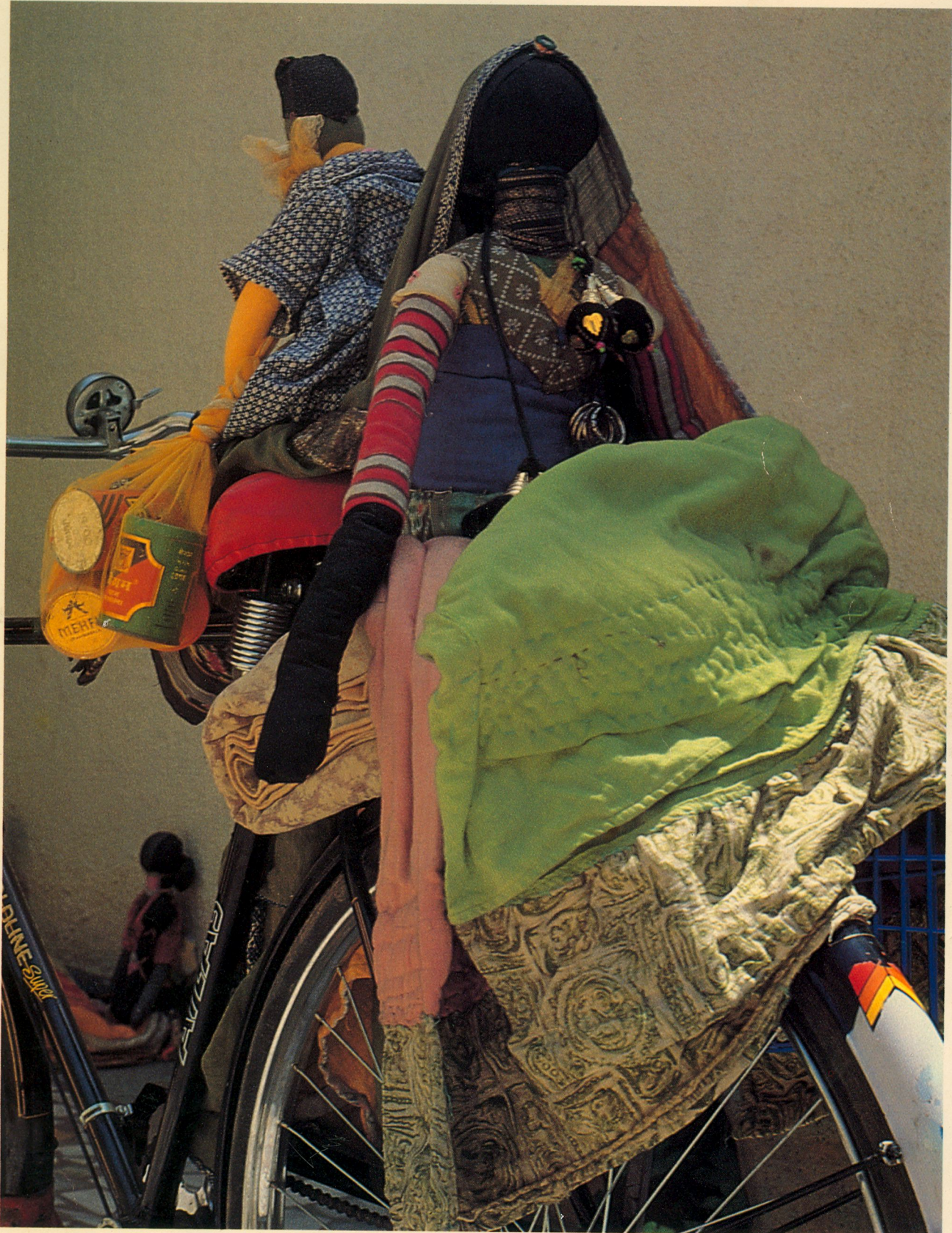


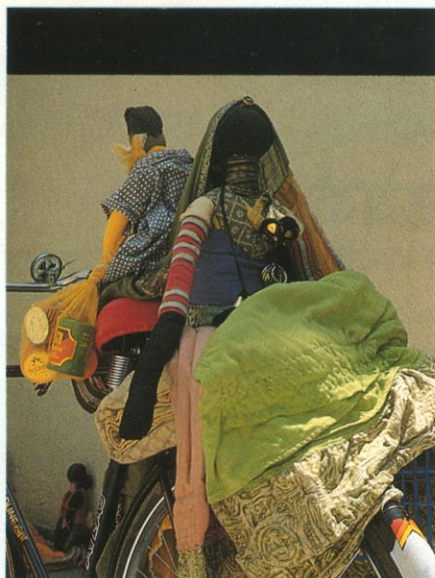
स्वागत

सितम्बर SEPTEMBER '91

SWAGAT

विमान में पढ़ने के लिए
FOR INFLIGHT READING





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TOURISM YEAR 1991

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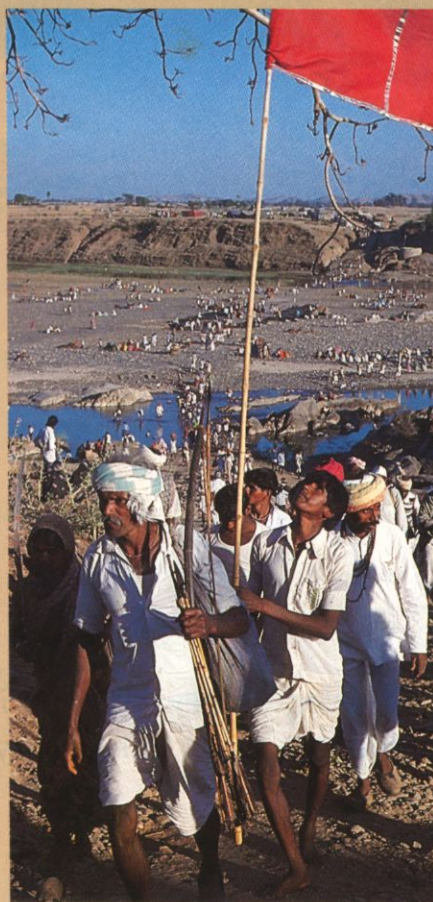
Images of Baneshwar

Text and pix: Nihal Mathur

Where do I begin to pick the strands of my story? Images come rushing one upon another flooding my mind as I now sit recollecting the experience. I hear the sound of cymbals, the beat of drums and the dust and din of the *mela*. This is the enduring image of Baneshwar Fair that rises above my crowded consciousness and I see the serene blue waters gently flowing past into the horizon...

I am back in the heart of tribal territory in Dungarpur District—southern Rajasthan—on top of the sacred mound on the sacred island created by the confluence of the three rivers: Mahi, Som and Jhakham. Here every year, on the full moon night, *magh purnima*, in February a huge tribal fair takes place.

The moving splash of colour all around me is an estimated crowd of 150,000 people—mostly tribals—*Bhils*, *Gracias*, *Kathodis* and others from the bordering areas of Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, making Baneshwar almost a *Kumbh*. It is here that the three masters of the Hindu universe reside side by side. The temple of Shiva or the Baneshwar Mahadev crowns the mound at the base of



which is a temple dedicated to Lord Vishnu who is not far removed from the one consecrated to Brahma. Under the shade of a tree is a small shrine where it is said the epic *Ramayana* was written by the celebrated author Valmiki or, as legend names him, Valia the Bhil.

The tribals begin to come in large groups, a day or two earlier, singing and in a festive mood loaded in buses, trucks, tractors or walking many miles from far off places; not only for the rituals but also for the fun and frolic of the fair that fills three full days and nights—peaking on the full moon night.

I become a part of a moving mass—enveloped in waves of rising and falling sounds—singing, chanting or crying, I am not sure which as I move with the crowd. Some people carry with them the ashes of departed relatives. The head of the family walks in front with the other members in tow. Women take up the rear, ceremonially sobbing in what is a collective gesture of grieving for the dead, who are bidden their final farewell in the flowing waters of the rivers. As the sun comes up and in the early morning chill there is a

holy dip for one and all as men enter the waters together while women wade in single file and the young go in little groups of their own. Individually, each seeks to cleanse the body and the spirit, offering prayers to the celestial powers and everywhere I look I see people.

Awash in the mellow February sunlight the men don their white *dhori kurta* and *safa* after the bath, while the women get into the business of drying their clothes, doing their hair, wearing their colourful best—preparing for the fair. Friends and relatives meet after an absence of maybe an year.

Indeed the meeting of the rivers is also a meeting of the peoples who catch up on the news and exchange gossip of the year gone by. Gently clasping one another the elder men hold and fold hands whispering greetings or goodbyes; women hug one another, inspect and admire the new arrivals in the family while the old affectionately



pat the young giving them a rupee or two to have fun at the fair.

I am back again in the moving mass of humanity jostling for space. There are shops wherever I turn. The eye meets row upon row of stalls selling a whole world of things. I am pushed past hordes of women who are busy shopping for the household or examining the many items of finery on sale. Scrutinising the silver ornaments one tribeswoman considers the purchase, while another examines the many prints and textures at a cloth stall. But the real crowd pullers are the trinket and bangle shops where a group of *Gracia* girls, is agog at the glitzy world of junk jewellery, choosing earrings, bead necklaces and hair clips. The young men select colourful kerchiefs that find their way around their necks. Nonchalantly knotted and befitting the swagger and the style of a loosely slung dagger they dress up for the occasion which picks up





pace with every passing hour.

People survey the scene and size of the market for whatever they are looking for whether it be agricultural implements or other necessities. There seems to be no hurry for tribal men as they buy bows and arrows, inspect spears, knives and ornamented bamboo staves.

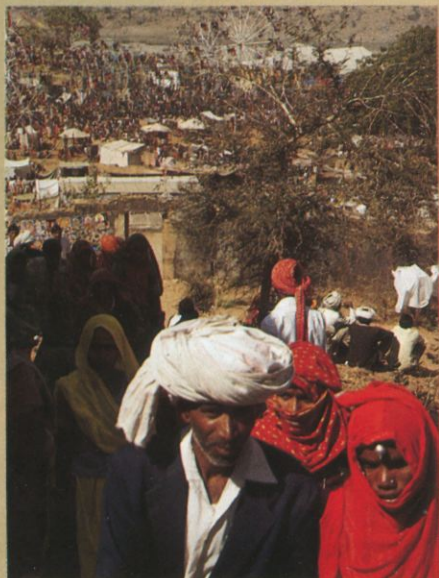
Once upon a time, Baneshwar Fair used to be a big trading centre where tribals came to buy provisions like salt, sugar and jaggery in exchange for the forest produce they collected. Today, however, a plethora of products seems to be on sale from the prosaic but purposeful soaps, safety matches, torch and battery cells to kerosene oil lamps, locks, blades and razors. Lying back at ease a man gets a shave from a barber who has strategically placed his chair and mirror next to *Ganesh Mishtan* which does brisk business offering tea, cold drinks, *laddus*, *jalebis* and various other sweets along with fried fast foods, spicy



enough to set any stomach ablaze. The potter who sits selling terracotta assisted by his wife and child, in handling customers, has a range of earthenware in all shapes and sizes much like the many products of bamboo, reed and grass sold by a family of tribal craftsmen who retail various kinds of baskets and ropes.

I discover many other crafts like that of the tattooist whose patterns get imprinted on the arms, hands and feet of women who sit surrounding the artist. I pause at the shop selling musical instruments the *dholak* and the *kundi* (a small percussion drum) which I buy for a friend. I chat with a *sadhu* till it is well past midday and he suggests that I join the crowds now surging towards the procession, which arrives amidst great fanfare with flags and banners and hundreds of devotees that accompany it chanting verses. Led by a lumbering elephant, the faithful climb up the hill to the temple. As the crowds push their way into the crammed

precincts for *darshan* that continues all afternoon it's time for a late lunch—served hot and expeditiously in Shiv Bhojanalaya where I eat under a *shamiana* packed with people. Many escape the festive grounds to cook their midday meals

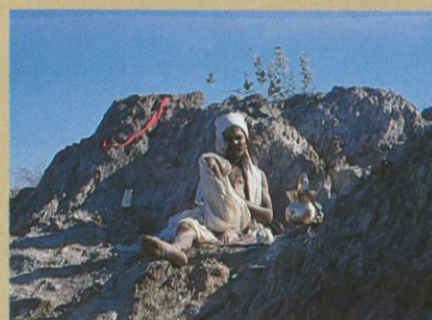


of *dal*, rice and *choorma* on the rocks by the river front. As evening approaches the entertainment begins. Large groups of young girls and boys move together arms locked in arms, singing and dancing. The excitement of a ride on the giant wheel festooned with small light bulbs; pot spots at the air gun counter; blowing balloons; looking at the Diamond Jubilee Circus; the mobile zoo and the

magician who keeps the crowds spellbound and guessing how it all happens, are all part of the excitement.

I step out into the deafening roar and noise of the *mela* now in high gear. The drone of several power generators electrifies the atmosphere. Blaring loudspeakers, video films that keep the crowds captivated and the *bhajan mandali* which sits and sings to a small gathering add to the sounds of the *mela*.

People begin to drift away from



the site in batches towards the sandy banks of the rivers and begin their own celebrations expressing their energies in the rhythmic movement of their dances. The sound of the *dhol* and the *thali* continues late into the night and I am back again in the crushing crowds moving with the flow in the bright moonlight. The silhouette of the temple, the *sadhu* playing his *panchtara*, the man on the mike, the gaggle of girls and other fragmented images continue to come rushing in one upon another—choking my mind and I do not know where to begin to tie the strands of my story.



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