

O B E R L I N

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O B E R L I N

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The bana of Bachargaon and beyond

by Roderic Knight

Motorcycles and powdered milk are useful "tools" for ethnomusicologists studying ancient instruments in India's Narmada Valley

It was mid-January and an early morning fog blanketed the vast Narmada Valley with its expanse of wheat fields and villages. I was still fairly new to the area, still relying on public transport to get around and making recordings as the opportunities arose.

On this particular morning I had caught an early bus from Dindori, a town of about 10,000 and headquarters for the region, to Bondar, about an hour away. At a secondary school for tribal area students I had located a teacher who could serve as my guide, and we were about to make our first trip together.

As I pulled on my sweater against the chill, I thought, "What a good day for hiking out to a nearby village." But Phulsing Markam, my assistant, had a different idea. "No, no, the roads will be muddy and slippery and it's much too cold. In your country, you like the cold, but in my India, we like warmth!" Markam is a short man with a twinkle in his eye and a penchant for a joke. But he was quite serious this morning, standing formally before me and frowning his brow. I couldn't very well go anywhere without him, so his wish prevailed.

By 10 a.m. the fog had burned off. The village of Bachargaon was not far off and a Pardhan *bana* player lived there. The bana, a small three-string fiddle, is little known outside the Narmada Valley, but Markam was a Pardhan and familiar with it. My own interest in it was primarily documentary, since I was conducting research on the tribal music of this region, but simple curiosity was also a factor, since I hadn't seen or heard this instrument before.

We struck off down the road at high noon and I thought about adding Indians to the mad dogs and Englishmen

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who "go out in the midday sun." My small backpack with its \$1,000 cargo of tape recorder, movie camera, two still cameras and some miscellaneous film and extra batteries was soon transferred to the rack of a bicycle being pushed alongside. Otherwise I might have never made it, for the sun had warmed up to summer intensity.

After 90 minutes of trekking down a packed gravel road through the wheat fields, the final distance on a footpath from one village to the next, we reached Bachargaon and the home of Babu Lal Paraste. The shaded porch had just been washed down and the cool breeze blowing through the house was just what I needed. I noticed right away some marks of village life: low stools carefully crafted of wood with seamless woven seats, grain husking and grinding equipment built right into the floor of the house, and large sculptured grain bins, white-washed with the rest of the house. Mr. Paraste was out tending his fields, we were told, and would be back in a short while.

When he arrived, Markam put our proposal to him: would he play the bana this evening so that we could make a tape recording? I wasn't sure what the answer was, since the conversation had not been translated, but it did seem that something would happen that evening, so we set off to visit another family in the village.

It was after dark by the time we started back down the rocky path to Par-

aste's house. As we approached, the dim light of a kerosene lantern on the porch illuminated what I thought must be an apparition. In front of the house was parked a little four-seater car of a very delicate sort normally seen only in the towns. Must be some government official, I thought. What complications will this bring? And how did that car *get* here? I was to find out the answer to the second question only in the morning.

Family members had crowded into the walled porch and some big logs were being coaxed into flame with twigs and grass. I tucked myself down crosslegged in a corner near Babu Lal Paraste and set down my pack, still not quite believing that I would actually record something that night. In the smoky light I was introduced to the people who had arrived in the car. I had guessed right about the government official. He was a publicity officer for the health department, but more importantly, he was Kishan Chand Paraste, son of Babu Lal, paying his father a surprise visit after one and a half years. His wife, Ansuya, a medical doctor, had also come along. I found myself immediately engaged in animated conversation with two highly educated and friendly people who had long ago left their village homes but obviously still felt very comfortable there. Kishan noted that as a child he had traversed the same road we had taken, up and back daily on foot, while attending the secondary school in Bondar. At the time, Ansuya Markam of Rahangi village was also attending school there. Rahangi? Both Mr. S. H. Ahmad at the Anthropological Survey in Nagpur and Phulsing Markam, my guide, had suggested that I visit Rahangi if I wanted to study the music of the Pardhans. Ahmad had given me some photos of a few people there. Fortunately, I had them along, so I showed them to Ansuya. She recognized her father among them and noted that he too was a bana player. As I sat there shaking my head over the size of the world, Kishan informed me that they would be going to Rahangi in the

The bin-baja instrument

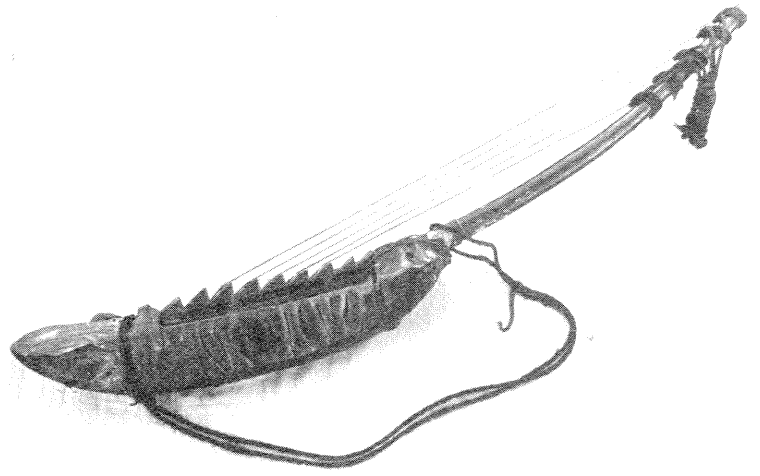
(see p. 34)

morning on their way back to Seoni, where they now lived, and that I was most welcome to come along. Since I still had not figured out how I would get to Rahangi on this trip, I was only too happy to accept this offer, at the same time marveling at my good fortune.

Meanwhile Babu Lal Paraste had been preparing his instrument, tuning it and playing brief excerpts to check if everything was all right. He hadn't played for two years, since his wheat fields provided well for him, and he felt that some of the Gond families that were his traditional patrons did not regard him with the same admiration and respect that he had once enjoyed. As his playing and singing would soon show, this was through no fault of his own, but rather a reflection of changing tastes or fortunes among the Gonds.

I began to sense that I was in the presence of a dying tradition. Kishan had not learned the bana, nor had any of his brothers. Ansuya's father, too, had urged his children to pursue their education and become urban professionals. The audience for this music was already limited, since Pardhan bana players traditionally played only for a chosen handful of Gond families having the same surname as their own. Now it appeared that it was dwindling further, as many Gond patrons were either losing interest in the old epic songs of Hira Khan Chatri or had decided they did not what to be bothered with the payment that was traditionally due the musician when he visited for an evening of entertainment.

Did I have a role to play in "saving" this music? I had read Shamrao Hivale's book on *The Pardhans of the Upper Narmada Valley*, written 35 years before, and had come here to see how much of what he described was still true. I was now discovering the cracks in the foundation. I began to talk to the Parastes about widening the audience for this music, about ways to interest other musicians or educators in it, about setting up public concerts introduced and narrated by some knowledgeable person. I thought, perhaps if I make this recording and then release it, it will find its way to this corner of India and wake up a potential audience among the surrounding populace. Now there was a long shot if ever there was one. I half-jokingly said that Kishan should learn



to play the bana, but he doubted if he would be able to. "Then get your brother who's living here with his father to take it up," I continued in a good-natured but earnest vein. Ansuya volunteered that she would learn if no one else did. In the end I decided that by merely being present there I was doing something for the music, and maybe that was enough for the present. I imagined that probably there wouldn't have been any music for this family reunion if I had not happened to be there asking for it. I learned later that this was indeed true—Kishan had not heard his father's bana for 12 or 13 years.

But clearly whatever benefit they derived from my presence was balanced by the benefit I derived from theirs. What would have been a rather stiff and unnatural recording session was about to become a happy family event with an audience that knew the songs and could laugh at the jokes. Undoubtedly Babu Lal Paraste's performance would be a good one under these circumstances.

By now the fire was burning with more heat and less smoke and Paraste had limbered up his fingers. He was sitting close to the fire, the long tailpiece of his instrument resting on his shoulder, the opposite end on his knee. He lifted it up and inclined his head, almost affectionately, toward the instrument. The chin hold of the western violinist was not necessary. His right hand gripped the stout handle of a short curved bow, and he placed it on the strings, not centered over the body of the instrument, but over the neck, just above the body.

The first sounds emitted were thin and distant sounding. I almost felt pity for the poor instrument—no wonder it was dying out. But then Paraste moved the bridge from its resting point on the edge of the body down onto the delicate

membrane that covered the face of the instrument, and it suddenly sprang to life. The tone was still thin—something like the tone described as "silvery" for the medieval European rebec—but the membrane face gave it a loud and penetrating quality. Brass bells attached to the bow accentuated its rhythmic movement.

As he was tuning, I had noticed that the three strings were tuned in ascending fourths, and now as he played I noticed that these fourths carried over into the music as well. He typically bowed two strings at once, sometimes all three, and the strings were so close together that one finger easily stopped two strings at once, thus producing a melody in parallel fourths. As the melody moved from the lower two strings to the upper two, it gave the impression of changing key. Then at times he would finger only one of the outer strings, keeping the inner string as a drone, and the music momentarily took on the flavor of an Irish fiddle tune.

For 15 minutes Paraste strung together short pieces, each slightly different and representing different moods described in the songs. Then he started his song. It began with a long, slow-paced invocation of "Ram, Ram" (Rama), asking for a successful performance that brought enjoyment to the listeners. As he sang he doubled his song on the instrument. After about four minutes he stopped suddenly and began singing unaccompanied, punctuating the ends of the phrases with short figures on the bana. Before long the listeners were beginning to grin and suppress some laughter. I tried to indicate that I was quite happy to have unbridled laughter on the tape, but it continued at a deliberately considerate level. Kishan and Ansuya were especially tickled, casting glances at each other and at me. I was

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*Above: Dhasol Markam playing the bana.
Left: Babu Lal Paraste in the first recording session. His son is to his left.*

left in the dark for the moment, but in the future I was to have the pleasure of playing the tape back for them and discovering the reason for the levity. The words were common fare for the beginning of a performance, intended to establish an entertaining mood, but they also gave the musician a chance to poke a little fun at changing social habits and to offer his advice to the younger generation:

In the "good old days" it was proper for the daughter-in-law to serve the mother-in-law, but today it's the other way around. Also a woman was supposed to serve her husband, but this too is now the other way around. Look at this woman—so sophisticated she can't even walk, so she's being carried by her husband!

In the "good old days" a man's duty was to serve first his parents, then his parents-in-law, and then his wife. Today it's the other way around. A man confronted with the necessity of carrying all these people proceeds as follows: first he takes his wife on his shoulders, then puts a flaming brazier on his head so that she might keep warm. Then he ties her parents across his back with a length of cloth, and his own parents he ties with a rope and drags behind. While going along this way, he meets a Brahmin (God in disguise) who asks him who all these people are on his shoulders, his in-laws, and his parents, whom he is taking to the river Ganges, where he will toss them in. But the Brahmin takes him aside and sets him straight, whereupon he mends his ways, and life thus proceeds as it should.

What more poignant commentary could Paraste have chosen for the visit of his sophisticated son and daughter-in-law! But it was all in fun and enjoyed by all. With this introduction he then

launched into a new lyrical section that marked the beginning of the legendary story of Hira Khan Chatri, a Gond warrior of an earlier age. Alternating lyrical and narrative sections, and interspersing an instrumental interlude from time to time, he performed for another 45 minutes and then called a halt to the story that could have gone on all night. Everyone had enjoyed the performance thoroughly.

Afterwards Kishan asked me if I didn't think this was one of the more elaborate and demanding of the tribal traditions of India. (His question indicated that *he* certainly thought it was). I agreed that it was and chided him once again about taking it up. I got the feeling he was beginning to take the idea more seriously.

In the morning we loaded up the little Premier (an Indian-made Fiat that they

had been able to buy through a loan available to doctors for increasing their work potential) and set off towards Rahangi. I discovered that the footpath we had taken the day before was just a shortcut and the road in fact reached all the way to Bachargaon. The road seemed smooth and short now, and the sun shone beneficently rather than beating down mercilessly. In no time at all we were back in Bondar, and after a brief visit, pushed on for Rahangi.

All the residents of Rahangi are Pardhans and many of the men are musicians. Dhasol Markam, Ansuya's father, is the eldest man in the village, but he too was out tending his fields when we arrived. I was told he was well into his 70s and had left playing at least ten years back. In view of his age, I did not take this as an indicator of a dying tradi-

A group of villagers in Rahangi.



He explains that this is his lovely wife on his shoulders,

tion. In fact, the statistics for Rahangi put the current status of bana playing in a different perspective. There were 18 bana players there, representing 40% of the adult males of the village. The youngest was in his mid-20s and at least half of them were away on *mangteri*, the performance tour on which they would visit their Gond patrons. Others were planning to go later.

In spite of being out of practice, Dhasol Markam said he would be glad to perform for us. The only problem was that his own instrument had been taken on tour by his brother. It took some time to locate another since so many of the players were away, but one was finally found. Dhasol Markam played admirably well and with much animation. He threw himself into the singing and story telling with great gusto and spirit. His wife sat at a distance, enjoying this remembrance of old times, and his daughter and her husband enjoyed one more evening of their musical heritage. When the single candle illuminating the room finally burned down, Markam had been entertaining us for an hour and a half with the story of Raja Ram. A token amount of *daru*, liquor distilled from the flower of the mahua tree, had helped to warm our spirits, but now the fire was dwindling and the night was cold, so we retired after this second night of epic song.

Next morning was parting time as the Parastes returned to Seoni and Phulsing Markam and I returned to Bondar. Clearly I would have to return to these villages, and I was already making plans to facilitate it by purchasing a motorcycle. Meanwhile, back in Bondar the other teachers had heard of our quest and had located yet a third bana player who was visiting a Gond family nearby. That very evening there would be a concert for my benefit, but of course with all the school students in attendance as well. Perhaps my ideas were not so far-fetched after all, for here was one being realized already and I'd hardly lifted a finger. This was a hopeful sign for the musicians of this remote corner of India.

Bus travel Indian style is hard to describe to the streamlined West. The bus itself might be compared to a school bus in size and accommodations: low roof, low-back bench seats, sliding windows. There is usually only one door, and no provision for emergency exits. A rack runs the full length of the roof, but most passengers keep their luggage with them, so the cramped space gets even tighter. There are 50 seats, but nearly 50 more people might be jammed in the aisles, especially if the bus is on the last run of the day. The roughness and dust of the remote area roads quickly take their toll—every joint rattles as if it were going to come apart, and the dusty windows af-

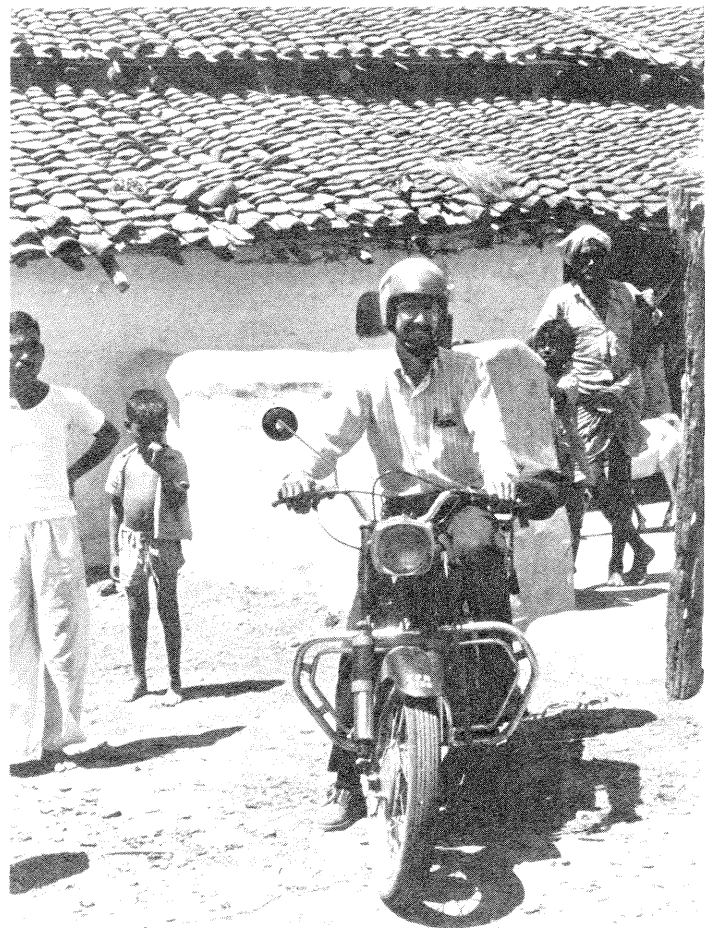
ford only a dim glimpse of the scenery. The din from the rattling and the diesel engine under its hood beside the driver numbs your senses and makes thought virtually impossible.

Some respite is afforded every hour and a half when the bus stops for a tea break. Young boys hurry to pour tea, brewed with milk and sugar in one pot, whisk away your cup when finished and quickly splash it off in a pan of water, ready for the next customer. Both sweet and salty snacks are also available, deep-fried in a wok over a wood stove built into the front wall of the tea stand.

As the cities fade into the distance the road becomes narrower and narrower until it is a mere scratch on the landscape, wide enough for only one vehicle at a time. All roads are handmade, with layers of crushed rock of decreasing size, filled in with earth, and maybe tarred. Needless to say, they are rough at best. The narrow clearance, slipperiness when it rains, and the daredevil spirit of the drivers combine to produce frequent accidents. A bus resting on its side in a ditch or stuck in the middle of the road with a broken axle is not an uncommon sight, but usually accidents happen at low speed, so serious injuries are few.

As comprehensive as the bus network is, there are hundreds of villages off the bus routes and far enough away to make walking with heavy equipment virtually

Roderic Knight on motorcycle in front of Daya Ram Paraste's house in Rahangi.



A bus stand at Dindori.



out of the question. Jeeps are suitable for traversing most of these roads, but are generally unavailable on a long-term basis, so after a few weeks of bus-tripping around the countryside I decided, on advice from others, that I should invest in a motorcycle.

In a few weeks I was heading for the hinterlands on an Indian-made Rajdoot 175 cc. On a two-wheeler the roads were even rougher, and I began to class them by what gear I could safely use: first, second or third. Third-gear roads were confined to precious short stretches here and there, but it was a pleasure to come upon them by surprise out in the middle of nowhere. Surely the first advantage, beyond the independence and mobility, was the visibility. Suddenly the vast open landscape of the upper Narmada River valley stretched out before me, with green and yellow wheat fields and small streams in the foreground, rolling hills and flat-topped knolls in the distance. Clusters of clay-washed and tile-roofed cottages dotted the landscape and people walked and bicycled, rode horseback or drove cattle to pasture. The road was never lonely.

Then there were the non-roads. As a college motorcyclist I had never been interested in the dirt bike variety of the sport, but I was soon to negotiate some tracks and hills that would make most dirt-bikers' hair stand on end. On the very first trip out, luggage rack piled with two back packs of equipment and a foam bedroll, and my research assistant, Phulsing Markam, riding behind me, we headed down a mere footpath through fields strewn with rocks, across a river in a rocky gully, up the other side, and into the lanes of a village that had surely never heard the putt-putt of a motorcycle echoing off its walls before. It turned out to be a wild goose chase, for the musician we had heard about was old and ill, and didn't play the instrument we were hoping to hear anyway. But darkness had fallen so we spent the night and renegotiated the path early the next morning.

Seeking out other musicians, we were more successful. Returning to Rahangi, where we had heard a Pardhan bard sing of legendary heroes with his three-string *bana* fiddle on an earlier trip, we found other musicians equally qualified and eager to display their talents. By now the people here knew us well. We were



greeted by a party of children who crowded around as the motorcycle approached, cheered as we forded the stream, and gathered around to watch and listen as we were welcomed into the compound of Phulsing Markam's uncle, and served tea.

After dark we sat on the floor of the kitchen, surrounded by the towering mud-sculptured grain bins, their relief decorations effectively lit by the small oil lamp in front of us, and were served a typical dinner of rice, unleavened bread, and vegetables, preceded on this occasion by some spicy chicken snacks and *daru*. Then Radhe Lal Patta, one of the leading *bana* players of the many in this village, performed a portion of what would normally have been an all-night episode from the Mahabharata, referred to by the Pardhans as the Pandawani story.

The next day, as Markam and I motorcycled to our next destination, he related the story to me: the episode told of the fate of Duriyo Dhan, last of the 100 Korawas, adversaries of the Pandawas. As a war between these two dragged on, he sought advice from his mother on the best way to win the war. As the bride of a blind man, his mother had blindfolded herself, vowing to live as he did, without sight. She now instructed her son to go and bathe in the river and come back and stand before her as naked as the day he was born. She would remove her blindfold to see him just this once and then offer her prophecy. But Duriyo Dhan was so embarrassed by this prospect that he came covering himself with a small cloth. His mother was chagrined, saying that he had disobeyed her and would be given no second chance. He would surely die at the hands of the enemy within weeks. He took refuge in a

lake, but Bima, the giant Pandawa brother, found him and slew him there.

The crowd who had gathered to listen to this performance was with the performer all the way, leaning forward to hear him and shouting "oho . . . !" at exciting points.

One objective that I was pursuing during these travels was to find out more about an instrument that was already rare 35 years ago when it was described in a book on the Pardhans by Shamrao Hivale. The drawing showed it clearly to be a harp, supposedly long extinct in India. On a lead, we headed for the village of Kokomata, another place that had probably never been visited by motorcycle, judging by the condition of the road. The people here are a branch of the Pardhans known as the Gogia, but they prefer to be known simply as Pardhans.

A musician, Ram Prasad Pandro, was identified to us, and when asked what instrument he played, he affirmed that it was definitely not the *bana*, but another with a curved neck. This sounded very hopeful, so we asked if we could see it. Without hesitation he came back with a long object shrouded in a cloth and unveiled it before us. Markam and I glanced at each other. Here it was! A shiny black patina covered the slender boat-shaped body and five sinew strings stretched from a sawtooth string holder on the face of the instrument to heavier cords wrapped around the faintly curved neck. It was indeed a harp, and clearly in playing condition. He also obliged our request to hear the instrument, called *bin-baja*, holding it across his lap with the neck to the right, cradling the body in his left hand. With a small plectrum he strummed the strings and alternately

touched and released two of them with his left thumb and middle finger. The sound was faint and low-pitched.

My camera was sitting right beside me, but I resisted the temptation to snap a picture. It seemed presumptuous, since we had only been in the village for a matter of minutes, and both of us were total strangers there. My discretion turned out to be my loss. Other men of the village had gathered around, and when we enquired about the possibility of hearing more of this music and taking some pictures, we encountered stiff resistance. "No, no, this is an old instrument. We don't use it any more and don't want to be associated with it. We are ashamed of it. It only makes a dull, monotonous sound and we ourselves prefer the bana. We don't want it to be studied or photographed or recorded. We're afraid the government might take interest and try to develop it, and we don't want it to be developed. We only want to hide it." They told Ram Prasad to take his instrument away again, which he did.

My assistant tried earnestly to persuade the group otherwise, and I offered to show how by plucking instead of strumming, it could be made to sound more interesting, but it was all to no avail. Dusk was falling so we had to decide quickly whether to try to stay here, where we were clearly not welcome, or to retrace our path out of the village. The choice was obvious. But I had been watching Ram Prasad the whole time, and I saw in his eyes a silent willingness.

After all, he *had* brought out the instrument and had even played it for us. As we bumped and lurched over the washboard and rock road, I was already planning a second trip and as many others as might be necessary. In the meantime I tried to imprint on my mind all the details I had seen of this rare Indian harp.

I decided that a few weeks should pass before I returned to Kokomata, so I took up residence in Rahangi village in order to further my studies of the bana. I found a willing and able host in the person of Daya Ram Paraste, a primary school teacher whose command of English was quite good. His house consisted of three rooms side by side, each about 10' × 12', opening on an enclosed porch at the front of the house. He and his wife and four children lived in the middle room. In one adjoining room was his sister's family, in the other, his brother's family. Some of the more adult children, a couple of grandmothers, and a temporary laborer and his family overflowed into the porch, where a cot for me was also set up. Altogether there were about 25 people in the house. Each room served as kitchen, dining room and bedroom for one family. Since cooking, eating and sleeping are all done on the floor, there was no problem of excess furniture crowding the rooms. I adjusted fairly quickly to the village routine, going to the river to wash in the

morning, joining my family for meals (carefully cooked with greatly reduced amounts of salt and chili pepper for my taste), and then settling down to some work of my own, such as writing or listening to tapes, as the various steps in the daily preparation of grains went on around me—sorting, pounding, winnowing, and grinding. The normal meal schedule was two per day—one around 10:00 AM, and the other in the evening, somewhere between 7:00 and 9:00 PM. Both consisted of rice with dhal (like split pea soup) and vegetables. Although I enjoyed this simple fare, I found it hard to accept vegetables as breakfast, so once I took the liberty of bringing some eggs and bread from Dindori, about ten miles away, and invited my hosts to share an "English breakfast" with me. Nankunia, Daya Ram's wife, looked on as I fried a couple of eggs—one sunny-side up, the other over easy. Her comment was, "Bas!?"—"That's all?" After that we often had eggs, plus instant coffee, another novelty (and luxury) item from the town.

Most of the villagers were farmers, raising their own crops of wheat, rice and other produce. Several of the men were teachers at primary schools in other villages. In the evening, when the teachers and farmers were all back home, I took time to meet all the families and get a more in-depth picture of the role that bana playing had in this village. It seemed clear, after interviewing the 18 farmers who were also bana players (from a total of about 45 heads of households in the village), that all of them were still active as traveling performers, and I discovered that several other men, though they did not play the bana, had inherited patron families from their fathers and they typically visited these families on a regular basis also, taking along a bana player who welcomed the opportunity to perform for other patrons in addition to his own.

I was anxious to take some lessons on the bana, but several events intervened to delay the opportunity. In early March, the family of Dhasol Markam, the elder bana player I had met in Rahangi two months before, suffered a loss: his younger brother, about 60, died of a brain hemorrhage. Dr. Ansuya Paraste, his favorite niece, was there to help, but to no avail. As a friend of the family and resident of the village I shared in the grief, and participated in the cremation ceremony.

Then came Holi, the festival of friendship and color, when friends and relatives, both men and women, greet each other with a smear of colored powder on

Woman making a clay hearth for cooking. The open-ended depression is the place for a wood fire and a pot would be placed over the closed depression. Tunneled area connects the two holes. Below: sifting grain.



the forehead, and later the men sing boisterous songs called *phaag* and children and adults alike splash or spray colored water all over each other. It is a day to stay in your home town and to wear old clothes, because anyone can splash anyone else and travelers are favorite targets.

Fast on the heels of Holi came Kriya Karam, ten days after the death of Hiraya Lal Markam. By this time the soul of the departed is believed to have entered a new body, and to mark the event, a ceremony of giving and purification is performed: all males of the family have their heads shaved, and the women, followed by the men bathe in the river. Later the men are presented with numerous cloths, wrapped on their bare heads as turbans. To please the departed and the mourners alike, and to lighten the mood, relatives invite entertainment groups to come to the event. For two days, three different groups performed in the Markam compound. One group consisted of a pair of *nagara* (large kettle drums), a small kettle drum called *timki*, and a *shenai* (double reed instrument). To this music many of the women danced and sang. The other groups were of a type called *Sing Baja*—three or four drums of different types, small cymbals and metal shakers, a shenai and one or two young men dressed as women, singing and dancing to the drums. As the evening went on, people gave one rupee notes and danced free-style with the dancers.

By the time Kriya Karam was held, I had managed to get one or two bana lessons with Radhe Lal Patta, and, happy from the *daru* that flowed freely at this event, he delighted in taking me around



Sing Baja musical group hired to entertain at a Kriya Karam, an event held after the death of Hiraya Lal Markham.

to various houses to show what I had learned. I didn't have much to show, but it pleased people nonetheless.

The children were also interested. One day, after taping a short version of a piece so that I could learn it on my own time, I was sitting in the house, bana in hand and tape recorder in front of me, alternately listening, jotting a note or two, and playing. The four-to-six-year-old crowd of the compound was romping around as usual. I closed my eyes to concentrate in spite of their play, and when I opened them, found a rapt semi-circle of little faces seated before me, watching and whispering to themselves about everything they saw.

Nearly a month had passed since the first trip to Kokomata and it was time to make a second try. Radhe Lal Patta of-

fered to go along this time, since he knew some of the people there and thought he would be able to convince them to let us see and hear the "forbidden instrument." Although he and I could speak very little to each other, we motorcycled out, hoping for the best. In the village, we located Ram Prasad's compound and rolled right in the gate. He was not there, but one of the more vehement protestors from the first visit was, and it looked like trouble again. Another musician of the town, playing a slender, two-string fiddle called *chikara*—a folk relative of the North Indian sarangi—entertained me and a crowd of villagers, while Radhe Lal engaged some of the men in a conference over the binbaja. As darkness fell Patta returned, looking rather grim and discouraged, and made it clear to me that we should be leaving. Failure number two, I thought, as I packed up my things. I caught a glimpse of Ram Prasad as we left and tried to read his face, but with little success. Later that evening, meeting with Phulsing Markam, who could translate the events, I learned that we had not been given an out-and-out refusal, but that they had demanded an exorbitant fee, and Radhe Lal had not been eager to argue at length with them.

The next step was not clear at this point, but I was beginning to feel the pressure of time, and explained that I regarded the exorbitant fee as objectionable, but not impossible.

In a week we had worked out the next strategy. Four of us—myself, Phulsing, Daya Ram and his nephew Naresh—would go to a village nearby, where we had learned there was a teacher who might be able to help. Traveling two by

Rod Knight playing bana with children surrounding him.





Sing Baja group. Man on left is playing shenai, man on right plays manjira.

motorcycle and two by bus, we met at the designated village, but once more a wall was thrown up before us. The person whom we thought might provide a connection was not inclined to make any overtures on our behalf and doubted that even a hundred thousand rupees would fetch results.

By this time it was long dark and we were forced to find accommodation on the floor of an empty 7' x 10' storeroom at the school house. Without a hearth or cooking pots, we shared some tomatoes, raw peanuts and tangerines and stared at each other in the light of a single candle. Were there other villages where the bin-baja might be found? Maybe this was the best solution. We discussed it some and then tried to get some sleep.

But unable to accept failure once again, Phulsing woke us all up at 4:30 a.m. with a last-ditch plan. Based on the hunch that Ram Prasad himself would agree to the matter even if the other villagers didn't, Phulsing instructed me to teach Daya Ram and Naresh—neither of whom had been to the village and thus would not be recognized—to operate my tape recorder and camera, so that they could go and do the job before any objection was raised. It sounded like a wild gamble, but by 5:30 a.m. they were on their way. I held out little hope, so went back to sleep.

Two hours later they were back. They had successfully met the musician and his brother through the intermediary of the chikara player, and though they had not been able to bargain down the exorbitant fee, they had contracted successfully to meet in the forest away from the village for the purpose of whatever recording and photography I desired.

We all sprang into action. Naresh and I drove with the equipment and Phulsing and Daya Ram met the party coming from the village. In the shade of a tree we set up. Ram Prasad unsheathed the bin-baja as he had done at our first meeting and our session began. I recorded him playing the instrument, singing and talking about it. I took photos in black and white and color. I even shot one movie roll. But even though I was getting what I wanted, I hadn't planned on getting it quite this way. I kept wondering if the money I had paid ought to be regarded as compensation to the village for allowing me to do something they were against, or if it wasn't rather

Radhe Lal Patta demonstrating the bana.



satisfying only that "willing person's" greed. What censure would he have to endure from his fellow villagers, if any? It was still clear, in spite of the permission given, that the instrument was to be kept from other eyes. If anyone happened along the path near our site, it was quickly shrouded from view. The bin-baja identified anyone who played it as a Gogia Pardhan, and they wanted to be known simply as Pardhan. Could I show these pictures and play this recording with a free conscience? Maybe Ram Prasad himself had not thought of all the implications. But now the job was done and all parties had been in agreement about it. I decided that once out of this local context, there would be little harm in sharing these documents of India's little-known five-string harp.

It remains a puzzling question where this instrument came from and how it acquired its rudimentary technique—things that call for further research. But one thing seems clear, and that is that no amount of publicity, whether academic or otherwise, is going to change it much, for better or for worse. In another 35 years it will still be an instrument hidden away by the musician, played once a year for a handful of traditional patron families in the same way the bana is, and then hidden away again. For the musician, it is the sacred dwelling place of the local deity Bara Dev, and for this reason it is surely significant; as an instrument, its mere existence is significant. Musically, I would have to agree with the Pardhans, who feel it has little to offer



Baiga dance troupe at Silpiri.

compared to the bana, but I am still pleased to have heard it and do not regret the troubles or expense. I believe my assistants are still a bit puzzled by the whole affair; nevertheless they accept it as an important event in the life of this ethnomusicologist.

The final weeks of my stay in India were filled with the laborious effort of filling in gaps in field notes, listening to tapes in order to write synopses of the song texts and making final musical instrument purchases. The pre-monsoon hot season in May did not help matters. It became virtually impossible to travel anywhere—even by motorcycle—after about 9 a.m. because the sun was so intense. In my early motorcycle travels I carefully avoided traveling at night, but now it was practically unavoidable, since the only alternative was around 5 a.m. By now I knew the roads well and I came to enjoy the night rides. Curiously, the roads seemed smoother at night. The only explanation I could come up with was that it was psychologically easier to be confronted by only that small swath of road that the headlight illuminated rather than to see the bewildering expanse of bumps and pits in broad daylight. Occasionally my plans were thwarted and I was obliged to motor off under the mid-day sun. To survive the

heat, I plunged a long-sleeved shirt into a bucket of water and put it on dripping wet. Friends observing me swore that this was ill-advised, but the 15 or 20 minutes of coolness before the shirt was bone dry again felt fine to me.

There were some pleasant surprises. In April, when the heat was already becoming more evident, Majeed, a photographer from Dindori who assisted me from time to time, and I were on a trip to Silpiri to work with the Baiga tribe when we pulled into a parched little crossroads town where he had a favorite tea stand. To my surprise, it offered ice cream as an alternative to a steaming cup of tea. Things really started looking up when the watermelons came into season; street vendors sold bite-sized pieces, or you could buy the whole melon. On the last night in Dindori, I

treated my assistants to a big dinner at my favorite cafe, topped off with a watermelon we brought in from the street.

When the day of departure dawned, we hired a hand cart operator to truck everything down to the bus stand and piled it all on. Five hours later we rolled into Jabalpur. The next few days were filled with errands: some 500 black and white prints had to be made to send back to friends and helpers in Rahangi and Mohoda, Bachargaon and Silpiri; three plywood boxes had to be made for air shipping the instruments home; train tickets to Delhi had to be purchased and berths reserved; and in the time remaining we tried to finish up the song text summaries. Two days later Majeed arrived, and the 5th of June witnessed the changing of the guard—Phulsing and Daya Ram headed back home to their villages, Majeed and I headed for the train station and Delhi. It was a tearful moment.

Majeed and I saved out enough time to pay a promised visit to Shamrao Hivale, the man who had written the only book on the Pardhans during his years as an assistant to Verrier Elwin in the 1940s. We enjoyed ourselves so much that we practically missed the train. Without time to check which car we were booked on, we tumbled aboard as it began to pull out of the station. We soon learned that we were not booked at all—we had tickets, yes, but no berths. It was going to be a long night!

And a long day. In the morning, six people crammed themselves onto the seat intended for three, and thus we braved the trip until we arrived in Delhi at 3 p.m. The only benefit was that it gave me a chance to reflect some more on the months I had spent in Mandla District.

I had become increasingly aware of the impact my stay had had on the peo-

this
Knight stayed in the goat house behind this house at Silpiri.



ple with whom I was working and living. I had arrived quite unannounced, and many of my decisions had been spur-of-the-moment, yet they resulted in some notable—if sometimes temporary—changes in my hosts' lifestyles. Phulsing had come under some criticism from his fellow teachers for his close association with this foreign researcher. Was it the right thing to do? What benefits was he deriving? Was I trustworthy? Was it fair? Daya Ram, too, came under fire from some of the more conservative villagers of Rahangi for hosting a "beef eater" in their midst (even though my diet while in the village was no different from anyone else's). He also complained jokingly one day that he could never again be content without powdered milk—a great convenience for a family continually providing English-style tea (with milk and sugar) to drop-in guests. I had been providing it with the other groceries but he would undoubtedly give it up as too expensive for a school headmaster in a village economy.

While working in Silpiri, I struck an agreement with the Baiga dance troupe members regarding payment for their assistance. A common complaint I noticed was the paltry sums they often received for "official" performances, so I was eager to give them more than enough as evidence of my sincere interest. By the time I finished all of my filming, recording and note-taking, the dance troupe members were collectively several hundred rupees richer. By comparison, it was unlikely that the village as a whole could have come up with more than 200 rupees. Perhaps this would help the villagers realize more

fully what great potential their music and dance traditions had—what valuable assets they were, especially if carried beyond the village setting.

My assistants were indispensable, not only because I relied on them for translation and guidance, but for their companionship. I regarded them as equals and very much as my superiors when it came to language and culture. Thus it was with some humility that I came to realize more and more that the situation was quite the opposite for them—that to have had me working in their midst, taking an interest in their culture and relying on them for assistance had been a great honor. They could not have foreseen my coming and wondered if I would ever return again.

In mid-May, I was struck by the irony of a particular situation: during a break in the work in Silpiri, I motorcycled to Dindori to send off some film and pick up my mail. Included was a packet of papers from Oberlin. My wife had been sifting through my campus mail and forwarding things that looked urgent or important. She wrote across one memo, "Try for this. I think you have a good chance." It was Acting President Jim Powell's announcement about the availability of a microcomputer grant. Here I sat, deep in the silent forest of Central India, as far as I could be from roads, plumbing, electricity, telephones, reading by candlelight in my mud and thatch room, thinking about the next day's mandar lesson. Suddenly I was jolted back into the computer age!

I had made some tentative attempts to utilize the capabilities of the college computer and was aware of that new development called word processing, but

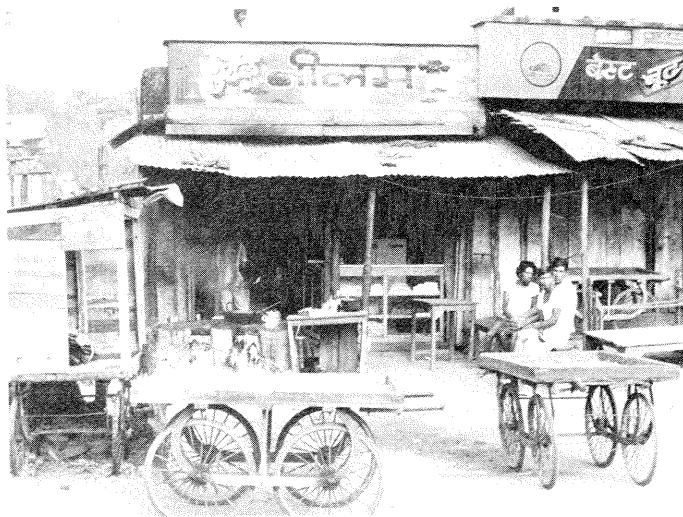
basically I was still one of those people who regarded the computing center as something of a foreign country.

The next day, after lunch when people were resting, I dragged my cot out to the goat pen. The goats were out, so I could sit in the shade of the roofed enclosure and catch any breeze that might come through the lattice-work walls. I drafted my proposal for a microcomputer grant. Fat chance, I thought, since I didn't have any facts or figures about the latest models—in fact, I hardly knew their names. I begged forgiveness for a budgetless proposal, and the next time I was in Dindori, I mailed it off.

As the train made its way towards Delhi, Majeed and I talked about cameras and photography, a mixture of hobby and profession for both of us. The world of computers had faded into the background again.

By mid-June I was ready to depart India. I had spent my last rupees, shipped off my instruments and obtained the necessary visas for my homeward stopovers; I even spent a week in Nepal getting a taste of the research possibilities there. Through the marvels of satellite communication I placed a telephone call to Oberlin, telling my family of my intended arrival time, still a month off since I would be stopping in four African countries on the way. The big news from home was that I had been selected as one of the recipients of the microcomputer grant. Clearly it was time to prepare for re-entry!

Cafe at Dindori (below). At right: a common scene. Man is making jalebis in a wok. The batter is fried, then dipped in syrup and then sold.



SUMMER 1983

