

Chapter 13 - Love is all you need

In a way the journalist's question was not out of place because the Bhil adivasis are among the most romantic of people and they start falling in love very early in life. Indeed in independent India the Bhils' primary claim to cultural fame is their colourful Bhagoria festival, which takes place just before the Hindu festival of Holi in spring and is celebrated by turns in the market villages or towns on the market day of that particular market village or town. Filmmakers from India and abroad have filmed this festival any number of times. The festival is a celebration of the harvests as by this time all the work related to the kharif agricultural season is complete. Along with this main thrust there is also a custom of young teenaged boys and girls eloping together from the festival to lead a married life. However, marriage for the Bhils remains a loose arrangement to bring up progeny and there are umpteen pre marital affairs as boys and girls and later on in life extra marital affairs as men and women to add spice to their humdrum family life. Indeed as long as people do not get caught in the act every one winks an eye at this side current of free sex that laces Bhili marital life. But once such liaisons become known then Bhili society has to do something about it in order to keep some semblance of order and what they do provides them with great entertainment. Apart from this there are the forcible capture of girls and even married women by boys or men for marriage; cases of rape are rare because there is so much opportunity for free sex. Finally there are the inevitable divorces. One of the enduring aspects of Bhili society that has survived the ravages of modern development is the sitting of the traditional community panchayat to resolve all kinds of disputes involving man-woman relationships.

All the parties involved, two in case it is just a matter of resolving the elopement of a couple and three if it is a case of an extra marital affair or the carrying off of a betrothed or married woman or the desertion of one man by a woman for another or vice versa, get together to sort out the matter and normally sit at a distance from each other, communicating through messengers who are called "vatars". This is a safety device to prevent direct confrontation between the opposing parties, which could become murderous considering that often people come armed with bows and arrows and guns to these panchayats. But this means that the vatars have to bear the brunt of the abuses and taunts when they go from one side to the other with proposals for a solution, which are wild to begin with before they reach more realistic levels through bargaining. That is why there is a saying in Bhilali that the behinds of buffaloes and vatars regularly get taken!

The Bhils also have a system of arranged marriages to keep the youth under control and prevent the onset of unbridled sexual and marital anarchy. So though the custom of a girl running away with a boy to get married is quite common and has social sanction, nevertheless in such a case the boy's family has to pay a premium over the prevailing rate of bride price. The bride prices themselves are negotiable and go on increasing with time. In case of extra and pre marital affairs the boy or man has to pay a fine, which again is negotiable depending on the seriousness of the offence and the prestige of the offended family. So the whole business of settling romantic disputes is an extremely entertaining affair, what with all the people hearing the colourful evidence, the hyperbolic demands for money and the choice epithets that are traded back and forth and sometimes may require quite a few sittings. There is also a kind of "politics of honour" (Baviskar, 1995) involved and so sometimes these disputes take on major political overtones between sets of villages. Often people not owing allegiance to the KMCS would use these disputes to try and put one over the villagers who were members of the KMCS. So we activists frequently had to sit through these panchayats

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to ensure that the KMCS villagers did not lose face. Nevertheless, I at least used to enjoy the proceedings to the hilt, irrespective of whether our villagers came up tops or not.

For a while these panchayats assumed an overt political character in the early nineteen nineties when the KMCS decided to do something to limit the ever increasing bride price levels. A massive meeting was held and after putting the whole process of fixing the bride price under the scanner the amount of the bride price and the accompanying gifts were decided on. The more difficult task was to get people to agree to this reduced bride price. The villagers outside the ambit of the KMCS naturally refused to see the logic behind this move and tried wholeheartedly to sabotage this initiative. There were many instances in which we would come away from the panchayats refusing to pay anything more than the bride price and this led inevitably to the matter going into the hands of the police and the dalals. These latter led by the MLA were only too happy to put a spanner in the works and so despite a sustained effort eventually this campaign fell through after a few years. Indeed the bride prices that are paid have now reached proportions in some areas where marrying has become an extremely expensive proposition for the boys and sometimes leads to them having to mortgage off their land and become migrant labourers.

There was one village in Alirajpur where extra marital affairs were the rule rather than the exception. Almost every week the people of the village could be seen sitting down to resolve these disputes, which invariably ended in someone or the other being made to pay a nominal fine. Now the person who had been cuckolded was not satisfied with just this paltry fine and so he would look out for an opportunity to have an affair with the offending person's wife or unmarried sister. He would finally succeed and so again there would be a panchayat in which it would be now his turn to be fined. It would carry on like this in a form of sexual vendetta. Appetite whetted these fellows would try to have affairs with the wives or unmarried sisters of other men and so the whole village was involved in this sleazy game of cuckold my neighbour. And old age was no bar. There was one guy in his fifties who had continuously had affairs with other women in the village and been regularly fined but his wife had always remained true to him not even once falling prey to the numerous advances that must have been made to her. Then his Sati Savitri wife died and this man married a second time. His second wife was young and easy prey for the other men who had always been on the lookout to take their revenge. Despite all that the old fellow could do to prevent it one enterprising man soon cuckolded him. To ensure that the old fellow was well and truly floored, this man nicked his own neck with a dharia, a kind of machete and then lodged a false complaint in the police station along with a hefty bribe that the old man had attempted to murder him and got him into jail.

There was a general celebration in the village that at last the old man had been castled in style. As no one went to bail him out, he spent months in jail. I happened to be in jail for a few days also at this time under preventive detention provisions for having taken part in an agitation and I vividly remember the old man in tears pleading with me when I was leaving jail to get him released some how! The other day I happened to visit the area for a meeting in our old village of Attha after almost two decades. I asked after this old man only to learn that the poor fellow was dead. Then I asked about the tradition of sexual vendetta in his village and was told that the new generation had continued where the older people had left off and so the weekly panchayats over extra marital affairs were still the order of the day there. Habits die hard they say. Other villages were not as bad but that such affairs were a frequent phenomenon can be gauged from the fact that the wives of all those men who had been forcibly sterilised during the emergency period later had more children in spite of this. This is

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why Bhil men do not like to undergo the vasectomy operation fearing that their wives will have more children anyway from other men!

There have to be some bad guys to spoil this picture of romantic bliss and entertainment and these are the old villains - the dalals and the police. Like in the case of other disputes the police have put their dirty fingers into the adivasis' romantic pie also. According to the provisions of the IPC a boy running away with a girl can be indicted for abduction and rape in case the girl later lodges a complaint to that effect with the police. The dalals and the police have used this with vengeance to spoil the pretty picture. So sometimes the girl's family instead of agreeing to settle the dispute in a panchayat listens to the dalals and lodges a complaint with the police. The police then arrest the boy and terrorise the girl into saying that she has been abducted and raped against her consent. Since in India at large the increasing incidence of rape cases has become a cause for serious concern, the courts are extremely strict in these cases and so the boy does not get bail until the case is disposed of. Eventually of course in most cases the girl's and boy's families come to an understanding so the girl and all the other witnesses become hostile and the boy is acquitted and they get married. But in the process the dalals and the police and lawyers earn hefty packets.

The most dangerous thing about such cases is that all those who have even in a remote way offered any help to the eloping couple are liable to be prosecuted for abetment once the girl turns round and lodges a complaint that she has been abducted and raped. I remember once in Alirajpur that a young adivasi couple eloped and then came to our office in Attha with one of the villager activists saying that the girl's parents were not agreeable to her marrying the boy and so they wanted to find out what to do. I told them that since luckily both the boy and girl, both educated, were of the legal marriageable age, which was rare among the Bhils in those days, they could go to Alirajpur and prepare a marriage affidavit in front of a notary. So they spent the night in our office and went off the next morning to Alirajpur. The girl's parents along with a dalal had in the meantime gone to the police in Bakhathgarh and demanded that a complaint of abduction and rape be lodged against the boy and some members of the sangathan and I also be charged with abetment of this crime.

Fortunately, knowing the law well in this regard, I had told our activist to also meet the SDO Police with the boy and the girl and submit a memorandum to him along with the copy of the marriage affidavit. This saved the day for us as the SDO Police sent a wireless message to the officer of the Bakhathgarh Police Station to the effect that he had listened to the boy and girl and was satisfied this was a genuine case of love marriage between two adults and so no complaint should be registered against the boy. I thus just missed, by the skin of my teeth, being falsely charged of abetting rape in addition to the numerous false charges of murder and attempted murder that were already hanging round my neck! Imagine my consternation therefore when just after this I came to Alirajpur on some work to find that one of our younger non-adivasi activists had brought a young couple from Vadodara who had eloped and married to spend their secret honeymoon in our office guest room!

Some members of the Vadodara Kamdar Union had set up an amateur theatre troupe, which used to perform street plays with a radical slant. The eloping couple were members of this troupe and in the course of their acting had fallen in love with each other. Since they were of different castes there was some apprehension in their minds as to whether their parents would agree to their marriage. The troupe had decided in a typically radical fashion without thinking out the consequences that the couple should marry in an Arya Samaj temple and then go off somewhere for a few days while they broke the news to the families and softened them up. Our young activist friend from Alirajpur, who happened to be around

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there, had gallantly proposed that the couple could spend their honeymoon in our office! So the troupe and our young friend had enjoyed an impromptu marriage celebration and then the young couple and our young friend had made their way to Alirajpur. In those disappointing times when the battle against the dam was in the doldrums the KMCS was well on its way to transforming itself into a marriage bureau for eloping couples!

Fresh from my narrow escape from being charged with abduction and rape I was aghast at this development. I made the legal consequences of our young friend's gallantry, in case things should go wrong, clear to the entire group. In legal terms in such circumstances an Arya Samaj marriage would have no value without a parallel court marriage. The Gujarat government would say that frustrated in our attempt at throttling their "jeeva dori" we Ravans had now begun abducting their Sitas. So the women activists were then charged with the responsibility of making clear to the girl that she should not under any circumstances compromise us to the Gujarat police in case her parents lodged a complaint. We then packed off the couple to a remote village and waited with bated breath for news from Vadodara. Fortunately things panned out well and the parents of the couple came round to accepting the fait accompli. I for one breathed one of the most satisfying sighs of relief that I had ever. A Charge of murder or attempted murder is one thing but that of abduction and rape is something I would definitely not like against my name.

Another festival that is a happy loving ground for eloping adivasi couples is the Indal. The Indal is in fact the quintessential expression of pristine pre-modern Bhili anarchism. The small Bhili village communities were bound together by close cooperation in almost all aspects of life starting from their agricultural operations to their social celebrations. This cooperation could be maintained only if there was near total equality between the families. One way of ensuring this was to distribute the individual surpluses generated by families from their agricultural, pastoral and gathering activities among the community. The Indal was traditionally the means of doing this. This is a celebration in which the family thanks the Gods for having been bountiful and every five years or so distributes the surpluses it has accumulated among the community by feasting them. Songs in praise of the Gods are sung during this time over three days and nights and on the final night people and especially young boys and girls congregate to dance through the night to the beat of drums and then in the morning partake of the feast. The songs sung during the Indal vary from place to place but they all give a sense of the vastness of nature and the strength of natural processes and inculcate a respect in the listener for these.

Sitting in a dark room with the singer Gayan and his chorus seated in front of the diya singing in a lilting cadence that slowly builds up its tempo to the tune of the dhak or small drum, the listener cannot but feel transported into a different world where all the petty rivalries and desires of the mundane do not matter anymore. In that atmosphere one can immediately understand why the Bhils have remained averse to the development based on greed and profit that we in the modern world crave so much after. There is a great sense of peace in those hills adjacent to the river and even though the life is very hard the great advantage is that it is simple. The people think nothing of climbing up the high hills to some of their farms on top everyday during the farming season and then afterwards bringing the heavy bundles of reaped harvest down on their heads. What unsettles them is the inevitable contact with the modern world, which is often through some rapacious local government official or the equally extortionate bania. That is why Bava of Jalsindhi in a fit of rage once held forth at length in a meeting about the forests and the river and the lands being that of the Gods and the government had no right to usurp this treasure that had been bequeathed to him

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and his people for safe keeping. One of the activists of KMCS took down this outburst, translated it into Hindi and sent it off to the Chief Minister and the press as an open letter. It remains to this day the most authentic and eloquent deep ecological statement to come out of the struggle against the dam.

The young ones of course have little time for the gayna going on inside and are more interested in enjoying the pleasures of loving, singing and dancing. The Indal is a rare event these days as families do not earn surpluses any more but are chronically in debt instead. So instead of the earlier five-year period these days a particular family does only one Indal in the lifetime of its household head. Shankar for instance has not been able to celebrate an Indal of his own and the last one was celebrated when his father was alive. Khemla only recently managed to celebrate his own Indal. This is why the people of Anjanbara were so incensed when the survey team disrupted the Indal that was in progress in their village after the gap of nine years. But when it does take place the Indal is the grandest of celebrations. There is the custom of sacrificing goats on the final night. Apart from the household celebrating the Indal others who are either close relatives or family friends bring their own goats for beheading. They also bring their drums. Thus the final night is a great spree of dancing, singing and feasting which is so entertaining that thousands of people gather from far and near to enjoy themselves.

In the early years of the KMCS we would be concerned with the fact that the adivasis were so ignorant of the modern economic and political systems that they had to depend heavily on us for all kinds of interactions with the modern world. So we would conduct two-day workshops for the youth where the various aspects of modern political economy would be explained to them. Once a ten day long workshop was planned for the youth in Attha, as we found that two days were simply not enough for training them properly. It so happened that there was an Indal celebration going on in one of the villages nearby and the final night celebration coincided with the fourth day of the workshop. During the night all the participants left the workshop venue to go to the Indal and never came back. So much for our attempts at modernising a set of people who had pristine anarchistic tendencies coursing through their blood! We of course did not give up and began organising the longer weeklong training workshops at the ashram at Machla from where there was no escape!

One of the important paeans of praise that is sung during the indal is to the Goddess Kansari. Kansari is the Goddess symbolising the Bhils' staple cereal of sorghum or jowar as they call it and so is their life giver so to speak. The felicitation of Kansari is extremely important to ensure that future harvests too are equally bountiful as the ones in the past. The importance of this Goddess can be gauged from the fact that traditionally oaths among Bhils are administered in the name of Kansari Mata or Jowar Mata as she is sometimes referred to. The oath taker has to take some grains of jowar in his hand and take the oath. The belief is that an oath taken in Kansari's name has to be fulfilled otherwise it will boomerang on the oath taker with mishap befalling him.

As mentioned earlier the Bhils had fought bravely to maintain their habitats and traditional lifestyles intact but with time they had been overcome. At the fag end of the twentieth century they had resigned themselves to being thrown around from place to place like counterfeit coins, when the struggle against the dam started. Initially they rose gloriously in revolt but after a few years they realised that the old story of displacement was going to repeat itself. So except for a few people like Bava most others opted for whatever they could get, which was in any case much more than they would have got had they not fought as they had done. However, even at the peak of the struggle they knew in their heart of hearts that the

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dam would not be stopped. One of the practices in the NBA was to stand together and take oaths that no one would leave their homes and land come what may - "Doobenge par hatenge nahin". As long as these oaths were taken empty handed most people were ready to take them but they would never take these oaths in the name of Kansari mata with jowar in their hands. Once everyone was made to stand on the banks of the Narmada and the oath was taken with the waters of the river in the palms of our hands. Khemla not only refused to do so but also commented to me that if this oath was not kept then it would mean harming the Narmada as it would boomerang on her. I responded that the Narmada had already been damned to be dammed by the evil God of modern industrial development that Nehru and his ilk prayed to and so it did not really matter if we contributed our mite to her eventual death by taking oaths in her name that we knew we would not be able to keep.

The Bhils' worldview is thus a very materialist one woven around their agri-pastoral livelihoods. Their Gods are animistic representations of the forces that govern their habitats and their livelihoods. They are practical people living in a material world governed by material passions. The Bhils did not take the spiritual pole vault taken by the early Hindu Upanishadic philosophers from a more or less similar material base. The subordination of the material world to that of the spiritual by the ancient Hindu sages is most vividly portrayed in the Katha Upanishad (Sarvananda, 1975). There the seeker, a young brahmin prince Nachiketa is disturbed by the fact that his father king Vajasravas is distributing old and decrepit cows to the Brahmins as presents during a yajna sacrifice. He persistently asks his father to whom he is going to sacrifice him his son. The father irritated by his repeated questioning says that he is offering him to the God of Death Yama. Nachiketa then decides to go off to meet Yama. The father repents but the young boy tells him that the ancient seers have placed greater value on truth than worldly ways and so convinces his father to let him go. But Yama is not at home when Nachiketa arrives and he has to wait for him for three days without taking either food or water. Yama on his return is told by his wife and others that a young brahmin boy has been fasting in his absence. Yama is both ashamed and afraid because a house in which a brahmin stays without food and water is visited with tragedy and destruction.

Yama offers Nachiketa three boons in which he tells him to ask for anything he pleases in recompense. Nachiketa asks first that his father may recognise and accept him on his return when sent back by Yama and this boon is readily granted. He then asks to be told of the fire that leads to heaven which is beyond all sorrow, hunger and thirst and this boon too is granted to him. Finally he asks for the supreme knowledge of existence by which mortals become free and attain immortality. Yama tries to dissuade him saying that it is extremely difficult to comprehend and that even the Gods have been in doubt about it let alone mortals. Yama offers Nachiketa the whole wealth of the universe but the young boy remains adamant. Then Yama begins to unfold the path to supreme knowledge, which according to him is as sharp as a razor's edge. It consists of always doing the preferable as opposed to the pleasurable because those who seek pleasure lose the goal of supreme knowledge. In a beautiful metaphor set out in exquisite sanskrit verse Yama says that a person's soul is the master of the chariot that is his body and is seated within it. His intellect is the charioteer and his mind is the rein with which he controls the horses which are the senses running on the roads which are the sense objects. The person who unites her soul, intellect, mind and body in reining in the senses from galloping down the road of sense objects attains true knowledge!

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This is the kind of high spiritualism of complete renunciation of material desires that forms the philosophical foundation of Gandhian political theory and action. It requires little imagination to see that there is a vast difference between the anarcho-environmentalism of the Bhils and that of Gandhians. In the former case love and respect for nature has made the Bhils evolve cultural and livelihood paradigms that prevent its exploitation by limiting growth and development beyond a certain point while allowing them to satisfy their material desires as much as they want to. In the latter case material desires and so consumption are sought to be reined in obviating the need for development and growth and consequent depredation of nature altogether. Naturally the Bhils being materialists have tended to militantly defend against intruders, the material bases of their culture - primitive agriculture, pastoralism and hunting and gathering. Gandhians on the other hand being spiritualists have relied on non-violent passive resistance to win over the hearts of the oppressors. We shall see a little later how this variance in preferred modes of action against modern industrial development has been one of the important factors in the NBA losing its influence over the adivasis in the valley.

Despite this crucial difference the one common thing between the anarchism of the Bhils and that of Gandhians is their village and agriculture based and so nature or eco centred worldview based on the principle of "vasudhaiva kutumbakam" - love and respect for everyone and everything in the world. The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess who acknowledges his debt to Gandhi coined the term "deep ecology" for this worldview in 1972 to emphasise the deeper ecological foundations on which it was based and later went on to call it "ecosophy" (Naess & Rothenburg, 1990). All over the world this principle has been gradually marginalised since the Columbian encounter by the devouring greed of aggrandisement that propels modern industrial development. The creed now is to produce and consume ever more and in the process lay waste both nature and the people who believe in living in harmony with it. Things have come to such a pass that in order to sell the products of a runaway industrialism, the homogenising culture of western consumerism is being popularised worldwide through television soap operas, sports broadcasts and commercials. A global market is sought to be created for the products of the industrial west by washing away local cultural influences from the brains of people through this powerful cultural onslaught of western consumerism. As we have seen the village youth in Chhattisgarh are not interested in desilting their tanks anymore but prefer to play cricket on their dry beds instead these days. Similarly the tremendous concentration of the audio-visual media on the last Cricket World Cup in South Africa in 2003 seeped through to a Bhil adivasi village in Dewas district that had access to television broadcasts. An old woman there who did not know anything about cricket lamented to me the fact that India had lost the final match to Australia. How much more catastrophic indeed than to have lost the ecological paradise that her village had been in her youth.

So when Subhadra and I arrived in Indore in the autumn of 1994 we may have been steeped in our love for each other, our love of nature and our love of our fellow human beings but we were also confused as to the course of action that we would take in our future work to try and spread these feelings of love to the ruling elite of the world who were bent on making war. But like the immortal John Lennon when he sang in the "Our World" concert in 1967, the first ever to be telecast simultaneously worldwide (Lennon, 1967), we still believed in our heart of hearts that

There's nothing you can do that can't be done.

Nothing you can sing that can't be sung.

There's nothing you can make that can't be made.

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No one you can save that can't be saved.
Nothing you can do but you can learn how to be in time
It's easy all you need is love, all you need is love.

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