Living Prehistory in India

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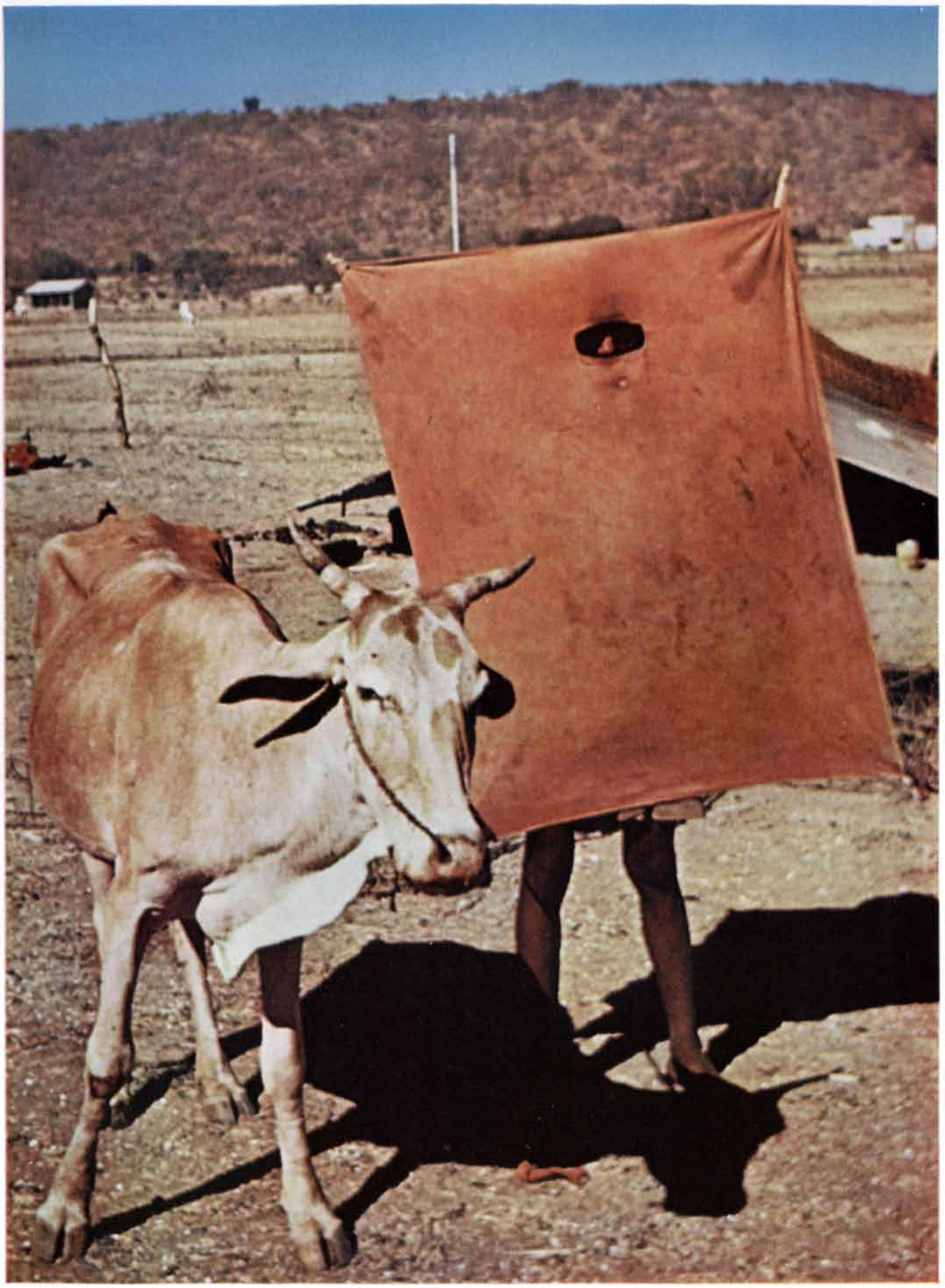


TRIBAL HUNTER from the central plateau of peninsular India stalks game such as quail by hiding behind a cloth screen and moving beside a grazing cow until the quarry is within reach. One of the Ras Phasé Pardhi tribesmen of Maharashtra, the hunter belongs to an aboriginal society whose ancient tradition of ordeal by fire may have inspired the more modern Hindu ritual of fire walking.

Living Prehistory in India

In India, as in many other lands, herdsman has succeeded hunter and farmer has succeeded both. A study of tribal groups that still pursue these ancient livelihoods helps to illuminate a shadowy past

by D. D. Kosambi

The basic task of the prehistorian is to learn as much as he can about the lives of the vanished people he chooses to study. Since by definition he works with evidence other than written records, he sometimes turns for illuminating parallels to living peoples who themselves have no written history. Perhaps nowhere in the world can such parallels be found more readily than in India. For one thing, even the written material from ancient India cannot be considered history. Scarcely a single historical figure who lived before the Moslem period (beginning in the 12th century) can be dated with any degree of accuracy, and more general accounts show little concern for facts or common sense. What is perhaps more to the point, there exist in India today many tribal peoples whose customs go back to preliterate times. Representing some 30 million (about 6 percent) of India's total population of 440 million, these peoples preserve many features—in fossilized form, as it were—of Indian prehistory.

How is it that peoples whose way of life has remained largely unchanged from prehistoric times have survived in India, which has had cities and civilization since early in the third millennium B.C.? The answer lies in the availability of food. In India today food shortages are all too well known, but they are a comparatively recent development; even now they are limited to village farmers working marginal lands and to the nation's impoverished city dwellers. In most of India nature is so kind that for thousands of years it has been possible for people to live with comparative ease simply by hunting and primitive food-gathering. This is still the case in areas where overcultivation and excessive clearing of forest have not eliminated the land's natural cover. Not only are fish and game abundant but also a variety of other natural products are enough in themselves to provide a balanced diet. Fruits, nuts, berries, leafy vegetables, tubers such as the yam, mushrooms, honey—more than 100 such natural products can be gathered in season. A large number of foodstuffs that can be stored from one season to the next grow in both wild and cultivated forms. In this category are sesamum (which provides an edible oil), emmer wheat, rice, a wide variety of beans and the sorghums and millets. Indeed, in the days of Gautama Buddha (sixth and fifth centuries B.C.) the millet *Panicum frumentaceum* was gathered wild and not cultivated at all.

This abundance of vegetable resources, supplemented by the milk and other dairy products available to the herders of cattle, sheep and goats, means that even hunting is not really crucial to survival. One can support life reasonably well in the balmy Indian climate without killing anything. This is a basic reality that does more than merely account for the survival of primitive tribal groups in India today: it clarifies the origins of Indian social thought. The characteristically Indian religions—such as Buddhism and Jainism—regard the taking of life as a sin. It is scarcely conceivable that such an ethic could have developed if an economy of bloodless food-gathering had not provided prehistoric Indians with an adequate livelihood.

The Iron Age people who practiced plow agriculture in India were at first limited to the plain of the Ganges. From that rich region they moved southward into the Deccan: the great forested plateau of peninsular India [*see illustration on page 108*]. This invasion was not accompanied by the violence that marked Rome's Iron Age conquest of tribal Gaul and pacification of the forests beyond the Rhine. As the advancing plowmen from the north met the forest herders and food-gatherers of the south, the contact seems to have initiated a process of mutual acculturation. The food-gatherers learned to adjust to agriculture and the farmers not only came to rely heavily on food-gathering to supplement their diet but also brought wild foodstuffs under cultivation. This two-sided adjustment between gatherer and producer provides both the fabric and the pattern of India's past. It is notably reflected in today's social organization and accounts for the origin of caste and the caste system [see "The 'Untouchables' of India," by M. N. Srinivas and André Béteille; SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN, December, 1965].

In many parts of India the names of the local tribal people are identical with those of the local agricultural castes, even though the difference in caste between tribesman and farmer prevents intermarriage and other forms of contact between them. The identity of names probably stems from an original unity, when immigrant farmers and indigenous food-gathering tribesmen at first made common cause in the forest region. The two major characteristics of the caste system—prohibitions against marriage outside the group and against acceptance of food from the hands of a stranger—are taboos that are typical of food-gathering tribal societies. One can imagine the caste system originating as a somewhat later effort of the indigenous food-gatherers to establish themselves as being superior to the immigrant plowmen.

If this is the case, one may ask why the caste of farmers is now higher than that of tribesmen. Answers are not hard to find. First, whatever their initial handicaps, the farmers, simply by practicing agriculture, had a sounder eco-

nomic base than the tribal people, and in India, as elsewhere, social rank corresponds closely to position on the economic scale. Second, because of their somewhat better food supply the farmers must almost from the first have multiplied faster than the tribesmen and thus would soon have outnumbered and dominated them.

Although there are caste inequalities between farmers and tribal peoples today, plentiful evidence of mutual acculturation remains, particularly in the area of religion. Many of the supposedly "Hindu" gods of the Brahman pantheon, for example, have their actual origin in tribal cults. By the same token, when tribal people abandon their aboriginal ways and take to farming for a livelihood, they abandon their ancient gods and adopt Hindu religious practices.

PACKHORSES belonging to shepherds of the Dhangar caste are led by the women to the next campsite in a round of travel that may cover as many as 400 miles during the eight months of the dry season. The Dhangar men do not follow the roads but let their sheep graze cross-country. Each night they pen the flock in the fields of local farmers, who pay for the manuring that results.

MODERN MICROLITH is made by a Dhangar shepherd, who smashes a nodule of chalcedony with a stone hammer and anvil. He will use one of the razor-sharp chalcedony fragments as a knife for castrating lambs. The knife is thrown away after one use.

Much of the ritual that accompanies both the Hindu religion and the aboriginal ones seems bizarre to modern eyes. Nonetheless, to dismiss ritual as mere superstition (or worse, to follow the fad of explaining it in psychoanalytic terms) is to throw away a genuine opportunity to study both the history and the prehistory of India.

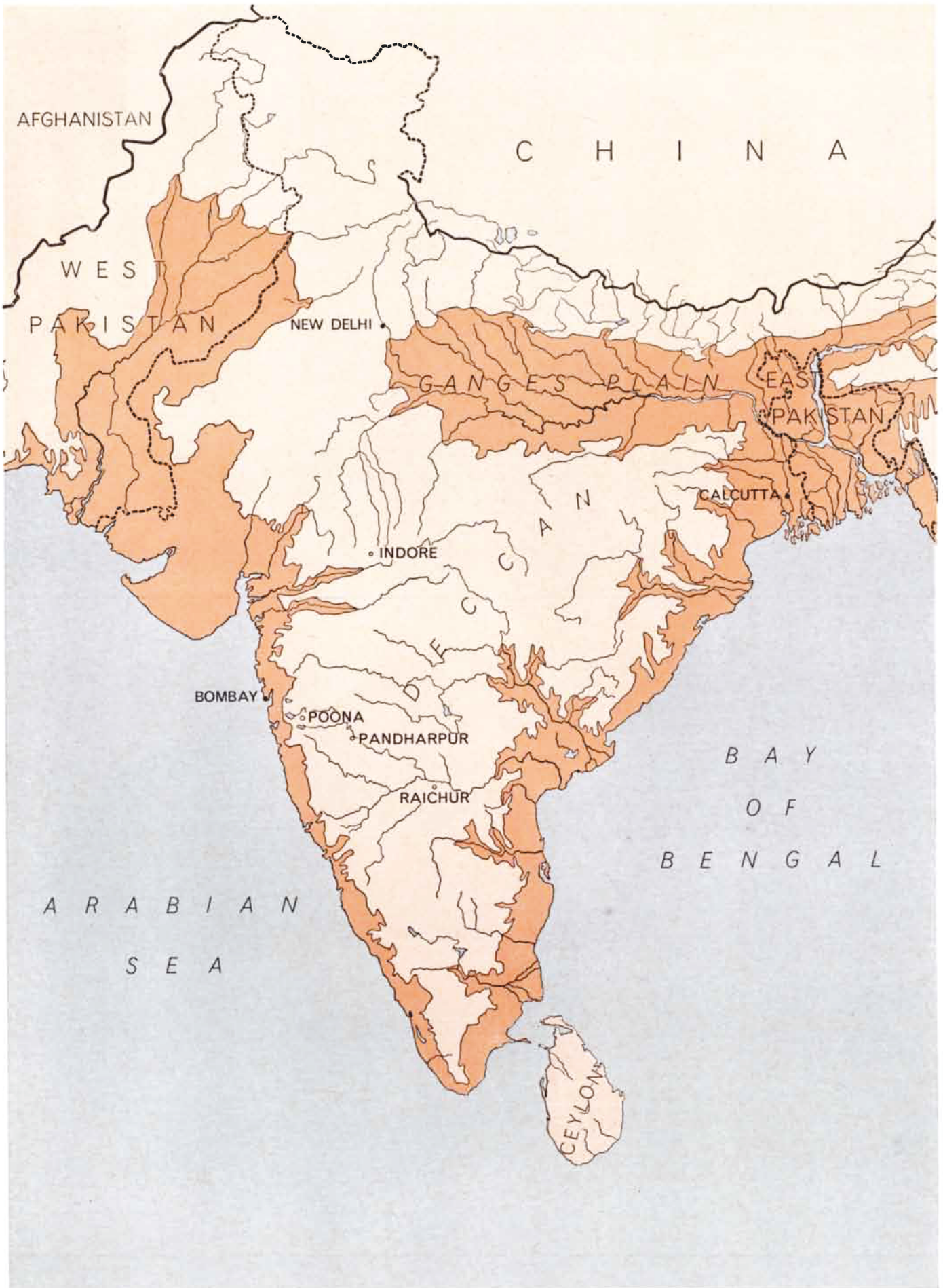
My own fieldwork has been confined to portions of the Deccan plateau and the adjacent west coast of peninsular India, an area in which my familiarity with local dialects and customs has made detailed investigations of tribal and village life possible. One of the first tribal groups I had a chance to study was the Ras Phasé Pardhi. These people, who now live in Maharashtra, originally came from Gujarat to the north and speak a dialect of Gujarati. The Pardhi are nomadic and are accompanied on their travels by a few scrawny cattle. The men do some casual labor and are skilled at stalking and snaring birds and other small game [*see illustration on page 104*]. The basic Pardhi occupations today, however, are begging and theft—practiced by men and women alike. The Pardhi consider stealing a crime only if the victim is a fellow tribesman.

Pardhi religious ritual is a mixture of adopted and aboriginal elements. The principal object of worship is a silver plaque of modern manufacture that bears the image of a Hindu goddess. Nonetheless, the major ritual—a fertility dance—gives every sign of being genuinely ancient. The performer is a male, the head of one of the small bands into which the tribe is divided. He dresses as a woman and is not merely a priest in the ritual. In his own words, "I *am* the goddess."

Part of the fertility ritual provides an interesting example of reciprocal acculturation between Hindu and aborigine. The dancer at one point plunges his hand into a pan of boiling oil, evidently without ill effect. This kind of ordeal is apparently an ancient Pardhi custom. At a Pardhi trial, for example, one proof of innocence is to walk a fixed number of steps while carrying a red-hot piece of iron. The parallel Hindu ordeal—walking on hot coals—has no sanction in Brahman scripture; ordeals are not mentioned in the earliest Hindu sacred books. In fact, fire walking apparently did not become a part of Hindu ritual until about the beginning of the Christian era, when it was adopted primarily as a means of proving innocence in the face of strong evidence of guilt. One can scarcely avoid

ANCIENT MICROLITHS have been found by the author in surface deposits at many sites in peninsular India. Carefully produced flakes such as these provided aboriginal hunters and herdsmen with tools for working bone and wood and for cutting flesh and hides.

TRANSFORMATION from function to ritual is evident in this 2,000-year-old sandstone ring, the inner face of which is decorated with alternating human figures and plants. Rings of this kind but without decoration are found at Neolithic sites throughout India; they were used to weight the digging sticks with which the earliest farmers planted seed. By 200 B.C., when this example was made, the rings were talismans rather than farmers' implements.



PENINSULAR INDIA is dominated by its ancient volcanic highlands, called the Deccan, bordered on the east and west by the subcontinent's narrow coastal lowlands and on the north by a wide, rich, densely populated alluvial plain formed by the Ganges River.

the conjecture that the Hindu ordeal was adopted from some aboriginal Indian rite such as the ones preserved today in the Pardhi dance and trial.

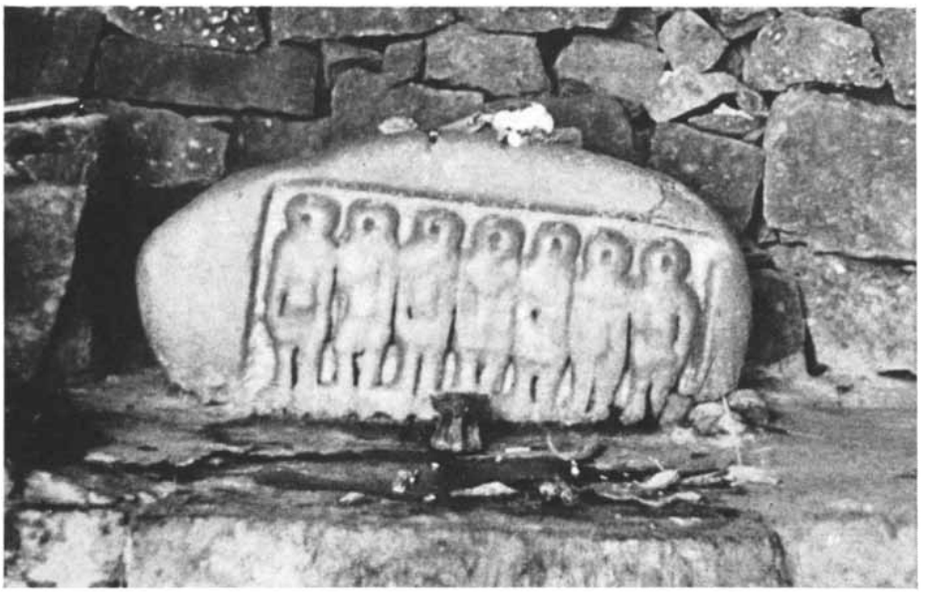
Another primitive group in the Deccan—the Dhangars—are a caste rather than a tribe. Some of them are farmers; others specialize in the manufacture of woolen blankets. At least one Dhangar family, the Holkars, took up the military life early in the 18th century and rose to princely status as the maharajas of Indore. Today the members of one Dhangar group follow tribal ways and earn a living as itinerant herdsmen. Each Dhangar band numbers about 12 people. Leading a flock of perhaps 300 sheep, the band spends the eight dry months of the year in a round of travel that rarely covers less than 200 miles and may range as far as 400 miles.

The women of the band travel the roads, moving from one preselected campsite to another and preparing the meals [*see upper illustration on page 106*]. The men herd the grazing sheep cross-country and leave them in some farmer's field at night. The sheep's overnight droppings are valuable fertilizer for which the farmer pays either in cash or in produce. These payments, together with small earnings from the sale of wool, a few skins and occasionally an animal, provide the livelihood of these pastoral nomads.

During the four months of the rainy season the Dhangar herdsmen move from their farmland pastures to traditional campsites on the plains that are dry enough to keep the sheep safe from the hoof rot they contract on muddy ground. At these rainy-season camps are sheep pens, solidly constructed of dry-stone masonry, that must have been built in prehistoric times. Some of the richest deposits of prehistoric stone tools I have found in India are close to Dhangar rainy-season camps. The same is true of many rock engravings that also appear to be prehistoric.

The stone tools are the tiny blades called microliths. It is a curious fact that although the Dhangars do not recognize the microliths as tools when they see them, they make and use similar tools themselves. When a lamb is to be castrated, a Dhangar shepherd takes a nodule of chalcedony and shatters it, using two other rocks as hammer and anvil [*see lower illustration on page 106*]. He then selects a sharp flake of chalcedony to use as a castration knife. After the stone flake is used it is ritually boiled together with the lamb's testicles and thrown away.

One of the traditional rituals in the Maharashtra region of the Deccan—the great pilgrimage to Pandharpur—may have originated in the days when everyone's life involved the kind of seasonal wandering that is still the way of the Dhangar shepherds. At the very least the pilgrimage is out of keeping with a settled agricultural way of life. The journey to Pandharpur can take as long as three or four months and traditionally begins at the start of the rainy season. That such a custom could have arisen in a farming society seems improbable; the rainy months are the ones during which the farmer does the larger part of his productive work.



SEVEN SISTERS, once possibly a college of priestesses who served an aboriginal mother-goddess in peninsular India before the invaders of the Deccan introduced worship of a father-god, are still revered in Maharashtra. This sculpture in their honor stands near the National Chemical Laboratory in Poona; it has a coating of red lead that symbolizes blood.

Other seemingly illogical mixtures of old ways and new are common in peninsular India. One example I have observed combines the plow technology of later times with a much earlier form of agriculture—the "slash and burn" method, in which farmland is created by cutting down and burning the natural vegetation. When the farmers of Maharashtra grow millet today, they clear hillsides by the slash-and-burn technique and plant the crop with the aid of primitive digging sticks. In the level valley fields where wheat and rice are raised, however, the same farmers plow and fertilize by modern methods.

The most spectacular example of fossilized ritual I have encountered is *bagad*, or "hook-swinging." Both the law and public opinion discourage this practice in India today, but hook-swinging posts are still to be found near many temples throughout the Deccan. According to historical accounts the ritual required that a pair of sharp metal hooks be thrust into a selected victim's back, penetrating the flesh just above the hips. The hooked man was then hoisted clear of the ground and left to swing, painfully suspended only by the two hooks. This gruesome rite was conducted on one special day each year. Foreign observers could discover no particular reason for it and rather too willingly attributed it to the savagery of the people who practiced it. None of these people had told them that to be hook-swung was a signal honor and a prerogative jealously guarded by a very few of the oldest farming families in each district.

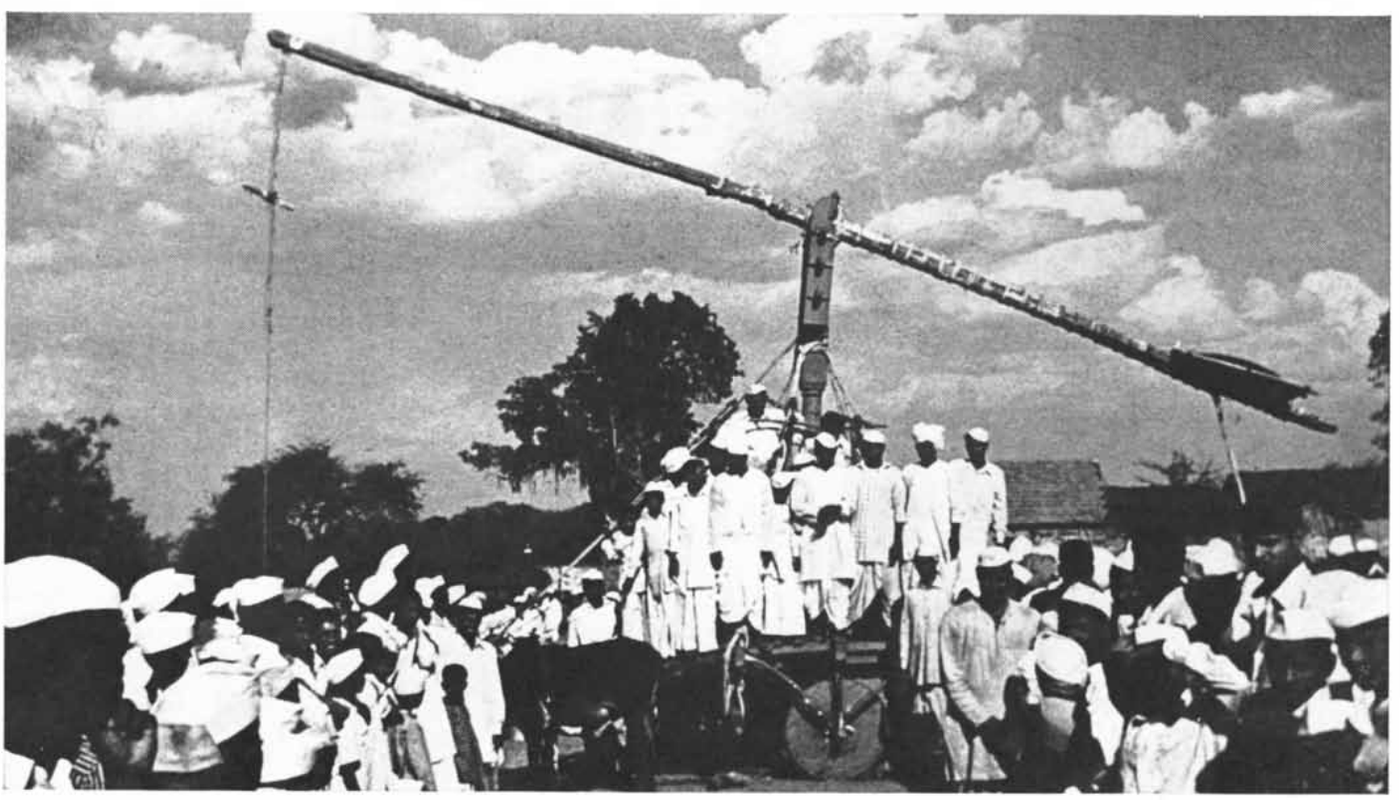
Today hooks are still set in living flesh each year in a few remote villages. I was recently able to witness such a ceremony. I must preserve the anonymity of both the village and the participants in the ritual, but I can say that it took place at the time of the April full moon. In this village the man to be swung must be selected from among the young married men of clan *X*, in spite of the fact that the village headman, the leading village families and all the richest farmers are members of clan *Y*. This privilege stems from the fact that the earliest immigrants in the area were members of clan *X*, and that it was they who first heard the call of the god Mhatoba, in whose honor the ritual takes place.

In this village the two swinging posts are set up in a cart that is used only on this one day of the year. Nowadays the celebrant's weight is no longer borne by the hooks throughout the ceremony. Be-

tween swings he sits more or less comfortably astride a bar suspended from a crossbeam that is balanced between the two uprights [*see upper illustration below*]. A new crossbeam is ceremonially cut each year in a jungle some 40 miles from the village; this jungle is said to be the place from which clan *X* originally migrated. Relays of specially chosen villagers carry the beam back to the village. They are permitted to put down their burden and rest only at specific points along the way.

At the outset of the hook-swinging ceremony candidates for the honor gather with a group of electors under a specific tree outside the village. After the celebrant has been chosen the electors and the candidates return to the village, running through a sacred course in groups of three. The man in the middle

RITUAL "VICTIM" of the annual hook-swinging *bagad* ceremony rests on his perch as he starts off to bless all the farm fields of his Maharashtra village. Two metal hooks thrust into the small of the back were at one time all that suspended the hook-swinger throughout the ceremony. To be selected for the swinging ritual is an honor that is jealously confined to the men of one clan in the village.



RITUAL CART on which the *bagad* uprights and swinging pole are mounted stands unused all year long except for this day. Those surrounding the cart include the electors, who annually choose a hook-swinger from among the eligible clan's young married men.

of each trio is a member of clan *X;* he is flanked by men of clan *Y*. The celebrant and his two escorts are the last to run the course. When they have done so, the celebrant is led to the local temple. There he is ritually bathed, declared *deva* (temporarily divine) and dressed in a special costume (a red turban and red silk trousers) that leaves him naked from the waist up.

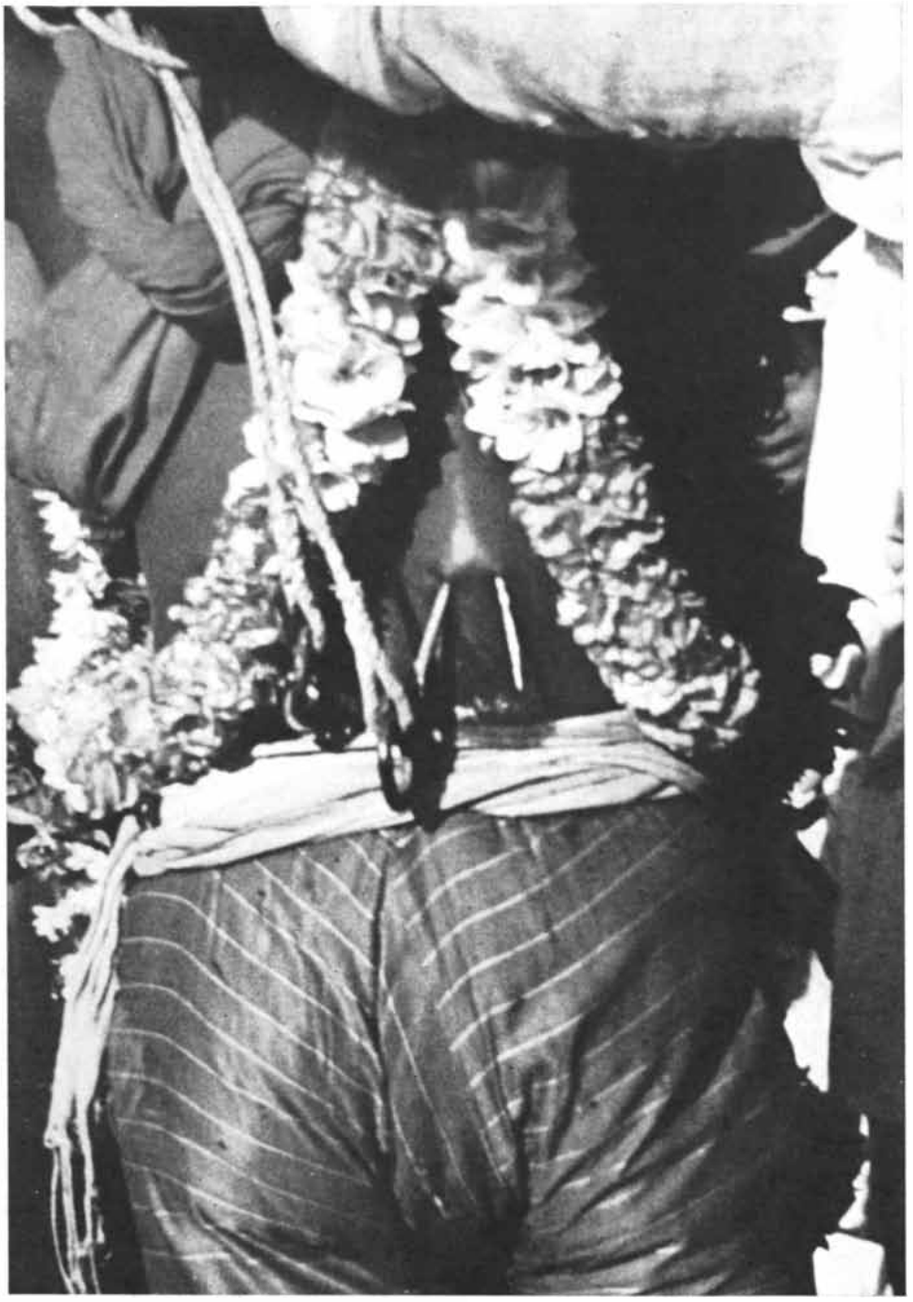
The celebrant now goes to the site of the village's annual *holi* (spring festival) bonfire. He stands on the fire's ashes as the village carpenter thrusts the two steel hooks into the small of his back [*see illustration at right*]. Every man in the village crowds around to watch the operation. The celebrant is then decked with garlands and led to a nearby field. There the *bagad* cart, drawn by a pair of bullocks, is waiting. A rope that is attached to each hook is looped behind the celebrant's back and tied to the crossbeam, which rests on the two *bagad* uprights. The celebrant individually blesses each child born since the last hook-swinging; when this has been done, he makes his first swing suspended by the hooks. A cheer goes up, the god-elect nimbly climbs astride his resting bar and the cart jolts off across the fields.

At prescribed points along the route the cart stops and the celebrant descends from the bar to make a predetermined number of swings. After all the village's fields have been blessed in this manner, the procession continues through the fields of a neighboring village to the place where the god Mhatoba's temple stands. The people have gathered from miles around. A number of goats are now sacrificed, the order of their slaughter being established by the rank of the clan offering the sacrifice.

When the sacrifices are over, the hook ropes are untied from the *bagad* beam and the god-elect climbs down from his bar. He enters the temple, the hooks are removed and his wounds are anointed with ashes from Mhatoba's sacred fire. Once this is done the god-elect reverts to human status. During the ceremony I observed, the celebrant was in a state of exaltation and showed no trace of pain. Although he received no medical treatment other than the application of wood ash, two weeks later the marks on his back were scarcely visible.

When I asked about this village tradition, I was told that the form of the hook-swinging ceremony had originally been quite different. In the "good old days," my informants said, the god-elect from clan *X* was killed at the end of the procession, along with another god-elect annually chosen from the low-caste clan *Z*. The two men were beheaded, their heads were set on stone slabs that are still in place in front of Mhatoba's temple, and Mhatoba's ceremonial palanquin was paraded over the grisly offerings. I was told that the original practice had been continued until only one male member of clan Z remained alive. At that point, it was said, Mhatoba himself appeared and declared that life need no longer be taken. It would suffice, he said, if on the sacred day the elected representative of clan Z had his thigh ceremonially cut and the representative of clan *X* was hooked and swung. In fact, my informants told me, the thigh-cutting ritual is still followed each year within the temple. The representative of clan Z has his thigh cut at the same time the hook-swinger descends from his cart. Like the hook-swinger's wounds, the clan Z celebrant's wound is anointed with ashes from Mhatoba's sacred fire.

What are the prehistoric elements in this bizarre tangle of ritual and tradition? For that matter, how much of the supposed tradition is actually credible? As a start, I see no reason to doubt that human sacrifices really took place in the "good old days." Although human sacrifice was eliminated from formal Hindu ritual before the sixth century B.C., the custom continued in many parts of India until recently. To judge by today's police



HOOK-SWINGER, ritually dressed in silk breeches and garlanded with flowers, is about to be tied to the swinging pole by means of the ropes attached to the two hooks that dangle from his back. The author found that hook-swinging was a substitute for human sacrifice.

record of ritual murders, human sacrifice is still practiced among a number of tribal peoples.

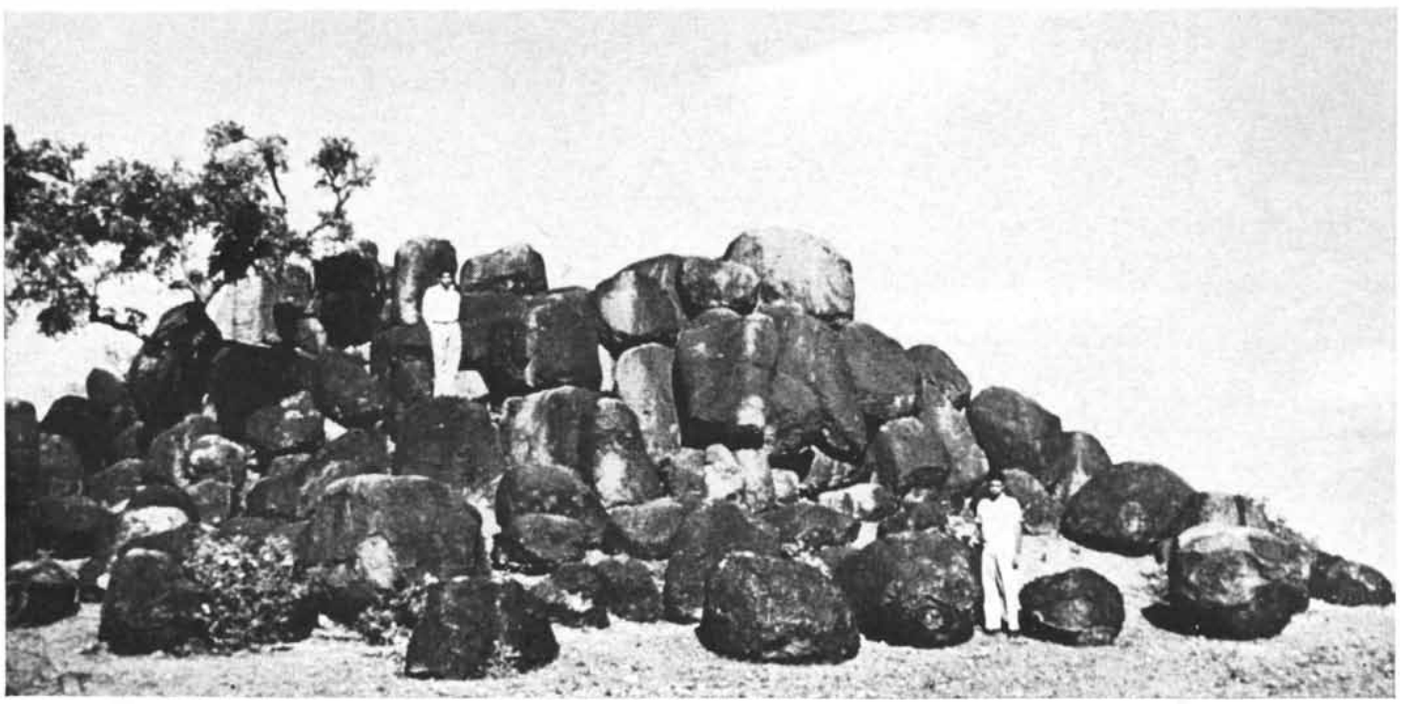
As recently as the 1780's the Brahman rulers of Poona, wishing to ensure the impregnability of Lohogad Fort, saw to it that a young married couple was buried alive under the fort's foundations. An unmarried man was similarly sacrificed by the Moslem builders of Chakan Fort; a cult in his honor survives to this day. Not all the victims of human sacrifice went unwillingly to their death. Evidence is provided by the barber caste of Kurkumbh, which is proud to hold first place in worship at the shrine of the goddess Phirangai. The barbers' priority is traditionally based on a feat performed by a member of the caste who had been given the task of escorting the goddess to Kurkumbh from her former residence some 200 miles away. The goddess agreed to make the move, with the usual kind of fairy-tale provision that she would travel no farther than the first place at which her escort turned his head and looked behind him. The barber resisted temptation all the way, staring fixedly before him until he reached Kurkumbh. On his triumphant arrival he volunteered on the spot to make a sacrifice of his unturned head.

Assuming that the account of Mhatoba's original bloody rites is authentic, how are these rites related to the prehistory of peninsular India? An answer to this question requires an examination of the deity's history. Mhatoba is a god to whom tradition assigns two distinct places of origin. One is the same jungle, 40 miles from his present temple, from which his worshipers procure the *bagad* crossbeam each year. Here Mhatoba has a second temple. It stands on a hillock, at the base of which I have found a fair number of crude microliths; the presence of these stone tools is good evidence that the area supported a prehistoric population. At this place of worship Mhatoba is called Bapuji-Baba, or "Father-God," and it is dangerous for any woman to approach him.

Mhatoba's other place of origin is about the same distance from the hook-swingers' village but in a different direction. The site is unmarked, but tradition states that at this place the deity first appeared and immediately made his presence known by kidnaping seven virgin sisters. Mhatoba thereupon traveled cross-country to the vicinity of the hook-swingers' village, where he paused by a pool in the river. There, for no known reason, he drowned all seven sisters. When a passing member of the Koli tribe ventured to criticize Mhatoba's behavior, the god drowned him as well. Near the pool today there is a shrine to the seven sisters and the unfortunate Koli. The pool itself is considered cursed. No one bathes there, nor is its water used for farm animals. Within the shrine the crude representations of the seven sisters are coated with red lead, which is commonly used by Indian villagers as a substitute for the blood of sacrificial animals [*see illustration on page 109*]. I have found surface deposits of microliths nearby, as I did at the temple where Mhatoba is known as Bapuji-Baba.

In spite of his murder of the kidnaped maidens, Mhatoba is known in one aspect as a "married" god. Next to his statue in the hook-swingers' temple stands a statue of a goddess named Jogubai. The hilltop Mhatoba, with his reputation for being dangerous to women, has no such consort. Why should the god be single in one aspect and married in the other? To find the answer I undertook a survey of all the district's temples. I quickly learned that the goddess Jogubai, like Mhatoba, was worshiped in several places, although there was no tradition that she had come to the district from some other region. I also encountered several more Mhatobas. In many places Mhatoba and Jogubai were "married," as they are at the hook-swingers' temple. In other places, however, either the god or the goddess was worshiped alone, and the local worshipers knew nothing about Mhatoba or Jogubai being "married" elsewhere.

It is my belief that Mhatoba and Jogubai are a pair of deities who originally belonged to two different population groups and quite probably to different eras of prehistory as well. As I interpret the evidence, Mhatoba was at first an aggressively male god of the kind who was worshiped by the Gavalis, a late wave of pastoral invaders who entered



MEGALITHIC MONUMENT, erected by prehistoric inhabitants of the Deccan, has become the center of a modern cult. The object of veneration is an unhewn stone, called Manzrai, or "Cat Mother," that lies under one of the boulders in the middle of the pile.

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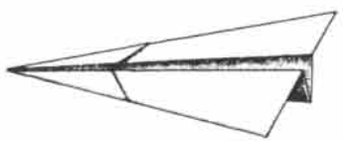

FIG. 1: Paper plane circa 1920, the classic paper plane. Smoothness of flight, grace, but under-powered.

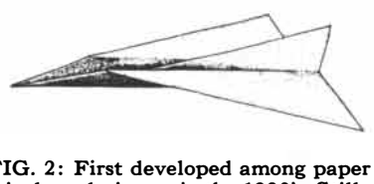

FIG. 2: First developed among paper airplane designers in the 1930's. Still under-powered—no jet engines available.

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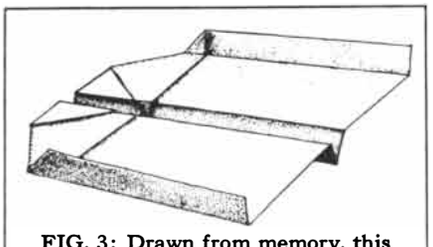

FIG. 3: Drawn from memory, this plane was last seen in 12th floor stairwell at 415 Madison Ave. Four jet engines would have materially improved its performance.

That classic paper plane of 1920 doesn't mean a thing without the power to get it off the ground. Howmet's integrally-cast components of high temperature superalloys make it possible to get more thrust by running the engines at higher and higher temperatures. (See Fig. 4.)

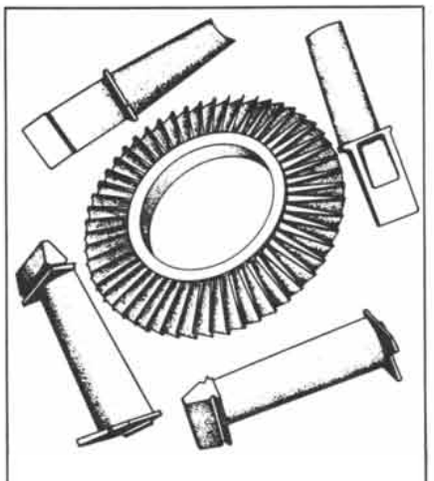

FIG. 4: Typical Howmet castings in high temperature superalloys for jet turbines.

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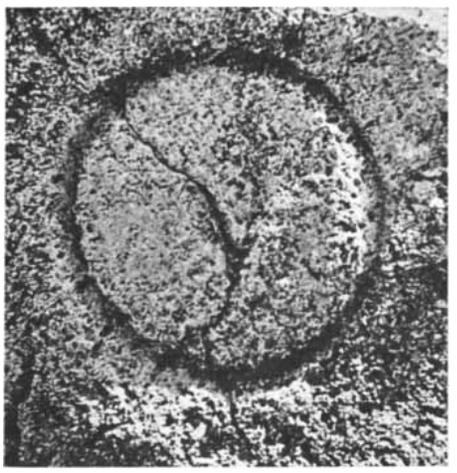
GODDESS'S SHELTER is the dark hollow (*right*) under one stone of a prehistoric megalithic monument near Poona. The deity, whose worship only began in the 18th century, is a huntress named Bolhai. The deep circle cut into the boulder is 12 inches in diameter, a size characteristic of most of the circles that decorate the megalithic monuments of the Deccan. It was probably outlined with a hand, the thumb and little finger acting as a compass.



CIRCULAR GROOVE decorates the flat surface of a basalt boulder that is part of another ancient megalithic monument in the vicinity of Poona. This circle is the same size as the one shown in the illustration at left.

the Deccan from northern India. These people herded cattle but did not use the plow. They reached Raichur in the middle of the Deccan plateau by about 2000 B.C.; recently obtained carbon-14 dates indicate that they were still practicing their pastoral way of life as late as 1000 B.C. The preceding wave of pastoral invaders from the north herded sheep and goats; therefore the skins they used for various purposes were the comparatively thin sheepskin and goatskin. The Gavalis had to work with thick cattle hides, and accordingly their microlithic tools were somewhat heavier and coarser. This difference is evident in the microliths found near the Bapuji-Baba temple.

Jogubai, on the other hand, is the kind of mother-goddess I associate with the earliest inhabitants of the Deccan: the primitive food-gatherers. These are the same people who with enormous effort erected all over peninsular India hundreds of megalithic monuments consisting of large piles of boulders. After they had piled the boulders together they also marked them with deep grooves. It is an interesting coincidence that wherever a modern cult is associated with one of these ancient megalithic monuments it is almost without exception a mother-goddess cult.

If it is correct to assume that the mother-goddess was first in the area and that the father-god was a pastoralist intruder, how do the traditions of the hook-swingers' village fit such a sequence? In their temple goddess and god are joined in "marriage"; I take this to be symbolic of a situation in which conflict between food-gatherer and pastoralist was resolved by peaceful fusion. The virgins drowned by Mhatoba might represent a sacred college of priestesses dedicated to the worship of the mother-goddess. The fact that Mhatoba is now married to Jogubai shows that even the destruction of her priestesses was not enough to suppress her worship.

The conflict between mother-goddess and father-god could not have been resolved peaceably everywhere. Throughout Indian theological art, from the earliest representation of a horned "proto-Shiva" on Harappan seals of the third millennium B.C. to gaudy pictures sold in Indian bazaars today, runs a theme of conflict between a female deity and a "buffalo demon," in which the goddess is the victor. In Kalighat paintings, for example, Shiva's wife Parvati tramples him. The goddess Durga-Parvati is called "she who tramples the buffalo demon."

In this connection Jogubai appears in another temple in the district not in the role of consort to Mhatoba but as consort to the more primitive male deity Maskoba, who is recognized as the counterpart of the buffalo demon. Just as the union of Jogubai and Mhatoba in the hook-swingers' temple can be taken to symbolize conflict resolved, so perhaps this marriage to the buffalo demon symbolizes conflict perpetuated. This much is certain: The prehistoric fusion of two distinctly different societies has left marks that remain to this day. Indeed, in some parts of the countryside both the buffalo demon and the goddess who tramples him are worshiped by the same believers but in separate shrines.

Two points, however, should be made clear. First, although instances of goddess-worship are still to be found all over India, there is no reason to believe the country's prehistoric food-gatherers were worshipers of a universal mother-goddess. To attribute any universal custom to primitive and segregated peoples is obviously hazardous. Second, it is important to emphasize that even when some ancient monument is found to be a center of goddess-worship today, there is little possibility that the modern cult represents a survival from prehistory. The early food-gatherers had no fixed abode and the early pastoralists were constantly on the move; accordingly any continuity of worship at a single site is implausible.

Nonetheless, coincidence can sometimes achieve what piety cannot. At the village of Theur the goddess of childbirth is worshiped at a megalithic monument that stands on the summit of a prehistoric mound. This goddess—Satvai, or "Mother Sixth"—takes her name from the fact that sacrifices are made to her on the sixth day after the birth of a child. The boulders that compose the monument at Theur are of a stone so hard that it will turn the edge of a modern mason's chisel. Yet every one of them bears smooth grooves with a semicircular cross section, some over an inch in depth, that were evidently produced by patient rubbing in prehistoric times. Prominent among the grooved designs is a representation of a cowrie shell, the traditional symbol of the female. It appears certain that the deity worshiped at the Theur mound thousands of years ago was a goddess, just as the deity is today. Here, with the Pardhi snarers, the Dhangar shepherds and the hook-swinging devotees of Mhatoba, is further evidence that the prehistory of India is still alive.

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