

Victims of the State

Yayavar Women Describe Government Oppression

by
Vibha Shukla

In India even today there are hundreds of tribes such as *Kanjars* and *Nats* who are always on the move and live as nomads. They are a tiny scattered minority among the rest of the population in most parts of the country. In states like Assam, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Kashmir and the hill regions of Uttar Pradesh they predominate in some areas. Each tribe has its distinct occupation. Some tribes are entertainers who train bears or monkeys to dance. Others move from place to place, grazing sheep, goats, cows and other livestock. Some gather and sell wild herbs, while some others make a living by singing.

They pitch their tents wherever water is available; in some towns and cities you may see them at the railway station, bus stand or in an open field. For a while they stay there and carry out their occupations. As soon as the head of the group gives orders to move, they roll up their tents, put their belongings on their donkeys and move on. These days some of them have begun to use passenger trains and buses in place of donkeys. Their whole life is spent without a permanent place they can call home.

They carry with them very little else apart from utensils, bedding and clothing. They do not store food supplies. Every day they purchase what they require for the day. When they



happen to get a large amount of money, they purchase gold with it. Each community has a different way of keeping its gold safe.

Most sleep on the ground. The sum total of the belongings of each family is likely to be no more than what can be carried by three donkeys. Young boys have started keeping transistor radios. Rituals connected with important occasions such as births, deaths, marriages among these communities must be performed during their travels.

The British government perceived these communities to be so dangerous that in 1871 a Criminal Tribes Act was passed. As result almost all nomadic

tribes were pronounced criminals and these communities had all kinds of restrictions placed on them. Their whole life became a nightmare. This infamous Act was finally scrapped in 1952 after the country had won Independence, though its consequences continue to make their lives more difficult. These tribes are now known as denotified communities or *vimukta jatis*.

Among these communities, the literacy rate is very low. By virtue of being nomadic they are exposed to a variety of risks. Whether they commit a crime or not, they are more likely to be rounded up and put in jail or in police custody. Their wives go to jail less often. To save their husbands, however, many women have had to pledge their bodies. Because of such atrocities most tribals have developed a deep hatred for the rest of society and try to keep aloof. Very little information is available on the inner life and problems of these communities.

For many years the government has formulated plans to improve the lot of these tribals. The truth, however, is that the very government machinery that has been appointed to ameliorate their condition is their worst enemy. The government machinery routinely subjects them to brutal atrocities because they are easy to implicate in any criminal case whether or not they have

committed that particular crime. The real culprits often escape and these nomads are often roped in instead.

Here are the experiences of some *Yayavar* or nomadic women gathered through interviews conducted in December 1989 among a particular group of them which had made a temporary settlement near the railway station and new bus stand in the city of Jhansi, Madhya Pradesh.

Bhuribai (Kanjar)

“People in our community can live without food but not without alcohol. We don’t like English liquor. Besides it is very, expensive. That is why we make liquor in our own tents. It is only with the help of liquor that we nomadic



Bhuribai (Kanjar)

Kanjars are able to get through the bitter cold of winter months under an open sky. But the people who have settled down to farming also produce their own alcohol.

Manufacturing liquor at home has two advantages: one, that we don’t have to buy it from the market. Secondly we are able to make some money from it because people like the liquor made by the *Kanjars*.

These days the police has become very alert so there isn’t much advantage in dacoity or burglary. If you get caught

you get severely punished and the police beats you up. Besides that if you work with the *thanedar* he takes away what we bring by theft. There is another danger. Occasionally during the course of a dacoity someone may get killed. That results in more police torture and more bribes. In addition we have to spend on lawyers. That is why we are gradually stopping unlawful activities.

Now we only brew liquor. If we get caught we only have to pay Rs 500-1,000 as bail. There is not much expense on policemen or lawyers either. The liquor business works well if you stay in one place. However it is not in our destiny to stay in one place.

Once we had pitched our tents near Tekanpur which is quite close to Gwalior and lies on the Gwalior-Jhansi road. All told there were over 40 tents. We stayed there for three years. If a mishap had not occurred, maybe we would have settled down in Tekanpur.

In Tekanpur we only used to brew liquor. In the evenings people from the nearby villages would come and buy our liquor. There is an army cantonment in Tekanpur. After two or three months army soldiers also began to come to buy our liquor. They gave us a good price so we sold them unadulterated liquor. Everybody was happy.

Thus two and a half years went by. One of the tents was occupied by Belabai. Bela was a widow and she used to live alone. One evening a soldier drank liquor in Bela’s tent and passed out there. He stayed with Bela all night. The next morning he gave Bela 50 rupees extra and went away. Among the *Kanjars* women have a lot of freedom so nobody said anything to Bela.

Next day the man came back with two of his friends. Bela gave him a drink and presented two new girls. Gradually the whole thing began to build up and a good pan of these soldiers’ salaries came to be spent in our *deras*.

However when the wives of the armymen learnt what was happening

they complained to the big sahib. The big sahib was very stern. One day he came with 10 or 12 soldiers. They broke our tents and we were ordered to leave the next day. That is how after settling down once we were compelled to go back to a nomadic life.”

Jorabai (Kalandar)

“Sometimes the police is responsible and sometimes us. There is a saying: *Naach naach mere bander aur kha jaye Kalandra*. (The monkey works himself



Jorabai (Kalandar)

to death dancing and the rewards are taken by the *Kalandra*). The people of our caste are engaged in the occupation of showing monkey dances. Some of us catch baby bears in the jungle, teach them tricks and when they grow up make them perform shows. We keep three or four donkeys with us. We put up our tents for three or four days in one place. As soon as business slackens we move on to a new place. But sometimes when we reach Delhi, Agra or Kanpur we stay on for some months.

Once, long ago, we had pitched five or six tents in the field of Red Fort in Delhi. It was about 5 or 6 p.m. Just then a policeman came by and asked my husband Nurbaksh for the *shisha* of the bear. This is used to make an aphrodisiac. That is why people often come to us *Kalandars* to buy it.

As soon as I saw the policeman, I recognised him. This was the same policeman who three years ago, seeing me alone, had violated me in my own tent. I quickly called Nurbaksh and told him the whole story.

As it was, Nurbaksh had always disliked the police. He told the policeman to wait, took out the root of a tree from his bundle (it looks like the bear's *shisha*) and sold it to him for Rs 500.

The policeman went away with the root. We knew that when he learnt the truth he would return and break our hands and feet. So the next day itself we wrapped our tents and left Delhi."

"A nomadic life is essential to escape police atrocities. Our occupation is such



Tamorabai (Kuchbandiyas)

that we can't settle down in one place. Our menfolk are engaged in the occupation of *singi* (a kind of pipe which village doctors use to suck up bad blood from the body) and the cleaning of ear wax. No matter how old or putrefied the wound or boil, we use the *singi* to set it right. Nowadays, however, all villages have a doctor so people don't come to us as often. Educated people these days are also reluctant to have their ears cleaned.

That is why the financial situation of the *Kuchbandiyas* is very bad. So much so that we have started begging. But our men do not beg. If they do they will be

called before the *panchayat*. That is why the women of our caste together with the girls and little children set out early in the morning, around 7 or 8 a.m., to beg in the streets and markets. That is how our work goes.

The city people do not say anything to us but the police trouble us. Some policemen are particularly bad. As soon as they set eyes on us they immediately come to the bus stand or railway station to enquire about and harass us.

Once we had set up three tents on the roadside between Jhansi and Chitra cinema. We had been there three days. Every day my husband would leave home around 8 a.m. to do his *singi* work. I and my sister-in-law Bindra would go to beg for alms. Bindra was just 18 years old. She was already engaged to be married. On the fourth day of our stay in Jhansi a wedding was to be celebrated in the house of a *pandit* living in Raiganj area. I stayed on with Bindra because I was tempted by the *mithai* and *puris* which we expected to get at the wedding.

When we returned at 9 a.m. to the tents we learnt that Jamu had been taken away by the police. I left Bindra at the tent and went to the police station. The police station officer met me outside. He said that Jamu had been accused of theft and would be sentenced to three years in jail. I wept, pleaded and offered to bail him out. But the officer refused bail. He had his eyes on Bindra. Eventually Bindra had to pay the bail all night, and then Jamu was freed.

Jamu had become very frightened because of the police beatings. The next day itself he loaded the luggage on the donkeys and dismantled the tent."

Chabilibai (Kanjar)

"*Kanjars* can never stay in one place. God has made us a roving tribe. Our mothers, fathers, and elders have always been nomads. If we settle in one place the *Devi* will get angry and calamities will befall us. Even if we settle in one place, what will we eat?"

The government itself does not want

us to settle in one place. In a few cases it's true that the government has given some tribal families land for farming. But the land is full of sand and stones. There is no sign of water anywhere for miles around. Leave alone a grain of food, even a blade of grass will not grow on such land.

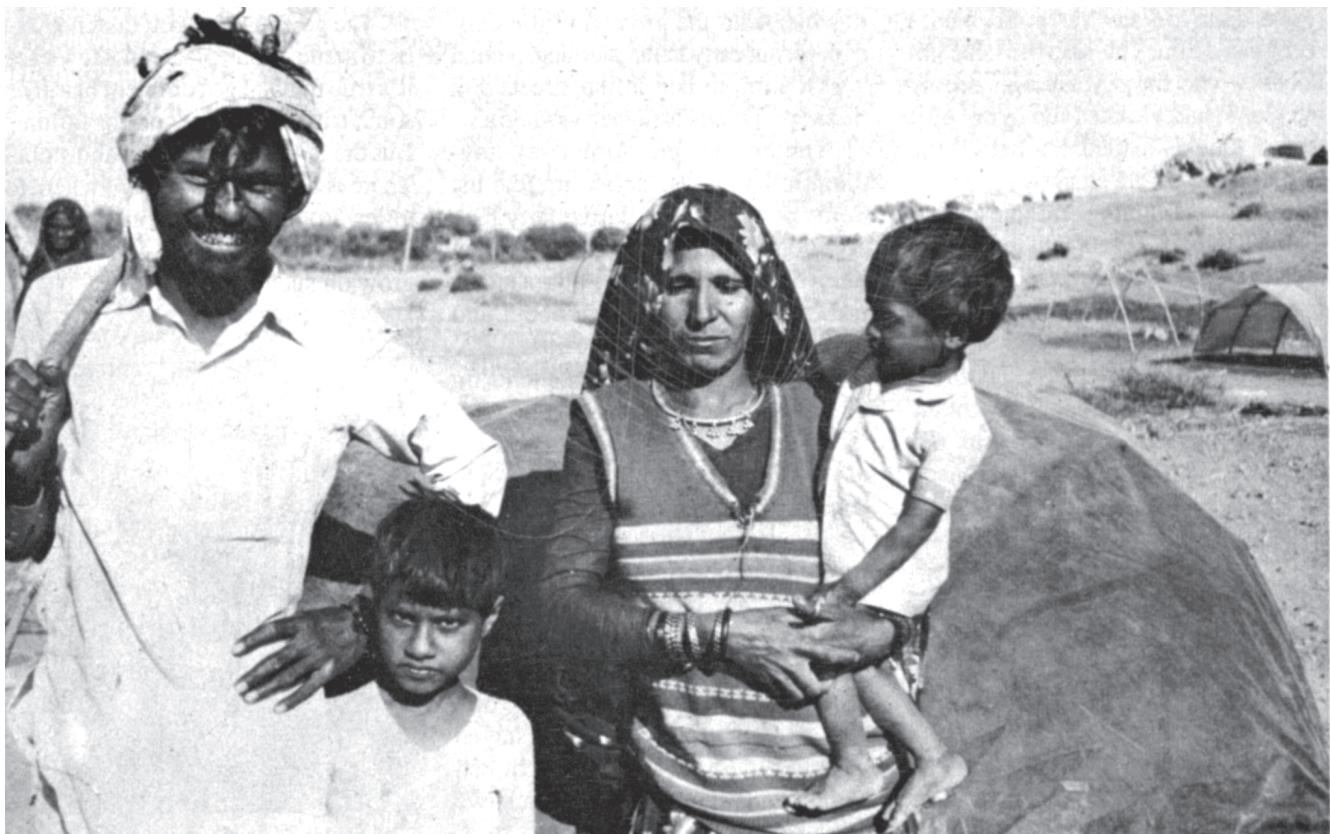
On top of it we are not sure of the government's intentions. Once a chief of our tribe, Ram Singh, received eight



bighas of land from the government. Absolutely barren, dry stone-filled land. Ram Singh did not like a nomadic existence. He separated from us and pitched his tent on the arid land.

Ram Singh was hardworking. He dug a deep well. With the grace of God, good sweet water gushed out. Ram Singh sent for his brother Jorawar Singh to join him and together the two brothers began tilling the land. After five or six years of hard toil the land became fit for cultivation. The brothers began to grow wheat and *moong*.

One day Ram Singh was in his field. The wheat crop lay freshly harvested when the *daroga* came with two or three policemen to take him away. They charged him with dacoity. Jorawar Singh was away in the city and thus escaped the police. Even though Ram Singh had been involved in crime earlier, this was a trumped up case—a result of a



Basantibai with her family

conspiracy between a man named Gangadin and certain policemen in order to grab the land under Ram Singh's possession.

When he returned, Ram Singh ran around a great deal. He made the rounds of government officers and lawyers but to no avail. When he had become absolutely disillusioned, he decided to take revenge on Gangadin and the *patwari*. However after our whole community reasoned with him, he calmed down. He took his tent and set off once more on the road."

(Later on Gangadin *Kurmi* was murdered, probably at the hands of some *Kanjars*.)

Basantibai (*Kalbaelia*)

"Circumstances compel us to lead a nomadic life. *Kalbaelias* are also called *saperas* (snakecharmers). People from our caste go around to jungles, mountains, and other places to catch

snakes, scorpions and so on which are used in shows. Earlier people used to be more *dharmic*. Wherever we opened the basket containing the snakes and played the pipe for a show, we would get a few rupees.

Now the whole situation has changed. In the villages where we used to draw the maximum crowds we are chased away as soon as we begin a show. Now we only get a good income on Nagpanchami day.

Once we had put up three tents in Kalyanpur (Kanpur). The women of our caste dance very well. Who knows how the *patwari* of the place got to know of it. In the evening the *patwari* came with two of his *goonda* friends and ordered us to do a show outside his house. These people had a lot to drink. My husband and brother were tired after a whole day's work but, greedy for a few paise, they agreed.

The *patwari*'s house was close to our *deras*. For half an hour he listened to the tunes of film songs played on the pipe and *dholak*. Then he asked my husband to call me and my sister-in-law Chanda to dance.

We protested a great deal but the *patwari* didn't listen to us. Compelled by him Chanda and I had to dance till 1 a.m. I was a very simple person but Chanda was very sharp. She decided to take her revenge. At around 2 a.m. Chanda woke up. She took a venomous snake from the basket and quietly put it inside the window of the *patwari*'s house. My brother-in-law had caught this snake a day before and hadn't removed its fangs on account of Nagpanchami.

The next day even before dawn had broken there was chaos in the *patwari*'s house. The snake had bitten the *patwari*'s only son who was five years old.

Since Chanda had told this story to my brother-in-law, he rolled up his tent early in the morning and got ready to go. Just then the *patwari* came running and fell at my brother-in-law's feet. Chanda stood nearby watching the goings on.

It was a question of a child's life so



Shyamabai (Kabutri)

Chanda softened. She also had a five year old child. My brother-in-law also felt sympathy. He used a *rukhdhi* to save the child's life and caught the snake. If

the snake had bitten the *patwari* instead of the child, maybe we wouldn't have saved him."

Shyamabai (Kabutri)

"The police drives us to crime and a nomadic life. A family never sets off alone with its tents. Usually five or six families move together. We pitch our tents at a railway station, bus stand or open field where there is water. We are tired of moving around constantly. Who knows how many years we have been roaming around, spending winter, summer and the monsoon under an open sky, carrying our belongings and tents on our donkeys? We have neither homes nor land. Our children cannot study because we keep moving from place to place.

Our family wants to settle down in one place and we wish that we had some land so that we could take to agriculture or some other regular occupation. However the majority of our community doesn't want to give up a nomadic life. Even if we somehow try to settle down in one place, the police beat us up and put us behind bars. If there is a theft or dacoity anywhere in the city, the police do not search for the real culprit. They

come straight to our tents, hurl abuses at men, women, everyone, beat us and search our tents. When they find nothing they give us orders to move on elsewhere immediately. We are very scared of the police so the same day we roll up our tents and leave.

Once we pitched our tents by the roadside in Kanpur across the river Ganga. There were three *deras* in all. Early in the morning on the first day we were putting up our tents. Three policemen passed by and after routine questioning they went away. In the evening they came back with their *daroga*. As soon as he came, the *daroga* called the *mukhia* of our group and took him aside to talk to him. At night the *mukhia* burgled the house of an engineer of the electricity department. The *daroga* had an old quarrel with this engineer.

Early the next day the *daroga* came again. He took away all the looted jewellery and valuables and gave us orders to remove our tents. We wanted to stay a few days but the *daroga* didn't agree. Eventually we dismantled the tents and left for a new place."