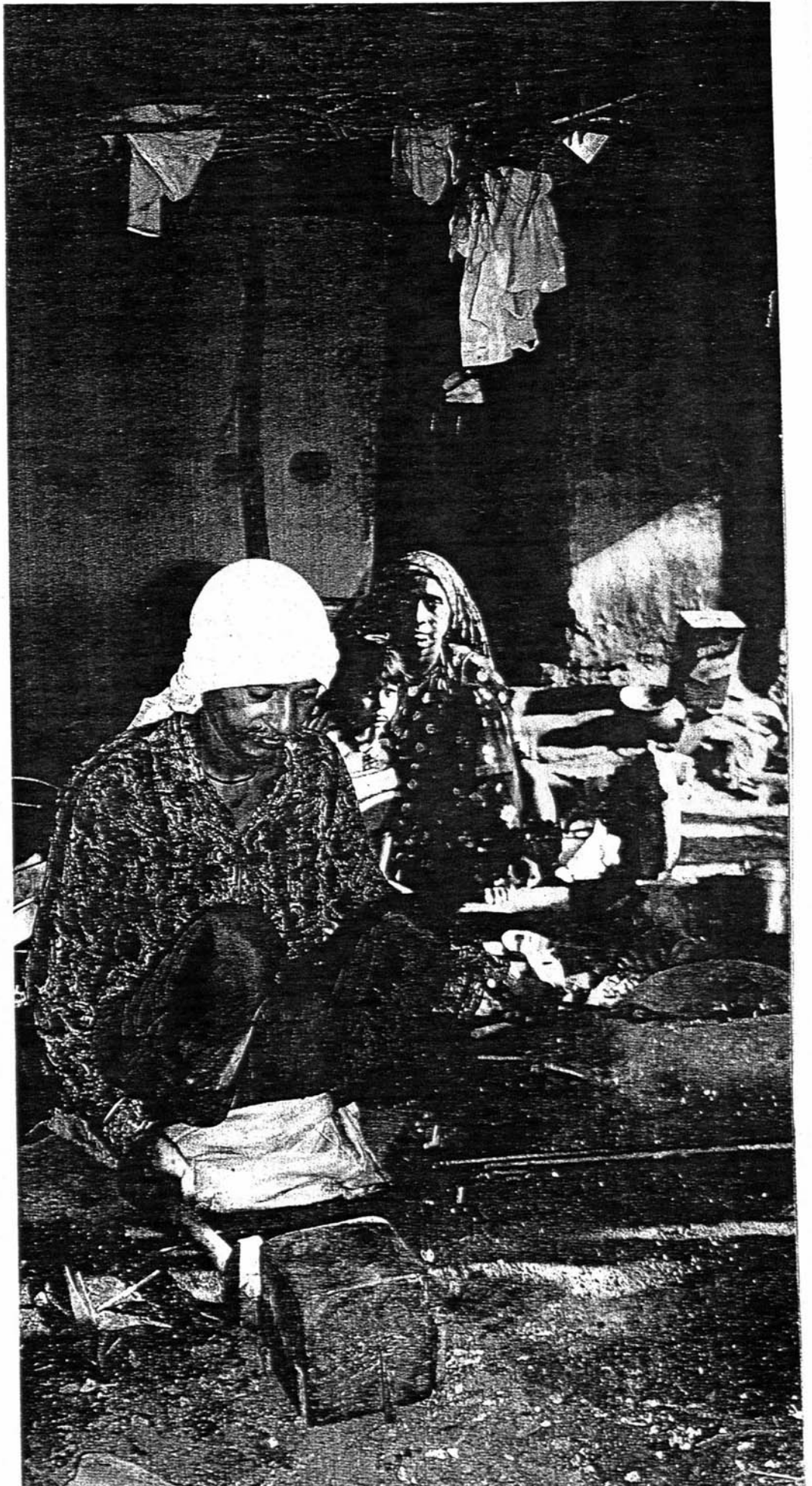
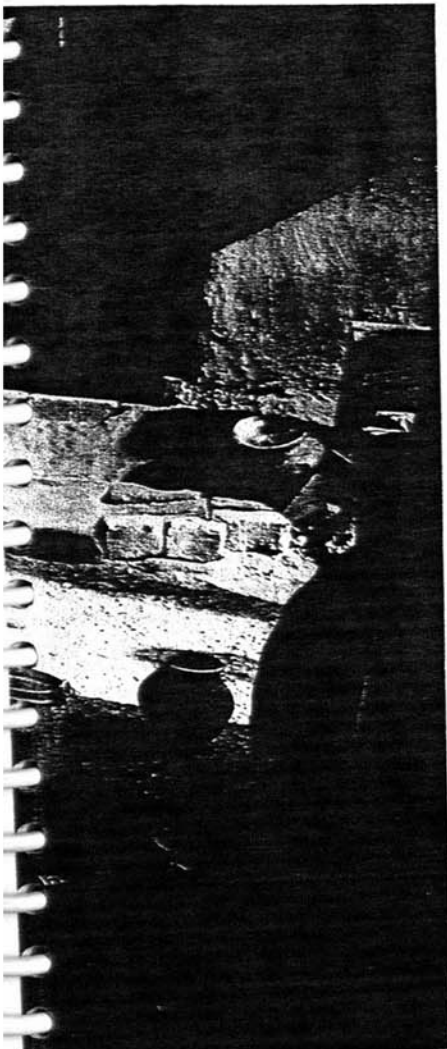


Women and children too help in the work

The ironsmith at work

lowing these principles of life for centuries but at the turn of this century when the socio-political atmosphere of the country underwent a rapid change, much of the vows their predecessors took earlier could not be followed scrupulously. Today they go to the fort of Chittor. Some of them have started living in houses and some erect walls encompassing their carts wherever they encamp. Nowadays one can see that the men have started using charpais whereas children and female members still sleep in the carts. The present generation of Gadulia Lohars who are getting influenced by urban culture also use lamps at night but a few clusters still uphold some of their pledges.

Some Gadulia Lohars believe that Kalka Mata once cursed them on some occasion that they would not lead a settled life. When the government gave land to these Gadulia Lohars and influenced the enlightened people of the community to live a settled life, some of them opted for the same. But soon a few deaths followed in the camp of the settled Lohars and the

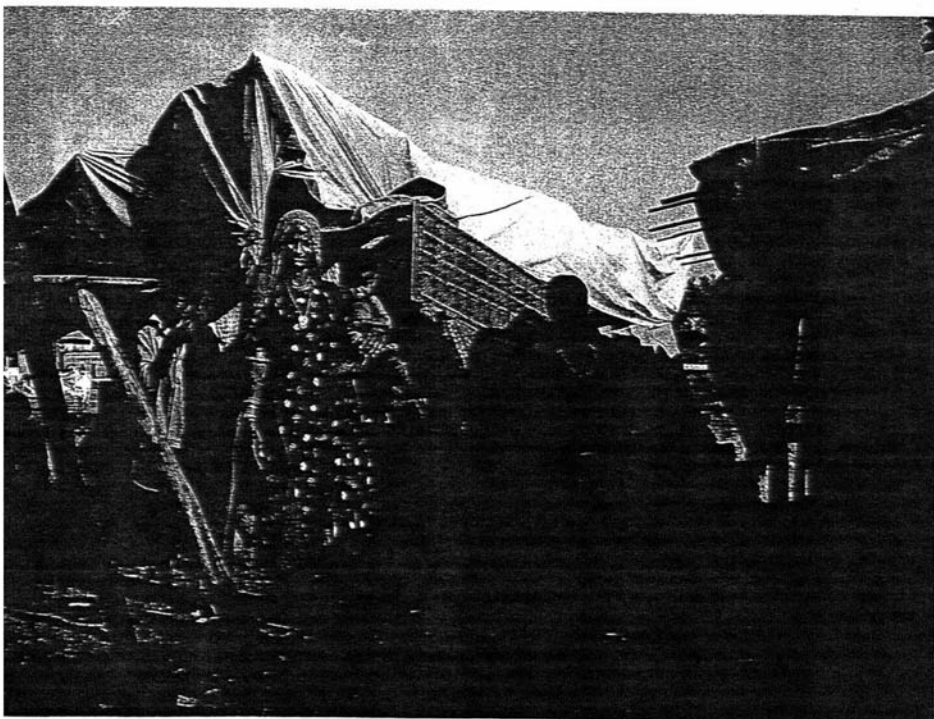


community interpreted it as the curse of Kalka Mata once again — the powerful female deity capable of doing irreparable destruction. Thus those Lohars again came back to the fold of nomadic life abandoning their homes.

These Lohars move in a cluster of closely related families. Decisions on where to camp and where to shift are generally taken in groups by the elder men of the community. The *panchayat* of the community has considerable influence on these families. Lohars take necessary suggestions, especially regarding marriages, from their elders. Their lifestyle is similar to the Rajputs.

These Lohars are considered highest among all other nomadic groups of Rajasthan. Like the Rajputs they perform child marriage. Their dress and ornaments are similar to the Rajputs. They dress in the simple rural folk style of Rajasthan. The male members of the community wear *jhavi* or *angarkhi* (jacket) which is collarless. They sport a headgear called *potia* which is col-

The Gadulia Lohar women and children

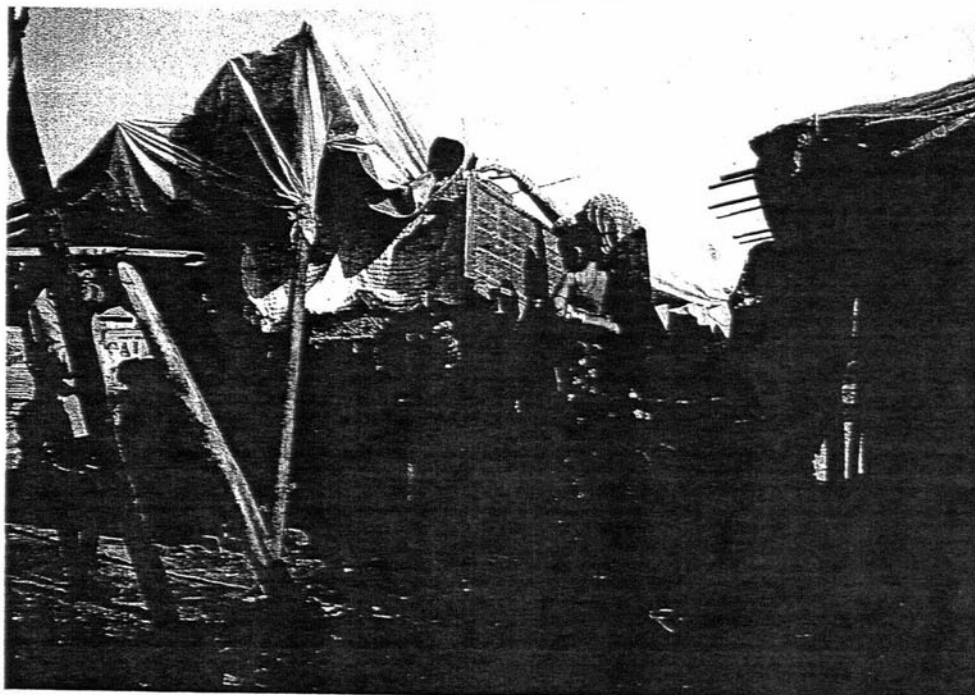


ourful and designed with dots and flower motifs from the Rajasthani school of art. And they wear the *dhoti* as a lower garment. All Gadulia Lohars wear *nagra jooti* or hand-stitched shoes.

The dressing of Gadulia Lohar woman are brighter and with bigger motifs. They wear a ghagra (skirt), *kanchili* (bodice) *lugra* (mantle) and a pair of *nagra* shoes.

The ghagra is made of ten to twenty yards of cloth and has considerable gather. This covers the body from waist to just above the ankles. These ghasgras are generally in bright hues of Indian red, burnt amber and sometimes blue.

The kanchili is short-sleeved and



Seen behind — the wooden carts converted to homes

their arms, chest, calves, ankles, stomach and even spot their eyebrows with tattooing.

Gadulia women wear ornaments fancifully. Ornaments are a symbol of their lifestyle and are used for different reasons. For example a married woman must wear ornaments on her head, ear, nose, neck, upper arms and feet. Their arms are generally decorated with big bangles which start from the shoulder joint and cover up to the elbow and they are generally of ivory or silver. *Churis*, glass bangles, are worn on the wrist. On the hair, the *tickli* is worn which is a silver pendant finely designed and strung on the head.

Amongst the Gadulia Lohars, a wedding is considered as one of the most auspicious occasions in the family. Generally, at the time of birth itself, matches are made amongst the community. On maturity of the bride and bridegroom their marriage is performed and the dates are fixed with the help of a Brahmin who finds out the right *muhurat* (auspicious time). The girl's father demands 'bride price' from the bridegroom which is generally decided upon by the elders of the community. When everything

backless. At the back there are two pairs of strings which are lightly tied to keep it in position.

The mantle is generally of bright colours and is used to cover the head. Small silver bells and trinkets are attached to the border of the mantle. Gadulia Lohars generally stitch their clothes and craft their ornaments with their own hands.

Since time immemorial, orna-

gets settled, nine knots are tied on a thread and one single knot is opened every day from the ninth day prior to the date of marriage. Gadulia Lohars refer to the bridegroom as *lada* and the bride as *ladi*.

Five days before the marriage, the brother and sister-in-law of the *lada* and *ladi* wear the wedding dress and go to the village potter. They bring a clay idol of Ganesha known as *Banyatha* and one earthen vessel known as *kalas* from the potter. These are kept near their carts. Over the *kalas*, *neem* leaves are kept. Turmeric (grounded) is kept inside the earthen vessel. The turmeric is applied to the bodies of the bride and groom on the fifth preceding day of the marriage. Then onwards *Banyatha* is worshipped in the morning and evening at the respective places of the *lada* and *ladi*.

On the marriage day, the wedding procession (*barat*) is lead by a *doli*, a palanquin, and the men and women of Gadulia Lohars dance and participate in the grand feast where mutton, *roti* and drinks are served. Their marriage is performed by Brahmins with traditional Hindu rituals in a simple ceremony.

emony.

Coming to their professional life, it has been observed that when the son attains maturity at the age of sixteen, his parents present him a cart and blacksmith's tools to enable him to lead an independent life. Generally the son's cart is placed next to his parent's cart.

Gadulia Lohars make plough blades and axe blades of different sizes and dimensions. They also make cooking utensils, hammers and different types of cutting, boring and levelling equipment. To make all these, Gadulia Lohars use a bellows to inflame the oven, levers, anvils etc. They prefer to work with the furnace specially in the winter season when the heat is not hazardous for them. In summer the demand for iron goods is considerably lower too.

It is found that in off-season the Gadulia Lohars trade in bullocks and move from village to village. Moreover, in the urban backdrop they are now switching over to traditional Rajasthani crafts like handcrafting small decorative horses etc as they can no longer sustain themselves with ironsmithy alone. Gadulia women are nowadays specially engaged in making puppets

or other folk crafts. The men do all the odd jobs of iron and also try to settle down near building sites where they get plenty of orders for iron doors, door joints and hinges, grilled windows and gates etc.

Gadulia Lohars have been leading a nomadic life for more than a hundred years. Their nomadic life goes on. Often the wheels of a caravan stop for a longer time in urban settings but always to eventually move on. Although amidst cultural amalgamation they might have lost some of their traditions and cultural values, their blackish wooden carved carts and bellowing furnaces are still to be seen all over the northern parts of India. They have not altogether lost their cultural ethos as this secluded community enjoys the prime Hindu festivals like Holi and Diwali with traditional gaiety. They can be seen encamped on the roadside of big metropolises where, even though the electronic culture looms large, they exist upholding their cultural ethos and live in their cramped carts. Symbolic nomadic nuances!

Rightly clad women share a joke

