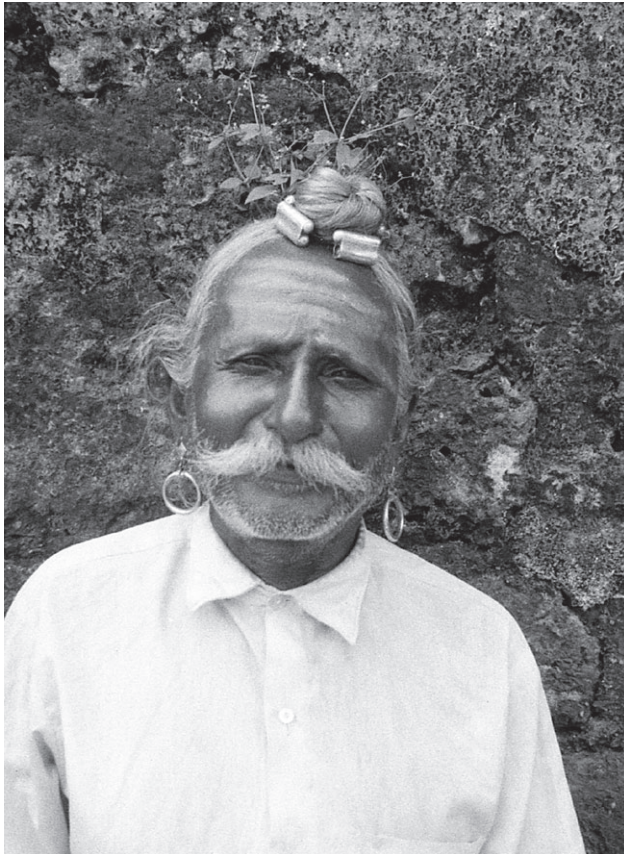


Gadulia Lohar: Nomads in India



LEFT
(top to bottom)

1: An ayurvedic doctor. Maposa Goa 1969.

2: An ayurvedic doctor and a client or patient in his roadside pharmacy and consulting room. Maposa Goa 1969.

3: On fallow plots of land along the roads people lived with extremely meagre possessions. Calangute Goa 1969.

4: Three of the millions of homeless people in India. Calangute Goa 1969.

RIGHT

5: A man with special powers and knowledge that he is willing to share in return for anything you can afford and consider fair. Rajasthan 1969.



I had taken few photographs until during a journey through Rajasthan in 1969 a friend lent me a camera. At that time, I still had some disdain for the camera as an obstacle to the view, because I had seen people in special moments and amazing places mainly busy with their devices. However, during a trip by train, bus and boat from New Delhi via Mumbai (in 1969 still called Bombay) to Goa, I shot in about five weeks over 250 pictures on four rolls of film.

Ewald Vanvugt

LONG FORGOTTEN, MY OLD NEGATIVES from that time have recently come to light again, and with the past now before my eyes I felt astounded and grateful. After more than forty years, some of my own pictures from India were completely new to me, while others reminded me vividly of meetings with remarkable people.

Outside train stations and on fallow plots of land along the roads, people lived with extremely meagre possessions. Far from all were beggars; indeed, many managed to scratch a living as smiths, seasonal land labourers, travelling entertainers and even as ayurvedic doctors with their knowledge of rare herbs and cures. Almost as poor as most wanderers, they possessed special skills and tools and costumes, some even owned a horse and wagon, marking them as people who worked for a living. Women and children without men stayed close to the improvised cooking fires. Nowhere did I meet an interpreter to help me talk with them, but the gradations of their wealth and poverty and of the strength with which they carried their fate fascinated me. I photographed such wandering people in several parts of Rajasthan without knowing who they were.

Recently, I found myself with a copy of the *National Geographic* of February 2010 which carried an article about nomads in India, illustrated with superb photographs by Steve McCurry. Some of the people in his pictures I recognized immediately, because only days before I had seen the faces of their ancestors in my own newly restored pictures. In the excellent article 'Lost nomads' John Lancaster explains precisely who I had photographed in 1969. The nomadic smiths belong to a people of wandering groups with the collective name Gadulia Lohar – after *gaadi*, Hindi for wagon or cart, and *lohar*, Hindi for smith.



LEFT
(top to bottom)

6: A woman cares for at least four children and possibly considers the elderly couple in the background as family as well. Rajasthan 1969.

7: A nomadic smith at work on the side of a road, with his family and a customer. Rajasthan 1969.

8: Father and son, perhaps ancestors of the nomadic smiths in Steve McCurry's similar picture from 2010 at <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2010/02/nomads/mccurry-photography>. Rajasthan 1969.



RIGHT
9: The travelling clown with two heads, four arms and four legs is mildly mocking a sacred person. The white-haired and white-bearded man with the sign painted on his forehead and the prayer beads in his hand clearly represents a Hindu holy man or *sadhu* who is being carried on the back of a disciple. The boys next to him have the skill to let air escape from a balloon with a penetrating sound that attracts the attention of everybody in the bazaar. Rajasthan 1969.



According to their oral tradition, they are descendants of an ancient Hindu people that lived homelessly ever since the Mogul emperor Akbar conquered the massive fort Chittaurgarh in South Rajasthan in 1568 by. The fort protected the capital of Mewar, a kingdom of the high-caste Hindu rulers and warriors known as Rajputs. The Gadulia Lohar consider themselves to be Rajputs too: their ancestors served the kingdom as weapon-makers. Ashamed about the loss of their country they vowed to live as exiles without a fixed abode.

They are one the many nomadic groups in India. Some lived off criminal activities, but the majority existed peacefully alongside mainstream India and made useful contributions to the larger community. But sedentary society was so preoccupied with the criminals that it was generally convinced all nomads were thieves or worse.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, European colonial governments spent much energy and money to capture nomads in permanent settlements and deprive them of their right to travel. Less than eighty years ago, the British military and civil servants in India considered all wandering groups to be rebels and criminals, and treated them harshly—their European prejudices about gypsies reinforcing their opinions about local nomads. The government of India still is striving for the settlement of the wandering groups. Bureaucracies don't like people without a fixed address. Officially seven percent of India's present population, or 80 million people, belong to one of the nomadic peoples.

The Gadulia Lohar stuck to their ancestral occupation as smiths and weapon-makers. Forty years ago I saw them sharpen knives and repair copper pots and kettles. Copper cooking pots have since become obsolete, so the main work



of the smiths today is forging from scrap iron new kitchen spoons and other utensils. According to John Lancaster and other reporters, the Gadulia Lohar are still treated with disrespect by everybody around them, including the authorities and in particular the police. And as is the case in so many similar situations across time and space: deeply entrenched opinions about their untrustworthy nature hinder them in finding work, and their resulting poverty and despair drive some to crime.

The Indian author and social activist Mahasweta Devi has long argued for more compassion and funds for the nomadic peoples from the Indian authorities and from the population. Mahasweta Devi has said many times: 'These peoples belong to the very poor, usually they are illiterate and not familiar with the social programmes. Urgently needed are the political will and the social mobilisation for a more humane existence of the nomads.' (See e.g. her article 'India's Denotified Tribes' at <http://indiatribals.blogspot.com/2008/01/mahasweta-devi-on-indias-denotified.html>)

If my old half-frame photo-negatives had not been scanned by the International Institute of Social History, the pictures would not have reappeared with such clarity and detail, each as large as a page in a newspaper. Then most likely I would never have recognised the faces in Steve McCurry's contemporary photographs as relatives of the people I once looked in the eye. The photos from 1969 illustrate and underscore that the nomadic way of life and the lowly status of the Gadulia Lohar have hardly changed in generations.

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Some technical information is necessary to understand the circumstances of the find in my archives. The camera I used back in 1969 was an Olympus from Japan, about as big as a fist. Because it only used half of a regular negative for each photo, it was known as a 'half-frame camera', very high-tech at the time, allowing the photographer to fit 72 photos on to a regular 36-exposure roll of film.

Over many years as an increasingly keen travel photographer, I have used many different cameras, using mostly film with 36 exposures, usually black and white. Since the advent of digital photography transformed our practices, my sheets of photo-negatives have slumbered in boxes in the attic.

An old-fashioned contact print of a half-frame photo-negative is hardly larger than a stamp (18 x 24 mm) and even under a magnifying glass the image can be rather vague. However, when the negative is digitally scanned, the photo can be magnified to fill a large computer monitor with translucent clarity and detail

Some years ago I made arrangements with the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam to store and take care of my personal papers. Last year Frank de Jong of the IISH and I started to go through my photo archive and in the process we unearthed amongst several treasures the half-frame photo-negatives made in India. So far, the IISH has published a selection of about 500 of my photos on Flickr (see <http://www.flickr.com/photos/iisg/sets>), mostly taken in Asia and South America in between 1969 and 1974.