

Rakesh Bhatt

Bishnois: The Ecological Stewards

The stories of hunting are often narrated by hunters, never by those who get hunted. Until the prey narrates the story of the game, the hunter would continue patting its own shoulder. But whenever the hunted took the role of the narrator, the story did not die in the pages of history, rather created it, throbbing in the hearts of humanity.

It was in the year 1730 when the Maharaja Abhay Singh of Jodhpur needed wood for the construction of a new fortress. Since the Bishnois neither obeyed the demand for the delivery of timber nor made any payments instead, the ruler sent his soldiers out into the villages with the order to chop down Khejri trees (*Prosopis cineraria*). These trees, which prosper even under extremely harsh conditions, have always been worshipped by the Bishnois - and in appreciation the trees offer them shade, food, building material, humid soils, protection and clean air.

When Amrita Devi heard of the imminent danger, she hurried, followed by relatives and neighbours, to the place of the tragedy, named Khejarli, a place at which the Khejri tree grows and tried to prevent the soldiers from what they had come to do. However, when all reasoning failed, she hugged the first tree to be cut in order to protect it. The soldiers beheaded the woman whose last words would become history. **"sir saanthe runkh reho to bhi sasto jaan"** (If a tree is saved even at the cost of one's head, it's worth it).



The massacre of Khejarli; 1730 A.D.

Although the soldiers had warned that anyone intending to stay in their way would share the fate of Amrita, her three daughters followed her example and were also killed. Men, women and children stepped forward, embraced the trees and let themselves be axed to death one after the other, Andoji, Virto, Vanial, Chaboji and Udoji, followed by Kanhoji, Kishoji, Dayarayaji.....

The terrible message spread like wild fire, so that people from eighty-three different surrounding villages rushed in, ready for the extreme sacrifice - to lay down their lives for the trees.

When the Maharaja heard the cries of witnesses of the massacre, who had run to his court, he himself went to Khejarli and stopped the tragedy, but by then it had already cost the lives of 363 Bishnois. The ruler was moved so deeply and was so impressed by the dramatic non-violent protest that he promised to honour the conviction of the Bishnois in future. He forbade hunting and woodcutting in their area by means of a law that is still valid today.

The quiet village Khejarli still exists and is situated about 30 km south of Jodhpur. A tarred road leads into the place, which consists of an accumulation of scattered huts and a pond. A small structure - they call it a temple - reminds of the 363 Bishnoi martyrs for saving the khejri trees, whose demonstration of altruism seems to still inspire the India of today. Indian Gazelles and Black Bucks roam around this shrine of mass self-sacrifice denoting the fact that animals and vegetation are safe in this region. For Bishnois reside here!

The question of such motivation, capable of even overcoming the instinct of self-preservation, can probably only be understood in the presence of an extremely stable moral foundation. This extraordinary steel base was poured many centuries ago by someone who himself had just survived a famine.

Guru Jambeshwar 1452 – 1537

It was in 1452, the seer Jambeshwar was born in the village Peepasar in Nagaur district of Rajasthan and later moved to Mukham in Bikaner district where he died in 1537 at the age of 85. It was the famine tragedy of 1476 which led people, in their desperate quest for food, to kill almost all the animals and cut down all the trees. Emptiness and hopelessness spread fast, hunger and misery drove many people out of Rajasthan. Jambeshwar did not flee, but understood that only a respectful co-existence of humans and nature can prevent misery and disaster.



The teachings of Jambeshwar are based on laws, which stress the importance of virtues such as self-discipline and non-violence. This brought about the 29 rules where from the religion eventually derived the name i.e. Bishnoi (*Bish-noi* stands for 29). The philosophy also impresses by its wisdom to wed Hindu and Islamic elements. Bishnois worship Jambeshwar as their only God considering him to be the incarnation of Lord Vishnu. However, they bury their dead like Muslims who return the bodies to the holy earth.

Eight of 29 commandments exhort the community to protect and sustain the environment. **The community has, therefore, been promulgating eco-friendly principles and necessities of sustainable development centuries before it became known to the modern societies.**

Estimated population of Bishnois is approximately six million. Bishnois are found in Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi and Mumbai. But their concentration is in Rajasthan especially in the districts of Jodhpur and adjacent Nagaur.



A Bishnoi house

Major cities of Rajasthan like Jaipur, Udaipur, Jodhpur and many others are color coded. The local municipality does not provide clearance certificates to shops and houses who do not paint the doors, windows and roof top with blue colour. Bishnois are exempted from following this rule for followers of the Bishnoi faith are strictly prohibited from wearing blue. The reason: blue clothing would be dyed in indigo, requiring large amounts of indigo shrubs to be cut down to produce it. **It is a telling comment that how laws of rulers seem helpless before the laws laid down by faith.**

The Indian caste system has no grip in the Bishnoi philosophy, in which generally equal rights between the sexes also prevail.



A group of Bishnoi men

One would be intrigued and amazed, while crossing the great Indian Thar desert in Rajasthan, to find that even in the midst of this barren and wast landscape of sand dunes, the areas that are inhabited by Bishnois have well functioning traditional water harvesting systems, even collecting dew drops from the plants. There is normally no serious lack of food, despite the extremely difficult environmental conditions, millet, wheat, carrots, radishes and sesame oil is produced. The cultivation methods are ingenious and perfectly adapted to the local conditions. Wild fruits and vegetables play an important role in the diet.



During drought period in Rajasthan, while one can see carcasses of thousands of domestic animals having died of thirst and hunger forcing the non-bishnoi villagers into ecological exile. **Ecological experts are amazed to find that there has never been sight of such tragedies in the Bishnoi areas, not even during the most difficult periods. One would not witness horrific scenes but rather a modest and peaceful routine.**

Bishnois have very simple answer to this. They believe that if you care for the trees and animals they would return the favour when you need most. It is for those tenets which assert that Bishnoi followers should be willing to sacrifice their lives rather than allow the destruction of flora and fauna.

For modern societies it is unbelievable to find that Bishnoi women feed milk to the babies of the black deer with their breast caring for them as their own children.



A Bishnoi mother

It is this determined adherence of Bishnois to such values that has helped them survive and ensure the survival of the fragile desert ecosystem.

Bishnois never kill any animal. The male animals are used for work. However, should there be too many, they have to be sold, preferably to other Bishnois or even if animals end up with outsiders they still stand a reasonable chance of dying a natural death **unlike countries of European Union where farmers are paid by special premiums to kill the ‘waste by-product’ calf as young as possible, in order to control the meat mountain.**

At the end of the year 2000, a congress was held in Bonn in order to look for solutions regarding the emerging *development* related disasters. Although the reasons, i.e. over-grazing, clearing and destructive agricultural practices, are known and understood perfectly, an effective healing-process of environmental scars does not seem to have been initiated up to now.

All around the globe clearing has led to serious problems. For example in China, wide soil erosion has advanced the Gobi desert within a hundred kilometers to the centre of Beijing due to high water consumption and uncontrolled clearing of forests. Now strong sandstorms unload annually a million tons of sand over the city.

The situation in Africa is even more dramatic. A loss of land of approximately 100 square kilometers per day has been estimated because of intensive exploitation of the soil. This forces three million humans to look for new habitats every year.

The tropical rain forest in South America which constitutes one sixth of the earth's surface and a habitat for half of all living species is being destroyed with a breathtaking speed. Half of the forests were already ruined in the last century and if this destruction continues at this rate, nothing of earth's breathing lungs would be left by mid 21st Century.

The Bishnoi faith and its followers are those islands of tradition which have been able to withstand the tide of modernity that threatens to engulf their centuries-old belief system.



Chipko

For the Bishnois the memory of Amrita Devi and other martyrs is still very much alive and led even in the year 1973 to a similar, although fortunately less tragic incident in the village Gopeshwar in Uttarakhand. The incident laid foundation of the famous resistance movement *Chipko* (Hug).

If we could translate our obviously fast and globally growing uneasiness into consistent nature protection, there might be reason for more hope. The time for a new ideology is here, alongwith a need for a different style of life: based on a desire for unity and not merely on economy centric development models.

The Bishnois have understood this truth for a long time already. Their conviction that each living being has the right of fulfillment, unimpaired in its individuality and spiritual destiny, can be an example for all of us. There is no better way into a peaceful and sustainable future.

Even though the Bishnois are presently protected by their very own wisdom, a disturbing question remains open all the same: How will a fast spreading urbanization in all corners of the world eventually affect any hitherto religiously pursued ideology of sustainability?

Will such unique traditions, like that of Bishnois, flow through the changing times or will they dry off in this age of global warming?