

The LOHARS

The travelling blacksmiths of North India

Clang, clang, clang! In the crowded clutter of the street sides of northern India, among the fruit sellers, the tyre menders, open air soup kitchens and clothing stalls, the sound of a sledgehammer striking hot metal attracts our attention. The travelling blacksmiths - the Lohars - are in town!

The Lohars are a travelling blacksmith community in north India. The name comes from *loha* meaning iron. They are found in small nomadic family groups in such states as Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. They claim to be Rajasthani, because they originated there, but form a distinct people with their own traditions and way of life. They call themselves the **Gaduliya** in Rajasthan and **Shilpkar** in Himachal Pradesh. *Gaduliya* refers to the open carts in which they travel and live. They were estimated to number 25,000 in 1970.

News of their arrival in an area spreads quickly. Traditionally, they travel in bullock carts and make and mend utensils, all kinds of agricultural implements, tent pegs, cart wheel rims, shoes for horses and bullocks, and a variety of iron and copper bowls. The carts are of a distinctive construction, having heavy wooden wheels and the sides sometimes have a wicker design in metal. The family live in tents of black tarpaulin at the side of the cart or in carts covered with an awning. The small forge is served by circular air bellows.

They usually live and travel as a group of three to a dozen families, each family with a cart. Each group has its own circuit of villages of about eighty kilometres, and has a regular schedule of visiting certain sites in towns and villages for a few days. They form long-term patron-client relationships with farmers. If a family group cannot fulfil the schedule for customers, another family group takes their place. We have met such groups in Rishikesh, south Delhi and Ghaziabad. They are known to travel as far as eastern Uttar Pradesh.

During the monsoon season they congregate in towns or villages, where some of them have settled. As many as two hundred families camp together, partly because the roads are impassable, but also to renew family ties. Each band or clan will have its own *panchayat* or council of leaders or representatives, one from each travelling family group. These settle disputes about work, bride prices and even clothing styles. They are divided into a number of clans and lineages.

They are a fervent Hindu community, worshipping Ram as a Hero god and especially the goddess Kali of Chitorgarh. They carry a small image of her in the *thalia*, or cupboard where small stores and valuables are kept on their carts. In addition each clan worships its own deity and each family offers daily prayers to the god of the anvil. They participate in all the Hindu festivals. Their traditions claim that they were originally Rajput warriors and weapon makers in the fort of Chitorgarh, southern Rajasthan. When the fort was under siege by Akbar (the great Muslim leader) in 1568, they saw that defeat was inevitable and fled by a secret doorway. For this reason, they believe, the goddess Kali uttered a curse on them and condemned them to a wandering life. Becoming a nomadic people they

took five vows. These included never to return to Chitorgarh, never to live in houses, never to use a light at night or use a rope to draw water. They believe their goddess might kill them if they settle. Their caste places them at different levels according to the district they move in. Their status now means their women cannot draw water from the wells of the very villages that depend on them for their craft. Their Hinduism is probably emphasised in order to be anti-Muslim. They maintain their hostility to Muslims to this day.

In 1955 the Indian government attempted to settle all nomadic groups, starting with the Lohars. A convention brought the Lohars back to Chitorgarh for the first time in four centuries. Their womenfolk feared the men would die, but nothing happened to them! A dozen colonies were established but many families found it too expensive to build houses. Most did not take to farming. The scheme foundered because of the lack of resources, poor land, and the Lohars inadequate re-training as farmers.

They marry only other Lohars, but from another clan. They are monogamous and divorce is rare. All marriages are arranged years beforehand often when they are still children, the partners not even knowing each other. Bangles are worn as tokens of marriage. The women grind the grain and bake, raise the children, but unlike many Indian women have contact with other people, including men. This is because the women share the iron-working equally with the men, a wife often swinging the hammer or working the bellows for her husband until her sons are old enough to help. They supplement their income by sales of bullocks and small numbers of cattle. Some Lohars use camels. There are other groups of Lohar in India.

The Lohars shun idleness, often working a ten-hour day for meagre income. Keeping a household and business on the roadside is difficult and unhealthy. Some villages have given them a plot of land to build a one-room house as a local base. Even those who have houses tend to store the equipment in the house and camp outside it, but otherwise they travel and live in or by their bullock carts. The male Lohar wears a large red turban while his father is alive, white when he is dead. He wears a full moustache, but no beard. They claim to be *Adiwashi*; speaking among themselves *Adiwasi Girasia*, a Bhil language from Rajasthan. Their language is listed as Gade Lohar. They readily speak Hindu to outsiders. Literacy is low, but one report says it has increased considerably.

No specific Christian outreach is being done. The Lohars blend into the streetside scene, yet, being mobile, a special effort has to be made to contact and befriend them. They could easily be physically near to an opportunity to hear the gospel, but because of their short stays and the social barriers between them and the other castes, they have little contact with the few Christians in North India. Unless someone makes it their ministry to reach them, they will not hear the gospel. A study of their schedules and sites and the befriending of specific families is needed, even following them to their different sites. There is a need to discover ways of making their itinerant work more viable, and to provide hygiene and basic health care. They value education for their children, so this, too, is a need.

Pray that there may be Christians called and dedicated to get to know these people, study their way of life, their language and befriend them for Christ sake.

Pray that the Adivasi New Testament translation might be finished, and that copies be given to the Lohars.

Pray that the Lohars may be able to develop new ways of using their skills. Their hand-crafted ironwork has difficulty in competing with factory-made products.

Pray that they might gain a new understanding of their own worth and identity, overcoming the limitations of the caste system and their own traditions.

Further Reading: Satra Pal Ruhela: "Bullock-cart Blacksmiths, Gaduliya Lohar Bring Forges to Rajasthan Villages", *Nomads of the World*, Washington DC: National Geographic Society, 1971, pp. 26-51. K. Singh: *The Scheduled Castes*, People of India National Series Vol. II, Oxford University Press 1993, pp. 802-806.