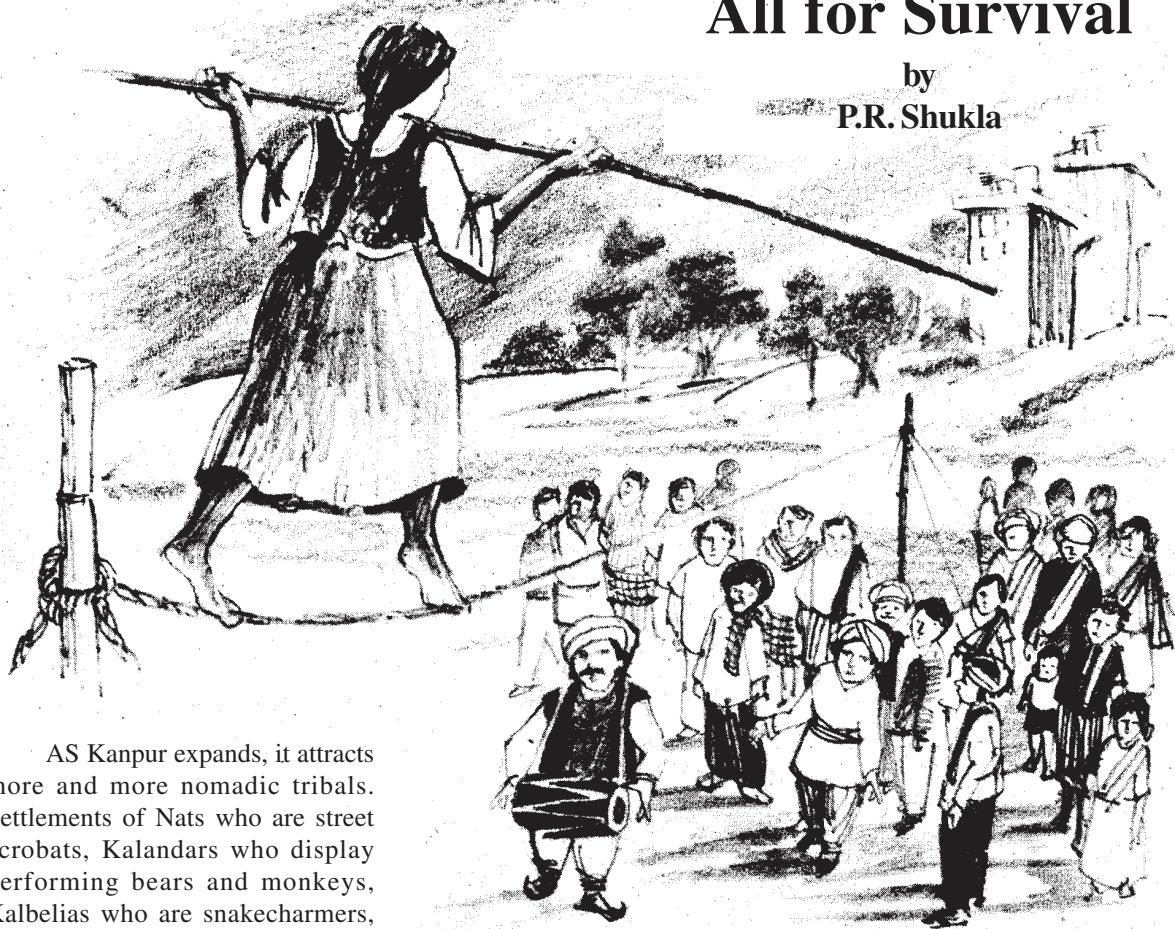


All for Survival

by

P.R. Shukla



AS Kanpur expands, it attracts more and more nomadic tribals. Settlements of Nats who are street acrobats, Kalandars who display performing bears and monkeys, Kalbelias who are snakecharmers, Kuchbandias who clean ears, and Moghias who spell herbal medicines, can be found here. At times, hundreds of families camp in the parade ground at McRobertganj and the Ramlila Maidan of Rail bazar.

The British government had categorised most nomadic tribes as criminal tribes and had imposed several restrictions on their activities. Although the Criminal Tribes Act was repealed in 1952, the police and administration still harass tribes and compel them to remain perpetually on the move. Despite being frequently driven away, however, they return to the big cities, since it is here that they can earn a better income.

This is an account reconstructed from actual events of atrocities

inflicted by the police on a family of street acrobats in December 1986. It is a typical story. This family reached Kanpur after having travelled many miles on foot. Mangalia and his married son Sukhram set up their tents at McRobertganj - they knew from previous experience that it was centrally located and relatively free of policemen.

The family set up bamboo poles and spread old, torn sacking and polythene sheets on them to form makeshift huts. Mangalia's wife Pyari and daughter Bhuri had fetched flour and lentils from the market. Sukhram's wife, Kajri, was pregnant and had a

two year old daughter, Sona, to look after, so she did not accompany them.

The next day was Saturday. Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday are market days in the parade ground. Father and son planned their performances for the next day. They knew that in a couple of days the police would be on their trail, so they were anxious to earn as much as possible by putting on four or five shows a day. That night, the family went to sleep early because they were tired after their long trek.

The next day, Pyari and Bhuri were the first to rise. They prepared *rotis* from three kilos of flour and a

pungent sauce made of onions, garlic and ginger. This is the everyday diet of the Nats. It is simple to prepare and also inexpensive. After all had eaten, and Sukhram had had a cup of tea and Mangalia a *bidi*, all of them except Kajri set out for the parade ground.

It was past 10 yet the shops in Navin Market had not opened. But pavement vendors had set up their wares. Mangalia took a look around and decided to perform near the Medical Association building on the Mall. Sukhram and he set up two bamboo poles with a rope between them about eight feet above the ground. The rope was anchored to the ground with iron nails. Pyari began beating the drum while Mangalia and Sukhram began to cut capers. At one point each caught hold of the other's feet and then turned cartwheels together, to the amusement of the spectators. Soon, Sukhram was balancing a 12 foot long pole, now on his forehead and now on one finger. Pyari encouraged the children in the front row to clap.

Now Bhuri got up. She was a dark, little girl of 17. Folding her hands to mother earth, she picked up a long pole and leapt on to the tightrope. With amazing confidence and balance, she walked from one end of the rope to the other. The children clapped loudly. As Bhuri prepared to undertake a particularly risky feat, Pyari handed over the drum to Sukhram and came close to the rope to catch Bhuri in case she fell.

Bhuri walked to the middle of the rope and then, invoking god, began to swing the rope to the right and to the left. The rope swung three to four feet to each side. The onlookers held their breath but Bhuri did not fall. Her mother now gave her a steel plate. She placed it at one end of the rope and sat on it, then with a jerk, jumped to the other end of the rope. Sukhram now went round with a collection bowl. The crowd immediately began

to melt away. Some threw a rupee or fifty paise, others walked off without paying anything.

Mangalia counted the money — they had made Rs 30. As they were preparing to move on, a man who had been watching Bhuri for a long time came up and asked where they were staying. Since he was in plainclothes, Sukhram did not realise that he was a policeman and answered his question. The Nats then moved on to the railway station. That day, they put up a total of five shows and returned to the settlement richer by Rs 200. On the way, Mangalia bought two bottles of country liquor and a meal of cooked mutton. Kajri was not feeling well so she drank some milk and went to sleep. The others sat down in the open to eat and drink. Pyari grew tipsy so Bhuri took her into the tent. Mangalia and Sukhram began to plan the next day's programme.

All of a sudden three uniformed policemen appeared and began to hurl filthy abuse at the bewildered men. One of them caught hold of Sukhram and yelled: "You rascal, are you creating a drunken brawl? Constable, take them and lock them up." Mangalia and Sukhram were stunned. Normally, the police would order them to move on but not take them to the lock up. Pyari came rushing out and fell at the policemen's feet. Still inside the tent, Bhuri caught a glimpse of the most abusive policeman and recognised him as the one who had enquired about their place of stay. Even at that time, Bhuri had felt evil intentions. Now, she was sure he had come looking for her. Trembling, she confided her fears to her sister-in-law. Kajri emerged from the tent in order to assess the situation.

As she stepped out, she heard one of the policemen say: "You bastards, either send Bhuri with us for the night or get ready to go to jail." Just then their eyes fell on Kajri. In their intoxicated state they mistook

her for Bhuri. Immediately, they pounced on her and carried her off. Pyari tried to catch hold of one of the policemen but he kicked her so hard in the face that two of her front teeth broke and her face was covered with blood.

The next morning, Kajri returned in a rickshaw, accompanied by a twelve year old boy. Mangalia and Sukhram were sitting outside. They had been crying all night. Kajri, who was already ailing, looked pale and was about to collapse but Sukhram caught hold of her. Pyari and Bhuri took her into the tent and made her lie down. After lying with closed eyes for a long time, Kajri burst out crying and narrated how the three policemen had taken her to Brijendraswarup Park and raped her by turns in the open. They had treated her so brutally that she had suffered a miscarriage.

When Pyari told her husband the story, he realised that they should leave the city immediately. The policemen were likely to come again. They must have guessed by Kajri's miscarriage, that she was not Bhuri and might now come for Bhuri too. Within an hour, they had packed up, and boarded the 10 a.m. bus for Lucknow. Fear of the policemen overshadowed all of them. The men kept peering out of the windows to see if they were being followed, while the women sat with veiled faces. Only after the bus crossed the Ganga bridge did they relax.

They alighted at Unnao where they intended to spend a couple of days, and set up camp near the bus stand. Bhuri was so terrified that she flatly refused to perform. Sukhram too wanted to protect his sister and agreed that Kajri should perform in Bhuri's place.

Next day they gave their first performance in the city centre. Sukhram took on most of the work so as to spare Kajri. Kajri walked the tightrope and balanced a pole on her

palm, forehead and teeth. In three day's time, they managed to save about Rs 800. On their last day in Unnao, they set up the tight-rope near the railway station. After Kajri's tightrope act, Sukhram tied Sona to the end of the pole and balanced it on his palm, forehead and teeth. Kajri too performed the same feat. A large crowd had gathered. Pyari tied three large stones weighing about 30 kilos to her plaits and lifted them off the ground. Then she took a pole with one end sharpened like a spear. She placed the blunt edge on the ground and the sharp edge between her breasts. With a jerk of her body, she bent the pole double. The excitement had reached its highest pitch when a capricious young man came forward, waving a 100 rupee note. Gesturing towards Kajri, he told Sukhram the note would be his if she would walk the tightrope with Sona balanced on a pole. Kajri was ready to perform but Sukhram was reluctant, remembering that he had lost one child four days ago. Sensing his fears, Kajri refused. But Mangalia did not want to lose Rs 100. Also, he hoped that other spectators would pay more, after witnessing the feat. So he persuaded Sukhram and Kajri to agree. Sukhram tied Sona to a 15 foot long pole and Kajri descended the 10 foot high rope. Invoking god she started walking. She had reached halfway when a voice struck her ears: "Here are the bastards — they have managed to reach here so fast after running away from Kanpur." Kajri recognised the voice and glanced at the crowd for an instant. There stood the murderer of her child, with a companion. That momentary loss of concentration proved fatal. She lost her balance and came crashing to the ground. Sukhram too had recognised the man's voice and got distracted. He managed to catch Kajri as she fell but the child's head hit the stones that Pyari had tied to her plaits a while earlier. Sona died on the spot.



The family had barely returned to their tent when the policeman with three others arrived and threatened to arrest and hang all of them on a charge of murdering the child. The family begged the policemen for mercy. After half an hour, the policemen managed to intimidate the family into agreeing to their bribe demands, and they left. With heavy hearts, Mangalia and Sukhram buried Sona in the nearby forest.

After sunset, the policemen returned in plainclothes, carrying bottles of country liquor. The family was seated outside the tents, around a fire.

The policemen were already drunk. One caught hold of Kajri, another of Bhuri, and went into the tents as if the Nats were their purchased slaves. The two other policemen kept vigil outside, having handed the bottles of liquor to Mangalia and Sukhram. After a while, the two policemen emerged from the tents and changed places with the two outside.

Mangalia and Sukhram were as though in the throes of a nightmare that they were helpless to awaken from. All had to be endured in order to remain alive.

(translated from Hindi by Manushi)