

Work, Sing & Love Together

In Chhattisgarh, the Muria tribals' traditional dormitories—ghotuls—are places for adolescents to learn the community's work, songs and dances, and forge lifelong friendships but it is the co-ed living that draws undue attention from outsiders.

Words & Photography SUPRIYA SEHGAL



In the ghotuls, adolescent Muriya girls and boys live together not only to learn dances, songs and community living but also to find a partner and forge friendships

Earlier this year, Homi Adajania's tribute to women making their own choices didn't quite get the stamp of approval from everyone. One didn't feel the need to hear from a Bollywood diva swishing her hair to a gripping soundtrack, interjected with rapid visuals of women from villages and other walks of life, that it was alright for the 21st-century woman to live by her own choices. Some felt the video was an empowering reminder to women. As the fractured audience took to the Internet with furious online debates and hysterical parodies, my mind travelled to Narayanpur at the edge of Bastar in Chhattisgarh—away from the clutter of short-lived arguments and intense opinions.

It was a February afternoon—still spring by the books—but the sun beat on us without reprieve. We were slowly driving to Narayanpur, the car rolling at a funeralsque pace, our eyes scanning for the headman of the village. "Jowar," called out my guide in sudden excitement to an unsuspecting old man walking at the edge of the road, blissfully deaf to the low hum of the car. I was told to remain seated until called. The Muriya tribals of the interiors of Chhattisgarh are a reticent lot, keeping their traditions and language intact and unadulterated. But the old man's toothless grin and wave of the hand was my cue to come out of the car and mumble a rather tamed 'Jowar' in comparison to the guide's enthusiastic greeting. 'Jowar' is namaste in Gondi, the local language.

I didn't want my eagerness to see a ghotul of the village result in a jinx, so I kept my hopes in check. There was a muted discussion between the old man and my guide about who I was and why I wanted to see one of the most traditional set-ups of the community. Convinced, he asked us to follow him to a tract of land just off the entrance of the village. In the middle of this stood a long, thatched hut and an adjoining shaded pavilion—all encircled by a tall fence made of logs. This was my first visit to a ghotul, the quarters of learning for the young Muriya tribals. Soon, we were ushered in.

The triangular section of Kanker, Narayanpur and Kondagaon in Bastar is the only part of the region that has maintained the tradition of ghotuls amongst the Muriya tribals and the extended Gond tribes of Central India. The ghotul is an exclusive living space (akin to a dormitory) for the young men (cheliks) and women (mutiaris) of a Muriya clan. It is a common village space that the adolescent Muriya girls and boys are inducted into, to learn the tribe's dances and songs, sowing in the fields, forest medicines, allocating duties, sharing experiences and even finding a partner. The co-ed living at night has garnered much scrutiny and controversy from the media in the past but for the Murias, this is an essential part of their culture sans judgement and coercion. Possibly the reason why they are uncomfortable with outsiders visiting. Inside, four young women and two men were given the task to acquaint us with the culture



NAVIGATOR

GETTING THERE
Raipur, the capital of Chhattisgarh, is connected by air, rail and road to major metros and cities of India. The state's airport is situated in Raipur, about 15 km from the town. Raipur Railway Station lies on the Howrah-Nagpur-Mumbai line, with connectivity to key cities in North, East and Central India. Bastar lies farther south of Raipur and the most convenient way to get there is by car. Book with 9303048400; www.iccubes.in; C1-206, Second Floor, Aishwarya Chambers, G.E. Road, Telibandha, Raipur; rates are ₹9 per km onwards for a minimum of 250 km per day + daily driver allowance. Narayanpur lies 233 km (4.5 hours) from Raipur.

STAY
You may need to travel a long distance from Jagdalpur (124 km/2.5 hours) or Kanker (125 km/2.5 hours), if you make these places your base. At Jagdalpur, stay at Devansh Residency (7782 221 199; www.devanshresidency.com; Kasturba Marg, Chandni Chowk; double room ₹1,490-3,590 + taxes). In Kanker, the only and brilliant option to stay is at Kanker Palace (7868 224238; www.kankerpalace.com; The Palace; double main house ₹13,600, cottages ₹3,900 full board).

GUIDE
Awesh Ali (+91 9425244925; ₹1,500 per day, fix the rate beforehand) is Jagdalpur-based and has in-depth knowledge and association with the tribal community.



IMPORTANT TIP

Do not think that the Muri tribals are hesitant to let visitors in. Only a local guide can arrange for a short visit to see the walled tribal dormitory. One is not allowed to enter the hallowed confines of the dormitory. Intrusive questions are not entertained or appreciated.

It isn't uncommon for the young men and women to choose life partners for themselves in the ghotul

of the ghotul—others were out, working in the fields. The main hall was the dormitory, at the end of which was a small, ambiguously shaped stubby idol called Lingo. The reigning deity looks over the young occupants of the ghotul at all times. Of course, this is out of bounds for any outsider, including the parents of these young ghotul members. Soon, a young boy brought out a handheld drum and teased the young women to join in for a short performance. The group started a slow rhythmic beating of the foot and sang a song, which I couldn't understand, but it did incite many laughs amongst the group. The song soon graduated to playful banter amongst the young Murias, while the headman, my guide and I sat in a corner and the headman told us about the history of ghotuls.

It is said that ghotuls were started by the tribes that lived in the wild, as a learning centre for the young since they had trouble commuting in the jungles and preferred marriages to happen in the vicinity. It also enabled the parents to keep a check on the children. These were the pods of learning where the young tribals were taught not only about daily life but the art of hospitality, warmth of friendship and the importance of a sense of community. The co-ed living was an integral part of finding the right partner.

Till date, the tribe feels that it is perfectly acceptable for a young man and woman to choose a life partner for themselves, with a fair choice of experiencing single or many physical and emotional relationships—something that is not uncommon among modern citydwellers. Others

believe that it was a great way of keeping wild animals at bay, as the ghotul occupants dance and sing late into the night. The noise would keep the wild animals away, and the older generation could sleep without fear of attacks. Even now, the ghotul fills with its young unwedded occupants at the end of the day, after they finish their household chores and dinner. Then it's time for some merriment with musical instruments, traditional colourful headgear, jewellery and the quintessential ingredient of any party—salphi or mahua, the local drinks. The members spend the night at the ghotul, leaving the next morning to tend to their fields or go about other household work.

Contraception is uncommon so, yes, there are babies born out of wedlock, but that is not looked down upon.

In fact, for many this is a sign of potency and good health. The children are looked after by the mother and possibly the eventual man who marries her, without an overarching atmosphere of disapproval—in fact, there is none. Renowned anthropologist Verrier Elwin summed it up pretty well. "The message of the ghotul—that youth must be served, that freedom and happiness are more to be treasured than any material gain, that friendliness and sympathy, hospitality and unity are of the first importance, and above all that human love—and its physical expression—is beautiful, clean and precious, is typically Indian." Equality and freedom are what make the fabric of the ghotul and tribal life in this region, long before someone conjured up a slick video. ♦