



Tree-top view of Bhagora Fish Farm, Madhya Pradesh, India, July 1973

Man Singh, Bhadam Singh, and Subdal

The monsoon rains had been good the summer of 1973, and on a steamy day in mid-August we were lounging in the foyer outside my rooms, occupied with a noon-time poker game. We were smoking *bidis*, and they also comprised our bets. The most primitive tobacco product in existence, a conical pack of 20 cost 10 paisé, or about U.S \$0.013. Add to this efficiency the trait that a *bidi* will not stay lit unless regularly puffed. Man Singh and Bhadam Singh were of the Gujjar or herding caste and were wearing *dhotis*. They were laborers at Bhagora Fish Farm. Subdal was of the Saharia tribe and held the position of Fisheries *Jemidar*. Like me, he was wearing only underwear because of the heat. The rattle of an approaching bicycle announced the arrival of my cook, Habbu. He was returning from a shopping trip to Shivpuri, 7 miles distant, and he brought my mail as well. Included was my latest packet of slides developed by Kodak in Bombay, and so the game was adjourned so we could inspect them. This had become a favorite ritual of these men I worked with. So we passed around the little 35-mm slides, each of us holding them up to the light in turn and making comments. Having begun the roll months before, I did not think about what all might be in them.

Suddenly Man Singh erupted in continuous laughter while gazing at one particular slide. Finally he managed to blurt out that the picture was of Subdal's wife bathing with another woman at the river, and they were both topless !!!

NOW PLEASE, let me explain! About six weeks earlier the rains had filled the reservoir and we had filled all our fish ponds from the canal. Wanting to create a panoramic photo montage of the whole fish farm in this condition, I had climbed about 25 feet up a large tree at the river bank behind the farm. Having finished this project, I was enjoying my perch when I heard women's

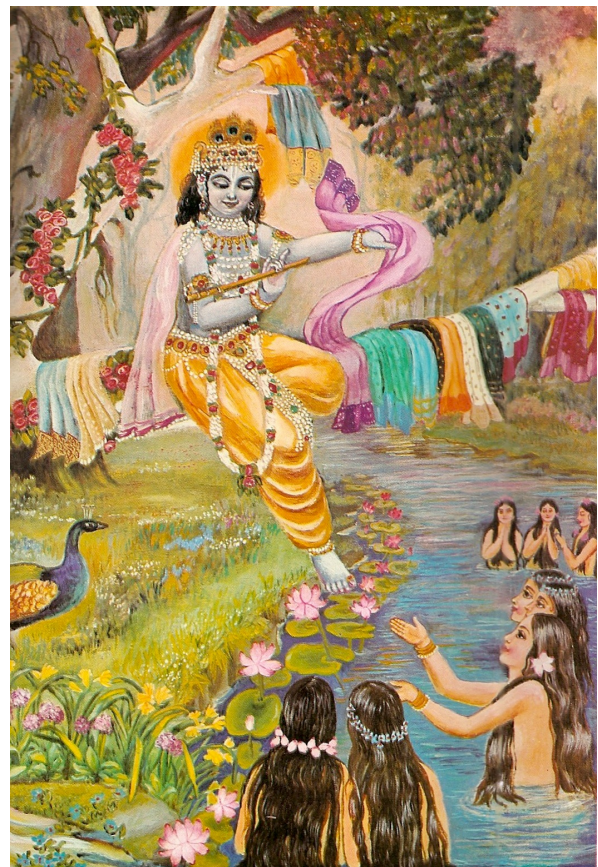
voices behind me on the path coming from the nearby village of Kota. Two tribal women arrived, removed their blouses, and began bathing while standing knee-deep in the river with their skirts tucked up. NOW YOU MAY ASK what business I had continuing to operate my camera. I will attempt no excuses, except.....that after almost two years of observing tribal women, some of whom worked for a spell at the farm, with their colorful skirts and saris, their hefty silver anklets and chokers contrasting with their brown tattoo-embellished skin, and their bashful smiles.....well let's just say I was thoroughly charmed.



Saharia girls working at the fish farm

And besides, do you not know the story of Lord Krishna and the *gopis* (milk maidens)? No? Well a whole bunch of them were ambushed by Krishna while they were bathing completely naked. He collected their garments from the river bank, climbed up a tree with them, and asked the *gopis* to come out of the water one-by-one and pray for their return, a request with which they complied. My photo-taking hardly rose to that level. I simply was imagining I was a photographer for *National Geographic*. (So there!).

Well Man Singh in short order could not see the slide from the tears in his eyes. Then Subdal appropriated it, held it to the light, and stared at it for about a minute, after which Bhadam Singh exclaimed “Yeh kya hai” (What’s this?) while gesturing to a very noticeable mound that had suddenly appeared in Subdal’s underpants. Now we all “rolled on the floor” for a few minutes. I lamely told Subdal that I had no idea that I was photographing his wife. Having a good-humored nature, he appreciated the situation and was not



Krishna and the gopis

the least bit offended. But now Man Singh, in all seriousness, asked Subdal to explain how he had not yet fathered a child, given the level of arousal displayed to us all. He glumly reported that the desire was certainly there but that most often the arousal would fail. Knowing his fondness for cheap country liquor during festivals, I had a hunch about the cause of his problem. So I offered a brief explanation of the phenomenon sometimes referred to as “whiskey dick.” I then suggested that he try not to drink beforehand and see how it went.

As Subdal remained thoughtful, Man Singh, still unmarried, launched into a boast of his sexual prowess and, looking me straight in the face, told me very seriously that he had made love to a woman “*gyarha bar*” (11 times) in one night. To this we all professed disbelief, but he vigorously maintained it was true. Well, despite his poverty, he was a very happy-go-lucky, well-spoken dashing young man. Named after the greatest Tomar king of Gwalior, or perhaps the more recent notorious *dacoit* (bandit), it was easy enough to imagine Man Singh with a harem in another time. And that brought to mind the erotic sculpture I had seen covering the temples at Khajuraho 200 kilometers eastward. Who knows,

maybe he was telling the truth.



Khajuraho temple exterior



Man Singh

A month later Dassera, the Hindu festival commemorating Rama's victory over the demon king Ravana, had come and gone and I thought it time to ask Subdal if he had attained victory in the bedroom. To this he replied with a broad smile, “*Sab thik hai, Sahib, bahut thik hai*” (All is good, Sir, very good).

Apparently, Subdal's success bolstered my reputation as a man of science beyond that concerned with the sex lives of fish, because Bhadam Singh now approached me with his own problem: whether to accept the government deal of having a vasectomy in return for money. He didn't understand the procedure and was leery of it. But he was very poor and as his

only child was a strong healthy boy, he was, to his credit, trying to make a rational decision. Complicating his understanding was the Hindu version of anatomy in which a man has a reservoir of a finite quantity of sperm stored in his head, with a connecting tube passing behind the ear on its way to the penis. This version is sometimes exemplified by a Brahmin man twirling a finger around his ear, indicating that he needs to go urinate. That gesture represents winding a loop of the long sacred threads that cross his torso around the ear to close off the sperm tube, thus preventing loss of the precious fluid. It also protects the threads from being peed on. Fortunately, plumbing vocabulary is well understood at a fish farm so I was able to teach a little anatomy and demystify the procedure. Thus reassured, Bhadam Singh had the vasectomy. A couple of months later I asked him how it all worked out, and he said his home life was much less stressful.



L to R: Subdal, Bhadam Singh, Daulat, L. Watson, Baboot Singh (watchman), Habid Khan (cook)

So.....in these ways an overt indiscretion fostered serendipity (would that I always be so lucky).

Although Man Singh, Bhadam Singh and Subdal were under my supervision on a daily basis, I was not technically their boss, and from the start this relationship somehow fostered friendships. As a PCV and “foreign technical advisor,” I guess I could circumvent the proper hierarchy that governs relationships in a very structured society, although Peace Corps training cautioned somewhat against this. However, my willingness to “break the rules” did work out well and didn’t result in loss of respect from my Indian supervisor or my coworker, Mr. Shrivastava, who became my closest friend. So we could work as a team when occasion demanded it and accomplish work in spite of my apathetic (and corrupt) supervisor.

Waiting for the monsoon rains to begin in June of 1973, we had an opportunity to net some rohu and niren broodfish that were concentrated in the mostly de-watered, nearby Bhagora *Talab* (reservoir). Although never done before at Bhagora Fish Farm, induced spawning by hormone injection, if successful, could jump-start the farm's production in advance of our collection of eggs spawned naturally during monsoon flooding. My plan was to use the gill nets I had brought with me to the farm as seines in the reservoir. But my supervisor in the Shivpuri fisheries office did not care to cooperate and refused to provide a truck for transporting captured brood-fish to the farm one kilometer away. Luckily, my ace-in-the-hole turned out to be Subdal, who enthusiastically volunteered to cycle pairs of 2-4 kg rohu in my water-filled nylon back-pack to the farm, pedaling as fast as he could.

So one day we entered the large pond which after months of irrigation drawdowns represented Bhagora *Talab*, and in water up to our waists, proceeded to drag several gill nets. Because rohu are jumpers, what ensued was riotous. Upon attaining a critical mass of concentration, all hell broke loose as many fish flew several feet into the air and over the net, occasionally hitting one of us (I received a stunning blow in an armpit). But we snagged a dozen or so promising candidates in the mesh, from which I chose six to be transported in three trips to the farm on Subdal's back. Once there, he placed them in cloth *happas* staked in one of the ponds, two males and one female in each.

Later, back at the farm, I dissected the pituitary glands from the other fish which we deemed injured by the netting. Though poor prospects for spawning, they were acceptable as donors. I mashed up the pituitaries individually, and then injected each female rohu with one-half a gland at dusk and then two glands at midnight, when the males received one gland apiece.



Niren pituitary donors

Although spawning occurred sometime in early morning, low fertilization rates resulted in only a few thousand fry. But the precedent was set at our farm and luckily, as it turned out, a great monsoon season was on it way, so we secured ample fry from collecting eggs during natural spawning in local reservoirs (the previous year's monsoon had been a bust). Most memorable, though, was the sight of Subdal scaling the rubble dyke of Bhagora *Talab* with the bright orange backpack dripping water, and fish tails flopping about his neck.



The pituitary, master gland in fish (and humans !)

Note: I subsequently destroyed that 35-mm slide of Subdal's wife and friend.