

LIFE AMONG THE RAJ GONDS.

Spending eighteen months living with the Raj Gonds from 1976 to 77 was the most inspiring, warm and friendly periods of my life. They do not call themselves 'Raj Gonds'. They call themselves '*Koitur*' and so will I. They are culturally part of the Indian adivasi or indigenous population. They speak a Dravidian language and are proud to be thought of as the 'Ruling' Gonds. In the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries they had feudal maharajas and rajas with masonry forts and a sophisticated tax system based on the number of ploughs that a household owned, or, for those who practiced *jhum* (shifting) cultivation, an axe tax based on how many axes or ploughs a householder used.

Unlike most tribal or adivasi cultures the Koitur do not live in an egalitarian social system, though they do not follow the Hindu caste system. What they do have is a complex phratry and clan kinship system, or what they call a '*saga*' or '*pari*' system that regulates socio-political life and their elaborate Dravidian-based marriage regulations, whereby you must marry within your phratry and outside your clan. This means you believe in the protection of your ancestral spirits, known as '*persa penk*', or 'great gods'. Their elaborate cycle of religious festivals and ceremonies give meaning to everyone's life and religion. To be a Koitur is to be connected with a complicated mythical world and to be a member of a distinctive community with its own language, religion and culture. In fact to be a Koitur is to be proud to be unique.

One of my great joys was to be thought of as the 'son of Hanumanrao' as my professor, Haimendorf, was known. He was the Austrian anthropologist caught by the Second World War in the Nizam of Hyderabad's state that was managed by British administrators, who defined him as an enemy alien. He was then confined to the Koitur tribal area during the war. Later he took British nationality and was appointed the Nizam's Special Advisor on Tribal Affairs. He revolutionised the title land deeds (*laoni khas pattas*) for fields that they had cleared from the forests. He declared that it could never be transferred to a non-tribal. The problem had been that many uneducated tribals had given away the rights to their land to non-tribal moneylenders (*komatis*) and become indentured labourers on their ancestral land. This gave rise to a period of political unrest and anger leading to the Babhijeri Uprising of 1937 and its cruel suppression. By the 1970s this re-surfaced and many Koitur became activists in an era of Naxalite-Maoist unrest from the 1970s to 2010. To quell this the government of India initiated an intense period of modernisation and development aid for the Koitur.

On first meeting the Koitur they are a proudly different group of people from the caste-ridden rural Indian. They are no longer the self-sufficient tillers of the soil consuming the products of their agricultural labour. Today they grow cotton as a cash crop and their economy is highly monetised. The days when every household had at least one bullock cart are over. Nowadays some have cars and many households have a moped and are largely electrified. This requires a rupee income. In the 1970s few children went to school, nowadays almost all children go to government boarding (*ashram*) schools. Both boys and girls are taught in Telugu and chatter away happily in that language, rather than their indigenous Gondi language. In the old days everyone ate the wholesome millet (*jawaar*) flatbread (*chapatis*). Nowadays the standard diet is fair-price white rice, resulting in a less nutritious diet. The children are no longer ambitious to be farmers, but look towards employment in the nearby cities and towns. Many are now attending university and colleges in Hyderabad. The women no longer wear their saris tucked between their legs, which was once so convenient for agricultural work. Nowadays they wear the standard sari and many wear trousers or a skirt.

Traditionally the Koitur have always been associated with two other adivasi peoples, the Pardhans (*Patardi*) and the Thotis (*Thotial*). The Pardhans are Marathi speakers; the Thotis are Telugu speakers. They both serve the same function for the Koitur. They are bards, minstrels and musicians performing and preserving the rich mythical traditions of their patrons. They have adopted the same kinship and clan system of the Koitur, on whom they depend for a living. However they do not eat together and, while having a specialist role as musicians at religious ceremonies, they are considered inferior and inter-marriage is forbidden. It is their musical skills and their knowledge of the Koitur clan myths of origin that are the vital factor in maintaining their role in Koitur culture. However with modernisation, education, the internet and mobile phones their relevance to Koitur culture is rapidly changing. They can no longer depend on the economic patronage of their clansmen, who are more interested in popular music and Bollywood movies than listening to their mythical origins. The one remarkable development is that one young Thoti man was accepted into a musical conservatory in Hyderabad. He has now become a star-studded national performer of classical Carnatic music.

Despite these cultural and economic changes the Koitur are the same charming, welcoming and good humoured people, who hold onto their traditional social structures and traditional beliefs. These beliefs give meaning to their seasons and their daily life. Almost every week there is a religious ceremony.

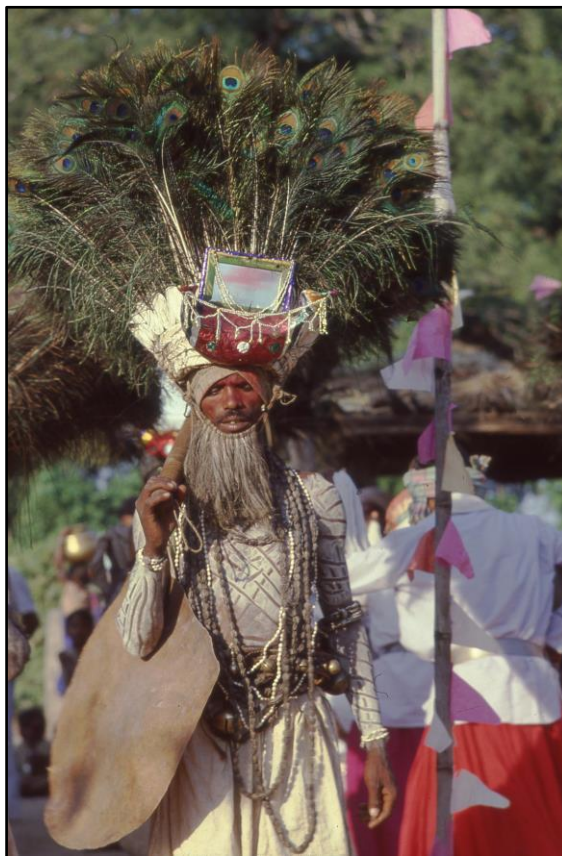
DANDARI: a week long festival in February. Troupes of peacock crowned divine jesters, *gusark*, Lords of Misrule, visit neighbouring villages with musicians and elders. They are accompanied by boys dressed as young brides called *purik*, meaning young chickens. The *purik* represent Yetmasur, the daughters of *Nataranjan Guru*,

the God of Creation. The mythical Koitur ancestor, Pahandi Kupar Lingal, brought the *purik* from the god's underground cave to be his wives and they gave birth to the Koitur people.

Normal carefully ordered and inhibited social behaviour is challenged by the jesters, the *gusark*, who dance, talk in exaggeratedly absurd language and crack raunchy jokes. Dandari is a bacchanalia - a libertarian festival. Full of laughter and absurdity, it reminds people that when the world was created it was an ocean of chaos – chaos put in order by the gods and by *Shiva Nataranjan Guru* who gave form to Koitur culture. It is at the heart of Koitur philosophy and way-of-life that gives meaning to their existence.

The *gusark* are adorned with huge peacock feather crowns and conical hats. Their bodies are covered in lime and ashes, redolent of being divine ascetic sages. They wear mirrors to show the people that they are only reflections of normality and that their chaotic behaviour is the real state of nature. They wear necklaces of rudraksh beads. They have become divine beings and their everyday self now lives in their baton, their *sota*. In many ways they are modelled on Shiva, who meditated on the nature of human existence and became Hinduism's great force of destruction and creation.

Just as Dandari celebrates the bringing of young brides from the land of the gods, so dancing groups visit other villages where their daughters have become wives and from which they have taken brides themselves. It is a festival full of humour and a forum for future kinship and marriage alliances. This is at the core of the Koitur kinship system, social structure and family politics.



Today the Dandari festival has become a dramatic touristic and Bollywood-styled event. It has lost its traditional meaning as a celebration of the divinely inspired kinship system and the creation of the world from chaos to meaningful and structured order.

The **PERSA PEN PUJA** is great communal festival. The village gathers to pay honour to their Great God. This is a day of devotion performed by the village priest, the *katora*, on the outskirts of the village, where the inhabitants leave votive offerings for sickness, wellbeing, and personal blessings. Conical wooden posts represent the Great God and the audience dance and go into trance, whose depth is confirmed by a ritual of raucous drumming and whipping. It finishes with a sumptuous communal feast.

Then there is the **DURARI** festival that marks the start of the agricultural year and every villager's



membership of their community. It is held at the same time as Holi, but bears no similarity. The village headman, whose ancestors started the settlement, takes charge. All contracts with moneylenders, servants, herders and rental agreements are renewed. Colloquially it is called *podela poymar*, meaning 'cutting of undergrowth'. In earlier times the Koitur were shifting cultivators, who cleared the forests when their *jhum* (slash and burn) fields had lost fertility. However, since the Nizam of Hyderabad started registering land ownership and demanding a land tax to fund his government, he banned forest clearance and reserved the forest as state property rather than a natural resource. This radically changed the Koitur agricultural techniques and they are nowadays settled agriculturalists.

However their religious rituals are redolent of their earlier traditional economy. Today the *Durari* festival now defines village membership and belonging to a divine community of personal contracts and agreements.

DASSERAH, the 'Beating the Village Bounds', is held after the monsoon harvests. It is redolent of the feudal age of the Koitur when villages owed allegiance to their feudal lord, the *Koitur* raja. It is presided over by his agent and rent collector, the *deshmukh*, along with the village priest, the *katora*, and the *patel*, the village headman. It is a ceremony of obeisance to the authority of the spiritually important feudal raja. It defines the village territory.

A series of flags are erected where paths enter the village boundary. They plead with the village spirits to protect them from the mischievous forest spirits. They beg for a good agricultural year and, to the sound of drums, oboes and brass horns, ceremonially walk round the village frontier.

A black and one white yak's tail fly whisk, the *chauwur*, symbols of power and authority of the male and female aspects of the Great God, and an antique sword and spear, the *sale*, symbols of the feudal lord are celebrated. They represent village's duty to provide military service to their overlord. It is redolent of a patriarchal system and is a largely male event defining membership of the village.

Lastly **POLA**, blessing the Draft Bullocks, and **AKHARI**, blessing the milch cows, are two festivals to the cattle.

Pola is held at the end of the monsoon season. It honours and protects the villager's plough bullocks, on which the Koitur depend for ploughing and hauling their carts, an essential part of their agricultural economy, soil fertility and household prosperity. Each household dresses their best pair of trained bullocks in embroidered blankets and takes them to the shrine of the Village Mother, *Siwa Auwal*, and the Earth Mother, *Dodi Marke*. Coconuts are broken; they are fed sweetened and fried oatcakes as a treat in gratitude and honour. The children of the village mount high bamboo stilts and go round the village beating the posts of the house and going to the village boundary asking for protection of *Siwa Auwal*, the goddess of the boundary. This is a festival of joy and fun assuring people of a fruitful harvest and a bountiful year.



Akhhari comes on the full moon day of Bhur Bhave, when the forests are lush and green. The villagers go



to a small shrine on a path leading from the village to the forests, where the cattle are taken to graze. An altar is adorned with all the village's cattle halters and bells that tell the herders where they are grazing. The shrine is dedicated to *Siwa Auwal*, the boundary mother goddess. A goat and a chicken are sacrificed and prayers are sung to her. A loud bison horn trumpet is blown calling the cattle to be brought back to the village. As they stream past the shrine everyone lets out a cry of joy. The cattle and the herdsman are now felt to be protected and safe for the coming year. This looks after the female breeding and milch cows, an essential economic source of wellbeing. A feast of sorghum, *jawaar*, and sacrificed chicken and goat meat is prepared and all the herdsman and boys enjoy a meal of thanksgiving.

Despite these major communal ceremonies there are a number of less significant ones, let alone the frequent household and family based festivities that punctuate the year and give it holidays and high days and moments of heightened pleasure and meaning that bind the people into a cultured community – the KOITUR.

Written by Dr. Michael Yorke.