



Art & Travel

A Different Beat

An ancient tribal enclave in Bastar, Chhattisgarh, is a stellar example of practicality and meaningful relationships, placing a mirror to the society at large, and showing us that, in this case, reverse is essentially moving ahead

SUPRIYA SEHGAL



One of the girls shares a lighter moment with her friends at the Ghotul

As dusk approaches, Awesh nudges me to wrap up the conversation. 'We should be out of here before it's dark,' his appeal is serious. 'They don't appreciate us staying around till late.' Being an insider, and responsible for my safety as a guide, his nervousness is understandable. Despite being in the sensitive region of Kondagaon in Bastar, I have the benefit of blissful ignorance. And the smiling faces of the young girls and

boys reveal no discomfort. I peg my personal cue to the cicadas that start their orchestra in the evenings. I assume my timeline will align with the hours when these young members of the *ghotuls* shut the door to the rest of the world and fall into the rhythm of a tradition that has been passed on since generations.

Carved out of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh is one of the pleasantly unexplored slices

of India. Layered both in landscapes and culture, it is one of those places that alter a traveller's stride to a slow indulgent amble through its intriguing villages. Ancient customs and unique traditions are hard for the modern world to fathom, but only a short time spent here opens one's eyes to how the tribals are at ease with themselves.

Of the forty-two tribes that inhabit the state in the belly of India, the Murias are the sole custodians of a unique system of choosing life partners. The *ghotul* system is an exclusive dormitory for the unwedded, where it is perfectly acceptable for a young man and a woman to choose a partner, with a fair chance of experiencing single or several physical and emotional relationships. Subjected to several misinterpreted versions of the tradition, the Murias guard the *ghotuls* with fervour. Later, when I get a chance to speak with the *gaita* (village head), I understand why only a handful of travellers or journalists are given a glimpse of the *ghotul*. The misunderstood rationale and rampant vilification by outsiders have made the Murias retrieve in their shell.

We leave the *ghotul* around 6 p.m. and settle at the *gaita's* home for a chat. The simplicity of the intent behind *ghotuls* is unraveled without eyeball-grabbing headlines. Some nuances are lost in translation, but the philosophy and trajectory of the *ghotuls* is vivid.

Chhattisgarh, especially Bastar in the southern part, has always



Ghotul inhabitants from Kondagaon

been the sanctuary for most of the state's tribal population. It is a land where natural wealth unfolds with every bend of the road. Emerald paddy fields and deep, dark forests teeming with wildlife have evaded the sales pitch of tourism for decades. The same factors existed even centuries ago. Life in the villages was isolated. The tribes that lived on this land were pitted against the vagaries of nature on a daily basis – to gather food and commute via the same trails as wild animals. Even looking for a bride or groom in adjoining villages was difficult. Marrying someone from within the vicinity seemed like a prudent choice. It also gave the parents an opportunity to keep a check on the young women and men, while ensuring a support system for their old age.

But the induction of the *motiyaris* (girls) and *cheliks* (boys) happened as early as six years of age. The *ghotuls* served

as a training ground for life in general. The older boys taught the new *cheliks* hunting, fishing and farming. The *motiyaris* were passed on the wisdom of basket weaving or running the kitchen. The cultural baton of songs, dance, local medication, craft and other life skills were handed down over during the years. Some believed that it was a great way of keeping wild animals at bay, as the *ghotul* occupants danced and sang late into the night. The noise would have kept the animals away, as the older generation slept without the fear of any attacks. On reaching puberty, relationships made a foray into the education.

Life in the *ghotuls* has changed only minimally. The youngsters step out in the day to tend to the fields or manage households with their families, but return to *ghotul* for the night. Raucous parties overflowing with *mahua* (local

alcoholic brew) and loud singing and dancing are still the trademarks of *ghotul* lifestyle.

We pause the conversation for a few swigs of another local brew ourselves. The *gaita's* wife serves us *sulphie* – a frothy and sour beer equivalent – in cups made from the leaves of the Sal tree. It gives me time to reflect on this remarkable system – seemingly toppled on its head in an urban context. What could be better than giving young men and women a comfortable and non-judgemental space to explore relationships to make sound decisions about their future? My mind wanders to practicalities as I note some questions to ask him.

'Having children out of wedlock in this scenario is common,' he starts with the accuracy of a mind reader. Even if a girl becomes pregnant, the partners are not



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A tattooed young lady at the Ghotul



A Ghotul inhabitant from Kondagaon

compelled to get married. Nor is this perceived as a setback to the situation. In fact, the virility and fertility on account of both partners is celebrated. The child is brought up by the families and accepted by the new partners as well. I am pleasantly surprised by this progressive approach. Reverse of what modern society has

conditioned us to think, this community is hearteningly forward looking, yet rooted to their tradition. It stands as a stellar example of practicality and meaningful relationships.

The *gaita*, as if assessing my interest and acumen to understand their world, parts with the information in layers

– peeling away one aspect at a time. We move from instruments, to songs and gifts given to the partners and finally come to the genesis of *ghotuls*. His words are measured, partially with reverence or possibly because of several rounds of *sulphie*.

Lingo Pen, the lord of all

aboriginal Gods of Bastar, features at the end of the evening in the *gaita's* discourse. The tribals do not like to discuss their religious proclivities and beliefs. For the Murias, he is the deity that gave them this cherished institution. It is widely believed that Lingo Pen was a great patron of dance and music. He

also doubled up as the God of Rains and the 'Creator at large' for the Murias and other tribes in the region. No wonder, the innermost sanctum at a *ghotul* has a small idol (an irregular shaped mound of earth or a wooden plank) of him. Even if you get lucky enough to visit a *ghotul*, the Lingo shrine is likely to remain undisclosed.

To end our evening on a lighter note, the *gaita* smiles and asks Awesh if I'm married. I mockingly ask if he'll let me find a partner in the *ghotul*, sparking a loud crackling laughter. 'But first you'll have to learn how to dance like a true *motiyari*.'