KUTCH diary

SHEFALEE VASUDEV

Dreams Inhabited

BHUNGA. How I loved the word when I spotted it in an ecotourism story. The last time I had heard it was as a child. A Sindhi-Muslim village poet visiting us had said he lived in a bhunga (mud hut). The hut of my young imagination was incredibly romantic. Floral curtains, plump beds with lacy pillows, a table laid with hot scones and a cute smiling teapot with a blue handle. That's what happens to a little girl who reads too much Enid Blyton. Now, some 30 years later, with fairy-taleism a distant memory, I finally saw a real bhunga. The journey began in my mind on the train to Gandhidham. The aroma of fafda-ghathiya at midnight, the Gujju chai-garam calls excited me. Will the upper berth do? asked my friendly co-passenger. No, I told him demurely without explaining that my silly, low-slung jeans made the heave impossible. He gave me the lower berth because I was "ladies". From Gandhidham, we drove up to Sham-e-Sarhad, our destination in the desert village of Hodka in Banni district, near the Indo-Pak border. Desert sand, quickly disturbed and fickle of purpose, rose in fury, pricking our eyes. The resort was like a miniature Kutchi village but non-touristy. Everything was made of mud, with mirror-work and colourful puppets on the walls. The bhunga, which looked like a painted mud house with a conical thatched roof, had colour, craft, comfort and warm lighting inside. Sanaaullah, the shy-as-a-new bride caretaker with his head covered by a floral scarf, brought us hot pakoras and a pot of masala chai. The teapot was almost smiling. Would Vinod Mehta like a diary from here, I wondered at that moment.

R. PRASAD

Lawrence, Almost

I was keen on a camel safari, so Pandhi chacha, a tall, grandfatherly guide with a red-hennaed beard, promised me one. The brochure said it was a ride through the Rann of Kutch. But Pandhi, probably reading the invisible label on my forehead—*aa bael mujhe maar* (come kick me)—had plans to take me through Khavda village. As I was trying to get on to the camel, an amused crowd gathered. Men with kohl-lined eyes staring and little boys dressed in Pathani suits clapping. Dream 2 snapped. No, thanks, I said clutching my sides with laughter as I imagined myself sitting on the camel—T-shirt, capris and villagers whistling behind me!

Delectations of the West

FREE show for villagers called off, Pandhi jumped back into the car shrugging. My laughter subsided after a while as we made our way to the India Bridge on the border. Salt marshes, endless barren land, except for some thorny bushes, stretched everywhere. A huge herd of camels was frolicking in the sand. "Turn right back," thundered the military officer at India Bridge—"this is forbidden territory". I turned and recoiled. It was sunset hour. In the deepest west of India—the sun, a burning crimson-orange-red globe with its reflection on the cooling desert sands, was a divine sight for someone like me who can't understand meditative symbols. I think I found one.

Sufism's Minstrels

MELODIOUS music made this trip special. At night, at Sham-e-Sarhad, Maldhari singers from nearby villages troop in with earthern pots to sing folk songs around a bonfire. Most of these are Harijans who do menial work by day and sing by night. While they sing Kabir's dohas on request, the curious thing is their love for Sufism. For decades, their ancestors have been singing lyrics written by the late poet Shah Abdul Latif, revered in Sufi-Sindhi history. Their cross-cultural comfort is amazing—they can sing melodiously in Kutchi as well as in Sindhi. Though the two languages are spoken similarly, the musical "dard" (pain) as someone would say, is different. But not for the Maldharis. Back at Gandhidham, I attended a sangeet chowki organised by the Indian Institute of Sindhology—a cultural and academic institute in India. Senior professionals sing here every month to keep Sindhi culture alive in the community. It brought back the stories my mother told me about Mirpurkhas, her home before the Partition. Sindhis are stereotyped as business-minded, papad-eating sais. But few know about their literature after Partition, the lilting folk music or their dress history. Sindhi culture has a vital past, a fragile present but a future which is almost non-existent. I looked around to note sadly that there were no young faces in the audience.

A Revision of Identity

I was born and raised in a small resettlement town called Adipur in Kutch. When asked by neighbours in cities or colleagues in various jobs about my origins, I would say I am an Adivasi. I thought this was a smart response. I also figured out, especially when I worked abroad, that more people had heard about Adivasis than about Adipur. Now, I have changed my mind. The adivasi is no more. After this trip, I am Sindhi-Kutchi.

(The writer is the Editor of Marie Claire, India)