

# The ARCE Newsletter

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NEWSLETTER OF THE ARCHIVES AND RESEARCH CENTRE FOR ETHNOMUSICOLOGY • AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF INDIAN STUDIES

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## Overview 2002

The highlight of the year for the staff, users and visitors has been the remodelling and extension of ARCE. The enlarged workspace includes a user area and a new listening room. This area now has card catalogues and filing cabinets that have documentation files for each collection for ready access. It will also be equipped with a user terminal in the near future, which will allow users to directly access the catalogues through a specially designed user interface.

### Global Sound Network

The project of the Smithsonian Institution – *GlobalSound.Org* – envisions a network of audiovisual archives that upload parts of their collections to a common site on the Internet,

which is maintained by the Smithsonian Institution. The larger objective of the project is to encourage the preservation and performance of the intangible heritage of communities around the world through the use of the Internet. It envisions the training of archives staff, long-term support of audiovisual archives, training in the local control of intellectual property, and direct payments to local artists, which should encourage the continuation of their traditions. ARCE is one of two archives chosen for the pilot phase.

Each participating archive is required to obtain appropriate authorization from both the collectors and the artists for the recordings to be made available on the Internet. Each archive is expected to set up a system for payments to artists after the initial advance has been recovered. The archives also receive some training in digitization and in obtaining appropriate rights. ARCE and other archives will only put materials on the Internet for which rights have been cleared, and for which special Internet contracts have been signed. We are in the process of obtaining permissions from collectors and contacting performers to sign contracts and provide advance payments.

### Technical Developments:

#### Audio Digitization Project

As audiovisual archives the world over face the problem of changing technology in the analog and digital world, there is a move to digitize audio materials as wav files stored as data files on large storage systems. ARCE has recently acquired the equipment to do this, after consultation with Phonogrammarchiv, Vienna and the National Library, Australia.

#### Archives Resource Community

ARCE continues to coordinate the activities of the Archives Resource Community (ARC), a network organization that has as its members thirteen archives of expressive culture with audiovisual collections. Last year, ARC held a workshop for Video Technology at the newly established Seagull Arts and Media Resource Centre in Kolkata. The entire membership of ARC met in Bangalore in April 2002 to plan events for the coming year. A category of Associate Members has been created so that the membership base can be extended – especially to institutions that are in the process of starting archives, and to include collectors and other individuals interested in archiving.

*Archives and Research Centre  
for Ethnomusicology (ARCE) •  
American Institute of Indian  
Studies (AIIS)*

*Director-General  
Dr Pradeep R. Mehendiratta*

*Associate Director-General  
(Academic)  
Shubha Chaudhuri*

*Editor  
Shubha Chaudhuri*

*Deputy Director  
Kalpana Bandiwdekar*



On the 1st of September this year, ARCE completed 20 years. It was a time to celebrate and reflect, and the staff at ARCE did just that. ARCE staff with the first recordings received at their archive.

# Learning the Mandar Baiga Drums

Roderic Knight

Manglu held a 750 ml bottle of *daru* ('medicine', but in truth, a locally distilled spirit) above my head and tipped it until the contents were about to spill out. He motioned to open my mouth and then poured a big swallow, followed by a second, and a third. Budh Ram and Sonu Lal, two Baiga men sitting with me on the floor before the big *mandar* barrel drum, each received the same dose. A few moments earlier Manglu had poured the first drops out of the bottle into my hands as the others reached their hands under mine to catch any overflow. As the men muttered some prayers, I lifted my cupped hands as an offering to the *mandar*. Then, in three quick motions, we touched our right fingertips from ground to forehead in the tribal gesture of reverence.

It was evening as we sat in the quietude of Silpidi, a village in the heart of the forested Maikala Hills of Madhya Pradesh, India's central state. Manglu, Budh Ram and Sonu Lal, leaders of the village dance troupe, were initiating me into *mandar* playing. It was the end of April and the hot season was fast approaching. But at 3,000 feet, the evening was pleasantly cool as my first lesson began. I sat on a low stool in the middle of the room with the drum on my lap. Budh Ram sat behind me and reached his arms around to demonstrate a rhythm. Often, as I tried to replicate it, he would grab my wrists and move my hands in the correct rhythm. It looked easy enough, but the technique for differentiating several tones on each head proved elusive. Eventually my hands began to cooperate, but it was well after midnight when we stopped. My arms ached, the bottle of *daru* was empty, and I felt well initiated.

Months earlier, in the city of Nagpur, at the exact geographical centre of the country, I had come upon Verrier Elwin's book *The Baiga*, written in 1939. I read with interest his detailed descriptions of the songs, drumming, and dancing of the Baiga, and was eager to learn more about them. In Delhi, for Republic Day, January 26, in 1982, I saw a Baiga dance troupe perform. I was fascinated by the combi-



Drummers dancing the Karma dance as they play, tossing their drums out in front of them

nation of lively drum rhythms and slow, narrow-range songs, sung in a wailing, antiphonal style.

When the opportunity arose, I made my first trip to Baiga Chak, or the Baiga Reserve. I was already in Mandla District, in the town of Dindori on the Narmada River, researching the music of the Pardhan people. The road-trip, paralleling the river much of the way, was about 70 km. I asked Majeed, a photographer who had befriended me in Dindori, to come along as my guide. We saddled my Rajdoot motorcycle and headed for Chada, an administrative town in the area. The roads, narrow and barely paved, allowed little speed. After several rest-stops and a few challenging stream-crossings as the road entered the mountains, we arrived, three hours later.

Chada was a desolate crossroads town with a few whitewashed houses, a school, an open market place, and a stark but majestic government rest-house with 16-foot ceilings and spindly eucalyptus trees out front. A newly constructed tea-stand stood nearby, as yet without a roof to shield the occupants from the sun. The lanes of the town were virtually devoid of people, let alone any who might be identified as Baiga.

But an inquiry at the school turned up a teacher who was a Baiga. His name was Arjun

Singh Duruve. He had been to Delhi in January with the dance troupe I had seen. He even remembered seeing me there when I had visited the encampment and practice area. It seemed I had come to the right place after all.

As we stood talking, a truck piled high with huge forest logs rumbled past in a cloud of dust. Duruve shouted to someone riding atop the load. A few minutes later a slender young man walked up to greet us. His sober face had the slightest hint of Mongoloid features – high cheekbones, narrow eyes, small nose. He broke into a smile as he spoke, and his eyes twinkled amiably. This was Sonu Lal, one of the dance-troupe leaders, from the nearby village of Silpidi. Through Majeed I asked Sonu Lal if we might be able to witness a dance performance in the next few days. I added that it would be especially nice if such an event were to take place before dark, since I was interested in filming it. Sonu Lal thought it could be arranged.

My heart went out immediately to this man. His face was pleasant, his personality warm. But at this first meeting, I couldn't help but sense a desperate feeling of distance between us. Could the barriers of language and culture be broken down? Might we actually become friends? The initiation described above shows that the answer to these questions

was yes, but only in due time.

Sonu Lal said it would take several days to arrange a performance, so we spent the night at the rest-house and then motorcycled back to Dindori in the morning. Three days later we were back. Now it was market day and there were plenty of Baiga around, buying and selling small household items and vegetables. I reassured myself that surely it would be easy to assemble the singers and dancers for a performance today. But a problem became immediately evident: since people came to Chada on foot from scattered villages, the market activities didn't get into full swing until late afternoon. We located Sonu Lal easily enough, but it was apparent that he was having difficulty rounding up his fellow-villagers. Market day occurred only once a week, and it was understandably more important to people to linger in the market than think about an exhibition dance performance, in full dress, before dark, for a foreign visitor.

Nevertheless, around 5 pm, assuming that Sonu Lal would eventually succeed in getting his troupe together, Majeed and I loaded up the motorcycle and headed for Silpidi, a couple of miles up the road.

The road was smaller and steeper than those we had already traversed. Outcrops of bedrock had not been cut away or filled in. On a particularly bad stretch, Majeed had to dismount and walk while I coaxed the little bike up the hill. Once atop the ridge the road flattened out. The turn-off to Silpidi was vaguely marked with two widely spaced stones

painted white at the right of the road. What they marked was not actually a road, but a wide footpath that meandered through the open forest on the flat ridge top. In the gathering twilight it was peaceful, and I rode at low throttle to enjoy it.

Soon we came to a small clearing. A few houses of mud and thatch were scattered among the trees; the rest of the village was spread out in a wide clearing on the slope below. The place had an inviting air about it. We pulled up in front of one of the houses, assuming this might be the location for the dance performance, and waited for the others to arrive.

Darkness was beginning to fall. In planning my trip to India I had chosen a Super 8 movie camera over the bulky video equipment of the early 1980s because it was highly portable and ran on regular AA batteries. But it had one shortcoming, inherent to the medium of film: it required much light. Within minutes it would be too dark to film, and yet there were no dancers in sight. I began to amuse myself with the thought that if it got much later we might not see them at all, let alone be able to film, since there was no electricity in the village and only a half moon in the sky. Refusing to be disappointed, I reminded myself that I could at least operate my tape recorder by flashlight, so all would not be lost.

It was indeed dark when the performance finally began. I flashed my light on the VU metre and set the mic levels, then sat back to watch the shadowy show. Two drummers with

*mandar* drums slung on their shoulders and another with the *timki*, a shallow kettle drum, headed a group of about sixteen young men and women, each of whom carried a U-shaped wooden clapper called *thiski*. The men, whose everyday dress was a loincloth or *dhoti* and vest but no shirt, now wore long-sleeved shirts and long skirts. The women had put on fancier versions of their everyday wear – an open-midriff blouse and sari-like wraparound skirt, but of mini-skirt length. The men also wore a turban-like headband of several layers of cloth, and the women had beadwork in their hair and long chains of woven grass links hanging down their backs. Both headdresses included a plume of peacock quills tucked at the back. As they entered the clearing, the men formed one curving line, the women another, with the drummers in the centre. The dancers bent deeply at the waist, pulling the handle of the *thiski* in time with their footsteps.

As they danced, moving slowly around the drummers, they sang back and forth – first the men, then the women. Two things drew my immediate attention: the men played their *thiski* and danced in synchronization with the drums, but the women seemed to be 'off'. My first reaction was that the dancers were either not well prepared or not listening carefully. But it soon became evident that this was intentional. I also noticed that although the women repeated the melody the men sang, they chose their own pitch level, somewhere between a third and a fourth above the men. This bi-tonality was surprising at first, but again clearly intentional, or rather, coincidental, since it appeared the singers were simply choosing a suitable pitch level for their voices, regardless of the other group. Poignant dissonances were often created as one group ended its phrase and the next began.

The drummers also danced as they played, tossing their drums out in front of them as they moved about. This was the Karma dance, performed on virtually all festive occasions but also simply for enjoyment at any time. The troupe performed several other dances, ending with a marriage dance accompanied by a pair of *nagara* kettle drums instead of the *mandar*. For the next to last item, the singers performed several *dadaria*, or forest songs. These are love songs typically performed at weddings. They retained the antiphonal style of the dance songs, but instead of drumming and dancing, the men sat in a tight cluster facing inwards, and the women formed a similar cluster next to the men. As they sang back and forth, the



The dancers bent deeply at the waist, pulling the handle of the 'thiski' in time with their footsteps. ...

sequence appeared not to be fixed. When one song was over, there was a moment of silence until someone remembered another starting line or perhaps made up a new one, then the others joined. Although we were on a ridge-top, the music echoed almost as if we were in a canyon – the sounds were echoing off the innumerable trees in the grove. The darkness and the echo reminded me of the vastness of the Maikala Hills and the extent of our isolation. Even the lights of Chada, only a few miles away, were nowhere to be seen. My only thought was to come back in the morning so I could see the faces of these dancers and singers.

After threading our way back down the mountain to the rest-house at Chada for the night, Majeed and I returned in the morning. This time we met Ram Singh Maravi, a young Pardhan man who was a primary school teacher in Silpidi. We asked him if he thought we might be able to spend a week or two here in order to do some research. He thought it could be easily arranged, so I began to make my plans. I was one step closer to making friends with Sonu Lal and his fellow-villagers.

After some intervening work with Pardhan musicians in villages near Dindori, the opportunity arose to make a more extended visit to Baiga Chak. Majeed couldn't stay away from his photo studio in Dindori for the length of trip I planned, so I took along a young Pardhan named Naresh Tekam, who knew Maravi, the schoolteacher at Silpidi.

Upon our arrival we made our housing arrangements through Maravi. A neighbour of his had an extra room we could use, and he asked his wife and daughter to prepare it for us. This they did in typical Indian village fashion by washing down the floor with a thin slurry of fresh cowdung and water. This mixture, much like pale green latex paint, dries quickly and leaves a cool, grassy smell that is entirely refreshing in the tropical heat.

That evening we were treated to an informal dance performance. The villagers made an occasion out of our arrival, performing the Karma dance long into the night – in fact, long beyond our ability to stay awake after the arduous motorcycle trip.

A primary goal in my mind for this visit was a good filming session, since the first one had succumbed to darkness. We arranged it for the next afternoon. It seems I had not learned. The same thing happened, even though no travelling or pulling away from market day was necessary. The appointed time in the

afternoon came and went but it was already dusk when the dancers were ready. I half-heartedly shot one reel of film, but it was no use – the darkness increased with each frame. The only solution I could think of was something I imagined impossible, but I suggested it anyway – an early morning performance. Any other time of the day was out of the question since the April sun warmed to blistering heat by mid-morning. I proposed this to Sonu Lal, the man who had jumped off the log truck at our first meeting. He conferred with his fellow drummer and dance leader, Budh Ram, and they agreed, seeing the futility imposed by the limits of movie film. The performance could begin at 7 am the next morning, they said. I was pleased with their earnest good humour, but I was still sceptical that twenty young men and women could all be brought together for such a purpose at such an hour, so I did not hold out much hope.

But at 6 am I was awakened by a shake on the shoulder by Sonu Lal. He and Budh Ram urged us to get up quickly and head for the 'upper *tola*' – the clearing on the ridge-top where they had danced before. I was impressed. These men were not only friendly to my odd requests, they were totally devoted to the cause! Budh Ram and Sonu Lal, both married and in their twenties, were joined by five or six younger men, and close to a dozen young women – the teens and pre-teens of the village. The session was a big success, except that to cover such an event I should have had another cameraman, someone to run the tape recorder, and another to take still photographs. I gave my still camera to Naresh and divided my time between capturing the essence of each dance in three-minute segments (another limitation imposed by the medium of film), while keeping one eye on the VU metre of the tape recorder I had set up for a separate audio recording.

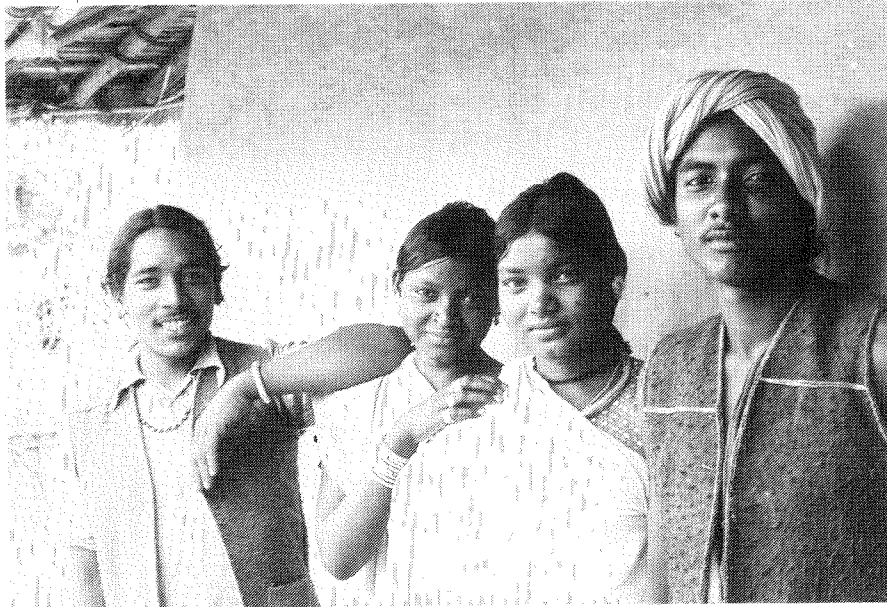
By 9 am the job was done. I had planned already to reward the participants and now I handed out crisp new five-rupee notes to each dancer and drummer. To my surprise, the men had brought along a couple of bottles of *daru*. Everyone quickly sought out a particular type of tree-leaf, deftly folded it into a small cup, and the bottles were passed around. Afterwards Naresh and I thanked Budh Ram and Sonu Lal who, along with the rest, then disappeared to go about their business for the day, promising to return in the late afternoon. For us, it was time for breakfast: roasted peanuts, apples and instant coffee – provisions



we had brought with us from a town along the road.

With rapport growing between us and the drummers, it was only another day before I got my first *mandar* lesson and the initiation to drum-playing with which this story began. From that point on, even though communication had to be through Naresh or with the use of sign language and a few words such as 'yes' and 'item' (a word that Sonu Lal had picked up somewhere), I felt as though I had been accepted as a friend. Since I had learned in the months before coming to Baiga Chak that Indians love to swap songs with each other, I tried teaching Sonu Lal and Budh Ram a folksong I thought might be easy for them to learn, 'The Wandering Song' ('I love to go a-wandering, along the mountain track, and as I go I love to sing, my knapsack on my back'). They worked at the pronunciation good-naturedly. Later on, the lines gave us something to say to each other when no other words were possible.

At one point we scheduled another early morning film session to make sure I had a document of each of the dances in the basic repertoire. It was equally successful. But the most memorable times were the drum lessons. Faced with limited time, since my field trip was nearing its end, I had to try to master the correct sounds on the drum, then stand up and try to play the drum with it slung around my neck, then finally try to add the dance steps. The routine was get up, sit down, get up again, sit down again, as I watched the



Left to right: Budh Ram, a friend, Gulbasia and Sonu Lal

footwork, tried it out, sat down to scribble notes to myself about how it synchronized with the different drum strokes, and then got up to try it out again. Of course there was a song to learn with each rhythm as well, but I decided the songs would have to wait. Naresh wrote the words down from my tapes, so that I could learn them later.

My impression was that these sessions were the top-rated daily event in the village during those days, at least for the children. I am sure I cut a funny figure, trying to learn drumming and dancing at once, and there was always a crowd of onlookers.

As the work went on, I felt I needed some special-purpose recordings. For the drums, I needed recordings of the drum technique – each hand alone, then together, for future teaching purposes. This was asking Sonu Lal and Budh Ram to do something quite unfamiliar to them, but as usual they agreed to give it a try, and the results were highly successful. Each gave their versions of the basic drum rhythms, playing one hand while tapping the other on the drum shell. They noted how many times each hand struck the head, and gave mnemonic syllables for every rhythm, much in the style used for teaching the *tabla* or *mridangam* in the classical traditions. The session ran to a marathon of four hours, covering a dozen rhythms, but with the aid of three bottles of *daru* shared around, none of us even noticed the passage of time.

On another occasion, we devoted a special recording session to solo performances of the

*Karma* and *Dadaria* songs, normally sung only in groups. The problem this time was to get the young women to agree to this, since they were shy enough even when singing in a group. But I had noticed that *daru* accompanied all events, so I quickly ordered a couple of bottles. It was readily available since every household brewed their own from the fermented flowers of the *mahua* (*Bassia latifolia*) tree. Leaf-cups were again hastily folded together, and after a few swallows for everyone, the session got underway. One by one the leading singers of the village took their 'solo flight'. The session ended with a spur-of-the-moment marriage-dance demonstration. One man jumped up and showed the dance steps as he sang, while Budh Ram and Sonu Lal, lacking the proper *nagara* drums on this occasion, spouted off the drum parts verbally, complete with inflections and dynamics. It brought the session to a hilarious end.

I gathered everyone together for a group picture, promising to send it to them after I left. The next day Naresh and I saddled the motorcycle for a pleasant – even triumphant – open-air ride back out of the Maikala Hills to Dindori.

*[The films described above and other scenes from Baiga life are compiled in the videotape Baiga Dances, produced by Original Music, OMV 009, 1995. It is deposited at ARCE and is also available for purchase from the author. email : R.Knight@oberlin.edu]*

## The Roderic Knight Collection

The focus of this collection is the Tribal Music of Central India. Prof. Knight has deposited 37 recorded audio cassettes (total recorded hours: 56) along with his field-notes, tape-logs, and copies of photographs of performers as well as instruments and instrument-making. He has recorded different musical instruments and interviews with performers about their playing techniques. The glossary of terms used for the instruments along with their complete sketches are valuable information for any scholar studying the musical forms of this region. He also found the performer of a rare musical instrument, 'Bin-baja', mentioned by Shamrao Hivale in his book published in 1934.

The major part of this collection consists of recordings of the Gond and Baiga people of Mandla District, Madhya Pradesh, and the Pardhans singing with the Bana for their Gond *jajman* (patrons). The collection also includes some incidental recordings made in other parts of India. The recordings were made during two field-trips to India, in 1978-79 and 1981-82.

### MADHYA PRADESH

#### Pardhans 16 hrs (1981-82)

Lessons on Bana (string instrument)  
Singing and narrative performances accompanied by the Bana  
Pandvani performance of Mahabharat episodes  
Jamara songs with drumming  
Biraha git  
Dadaria songs  
Wedding songs by women  
Chikara (string instrument)  
Gogia Bin-baja (harp) – singing accompanied by the Gogia  
Gudum Bands (Danawasi and Sukulpura) – singing with Baja, Nagara, gudum, dapla, timki, shehnai, jhanjh and manjira

#### Gonds 1 hr (1981-82)

Gondi flute music  
Gond Karma dance

#### Baigas 8 hrs 18 mins (1982)

Baiga wedding rituals  
Birha songs  
Wedding songs  
Baiga songs and dances  
Karma songs and dances  
Jharpat dance  
Dadaria songs  
Phag  
Bar dances  
Saila dances  
Sua Rina dance  
Drumming rhythms and lessons on the Mandar  
Baiga Kinnari (one-string zither)

#### Bison Horn Maria 1 hr (1978)

Dandami Maria dance

## DEPOSITS: FIELD RECORDINGS

## New Collections 2001–2002

**Muria** 9 hrs (1979)

Ghotul dancing and drumming  
 Muria Ghotul songs  
 Kaksar dance  
 Geri dance  
 Char festival  
 Hulki songs  
 Pus Kolang songs  
 Diwali and Pen Patang dance  
 Muria Tehendor (Jew's harp) music  
 Muria Husul (flute)

**Hill Maria** 1 hr (1979)

Songs and dances

**Chattisgarh** 6 hrs (1978-82)

Chattisgarhi folksongs  
 Algoza (flute) by musician of the Ahir tribe  
 Sarda (l-string fiddle)  
 Amarkantak temple fair: various instruments played  
 at the fair such as Nagfani, tambura, Mohori  
 and Nefri.  
 Danteshwar Temple instruments: Nefri, Mohori and  
 Nagaras

**Festivals /Events** 3 hrs 39 mins (1979-82)

Ram Navami celebration  
 Baisakhi performances  
 Marhai religious festival  
 Bhatra music for the Cherka festival

## OTHER RECORDINGS

**Tamil Nadu** 1 hr (1978-82)

Temple procession with Nagaswaram, Thavil and  
 Thalam in Meenakshi temple, Madurai

**Band Music** 2 hrs (1978-82)

Sikh wedding at Chandigarh  
 Shehnai and Bagpipes by marriage party  
 Wedding bands

**Vocal & Dance recitals** 3 hrs 21 mins (1978-82)

Kathak  
 Rajasthani folk dances  
 Hindustani music  
 Bhajans  
 Oriya narrative songs

**Nepal** 1 hr 30 mins (1982)

Classical and folk dances



A performer with his musical instrument, from Roderic Knight's collection on the Tribal Music of Central India