

The Power of Taboos

by

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IN 1871, the British government passed the Criminal Tribes Act which declared a number of nomadic tribes criminal from birth and placed a number of restrictions on them. After national independence, this Act was abolished in 1952, as a result of the efforts of social reformers. The former criminal tribes are now known as liberated tribes. Among them are Nats, Kanjars, Sansis, Kabutras, Paradhis, Kalbeliyas, Banjaras, Sikligars and Kuchbandiyas.

The Modhiyas, a liberated tribe, are seminomadic even today. They can be seen with turbans on their heads and shoulderbags, selling herbs and roots. They spend eight months of the year, wandering and pursuing their trade, and four months at their regular settlements. Some Modhiya families have settled down permanently and are engaged in agriculture. A few are educated, and employed in government service. I have worked among the Modhiyas for seven years, interviewing 300 men and 300 women in Gwalior and Datiya districts.

The Modhiyas still preserve their unique way of life, including many customs and rituals. They generally avoid taking outsiders into their settlements.

Women participate in activities like hunting, gathering of herbs and preparation of medicines. They also participate in the community *panchayat*. The Modhiyas practise bride price, not dowry. A bride's father gets a bride price ranging from Rs 500 to Rs 15,000. The Modhiyas welcome a girl's birth and consider unmarried girls pure. Girls participate in worship and it is they who build shrines. But married women are considered extremely impure.

The lower garment or *lehnga* of married women is thought most impure. If a woman hits a man with her *lehnga* he is considered impure or *ulak*, and has to bathe in the Ganga, have a special *puja* and feast the community to purify himself. If a woman hangs her *lehnga* on a wall, the wall becomes *ulak* and has to be destroyed. Her whole family will have to conduct purification rites. Even after this, they will be considered stained and no member of such a family can become the chief or *panch*.

Modhiya women are always on the alert so that episodes of *ulak* rarely occur. Since the Modhiyas generally live in tarpaulin tents, the question of women going on to the roof does not arise. However, where they have settled down and constructed houses, it is *ulak* for a woman to go on to the roof because this would involve her lower garment being on a higher level than men.



In Kirora village, Gwalior district, about 40 Modhiya families have settled permanently, work their own land and have constructed houses. One of them, Bulakha Modhiya, has 60 *bighas* of fertile land, and grows wheat, lentils and chickpeas. He is well respected in the whole area, and has received an expensive gun as an award from the Madhya Pradesh government for help in catching a dacoit. He has also won a local Gram Sabha election with a big majority. Bulakha has constructed a three room house in Kirora.

Bulakha is a man of progressive views and opposed to bad customs. Bundelkhand is a very hot region. The months from March to October are particularly sultry. Most people sleep on the rooftops or in the open. So one day he decided to break the *ulak* taboo. One hot September night in 1986 he and his family went up and slept on the roof of their house. They slept well, but the next morning, there was an uproar in Kirora.

The Modhiyas called a *panchayat* at 7 a.m. and decided to outcast Bulakha. Bulakha had calculated that since he was the headman he should be able to bring the others round to his point of view. He had counted on his wits, courage and wealth to see him through. He had even thought that his fellow tribesmen might praise his daring and emulate him.

He set off as usual to the fields to perform his ablutions. On the way he met several Modhiyas but none of them returned his greeting. For the next few days, Bulakha stayed indoors and did not communicate with anyone. Meanwhile, another *panchayat* was held and it was decided, in Bulakha's absence, that he would not be received back into

the community until he was punished. Bulakha now found himself completely isolated. He was insulted wherever he went, and his nearest relatives severed all relations with him. Unable to bear this humiliation, Bulakha called a big *panchayat* at Kirora on September 10. Respected elders from many places including Gwalior, Jaurasi, Syahra, Churaita, Datiya, Churali, were present. Bulakha explained his position and suggested that the *ulak* taboo be done away with. A couple of liberal minded *panches* agreed with him that *ulak* was a useless custom. But the majority of *panches* were in favour of *ulak* and severely rebuked those who spoke against it. Bulakha now sought permission to purify his house by performing a *puja* but the *panches* said that while a living creature might be purified by *puja* and Ganga bathing, an inanimate object which became *ulak*

must be destroyed. Bulakha's pleas were ignored and the *panches* decreed that until Bulakha and his family shaved their heads, bathed in the Ganga and conducted a special worship, and also destroyed their house, they would continue to be socially ostracised, and no Modhiya would interact with them. Bulakha had spent Rs 3,000 on organising this *panchayat*.

Bulakha went home where his whole family was waiting anxiously and his wife was weeping at the thought of their precious home being destroyed. But Bulakha had not yet lost hope. He went to Dabra where he had a friend who was a journalist attached to the *Dainik Bhaskar* of Gwalior. Bulakha told him the whole story and asked him to write about it, which he did. The story appeared on September 13. Bulakha believed that newspapers are connected with the government, and that as soon as his

story was published, government officers would come and force his community to put an end to *ulak*. He waited for several days but nothing happened, except that the Modhiyas grew even more angry with him for having publicised the affair.

Finally, Bulakha was defeated. He sold for Rs 10,000 the gun he had received from the Madhya Pradesh government and surrendered before the *panches*. On October 23, another big *panchayat* was held in Kirora. Bulakha's house was broken down and the whole family was shaved and sent to Allahabad to bathe in the Ganga. The *panches* stayed in Kirora until the family's return. Then a special worship was conducted, the *panches* were feasted, and after announcing the reintegration of the family into the community, they returned to their own homes.

(Translated from Hindi)

The Farce Again

*I, too, have seen the farce...
with eyes averted
in mock humility.*

*Walled up in gold and red
with mother hovering
hesitant expectant...
helpless,
pointing out the long, black, silky, pleated hair,
the 'fair' colour-recent
result of mudpacks and turmeric...
Tongues clicking
in sympathy/despair/indecision...*

*And father's ears on tiptoe
and hope spread out across his face
like mountain shadows across the plain;
followed by the
inevitable
Yes/No...
To
the piece of polished human flesh
placed lifeless on the corner chair,
with eyes averted
in stark, real humiliation...*

I, too, have been the farce

- Charanjit Kaur

Krishna, the World

*to be a man
to steal their hearts
some butter
to take away their clothes
to have some fun*

*though not the brains
blue skinned boy*

*to have
crores of nights and days
misery
forgotten for one moment*

*though not for ever
blue skinned boy*

*takes more than you
all men
can hold*

*it leaves you ,
naked*

blue skinned boy

*it takes
more
to give life*

-Jurgen Jansen