



India's Wonderful Secret: *A Journey Through Orissa*

Women in rapeseed field

When was the last time you said “Wow!” and meant it? I mean, *really* meant it? If it’s been a while, or if you can’t remember, maybe it’s high time you head for Orissa. “Where?” I hear you ask. An informal survey of inveterate travelers revealed that few, including frequent visitors to India, had ever heard of Orissa. Located on India’s southeastern seaboard, it is a locus of traditions, customs, and ethnic and tribal groups that can be traced back to the stone ages. This unique and exotic state is the only one of its kind in India, and one of the most photogenic in the world. Although it finds mention in obscure anthropology texts, it rarely appears in guidebooks, so it has been happily spared the blight of mass tourism. The few visitors who come here find it hard to believe that India could hide such a wonderful photographic secret so well.

Debbie
Jefkin-Elnekave
Chicago, Illinois

Artistry for the ages

When counting Orissa’s considerable blessings, one must begin with the natural beauty of its setting. Carpets of rice paddies and yellow rapeseed fields serve as a foreground to timeless folds of lush, verdant, forested mountains. This pristine region was conquered by King Ashoka in 260 B.C., with Bhubaneswar serving as the capital, but it wasn’t until the 7th century A.D. that the Odissi



Young child



Kutia-Kondh woman



Gadaba dance

culture began to flourish. This period gave birth to a treasure trove of handicrafts and artistic achievements.

In Nuapatna Village, *ikat* (tie-dye) weavers create geometric patterns and highly stylized fish, deer and border motifs on cotton and silk fabrics. The nearby villagers of Nabajeran Pur craft *dokra* sculptures, using the same metal casting method that was used in nomadic times. The exquisite motifs include elephants, horses, peacocks, drummers and mystic tribal gods. *Patichitra* paintings of Puri rose to popularity in the 15th and 16th century as a means of spreading the Hindu faith. These striking creations bind faith and exacting beauty in a spectacle of riotous color and highly stylized figures. Each element is defined by ancient texts, religious myths and local tradition.

Perhaps the greatest artistic achievement of the Odissi period was the classical dance form, which dates back to the 8th century. It was originated by *devadasis*, or 'female slaves of the deity,' who performed from early evening until bedtime. They were not permitted to marry, as their dedication to temple service was considered a marriage with the deity. As centuries passed, their services shifted from heavenly gods to so-called earthly gods and lords, which amounted to a life of prostitution with religious sanction. Over time, this magnificent dance form became nearly obsolete, but fortunately, a 1950's revival has restored Odissi dancing to its original glory and fame. To capture the drama of the dance, I put fresh batteries in my flash for fast recycling. I set the aperture at *f2.8* for a shallow depth of field, which blacks out the background and gives a positively spectacular aspect to the vibrant costumes.

Testament to a bygone era

An hour away from the capital, Puri boasts the 13th century Konark Sun Temple, one of Orissa's greatest cultural treasures. The massive temple was conceived as a great celestial chariot with huge wheels, drawn by seven colossal horses, to carry the Sun God on his daily journey across the sky. The magnificent carvings of this architectural masterpiece comprise an eloquent narration that evokes the ancient and exotic life of 13th century Orissa. Because of the protective railings around the structure, a 70-300mm lens is necessary to capture the stunning details from a distance. It took 1200 masons twelve years to complete, and it stands just

as majestically today as it did then, as an enduring testament to the craftsmanship of a bygone era.

Tribal stewards of living history

But if Konark Sun Temple is Orissa's diamond, then the stone age hill tribes that inhabit the isolated, mountainous region of the area are certainly her pearls. They are a testament to their limitless capacity, in a world mired in pop culture and trends, to hold fast to their life ways and traditions.

Because the local electricity supply is unreliable, starting the journey with an ample supply of fully charged batteries is an absolute must, as is a surge suppressor. Predictably, my suppressor breathed its last breath during a power surge, but luckily my battery charger was spared.

On a visit to a weekly market, I meet Kusumi, one of 300,000 members of the Longia Soura tribe. As a young woman, she inserted increasingly larger balsa wood plugs into her pierced ears, and today the lobes nearly reach her shoulders. Hallmarks of her society include polygamy, shamanism and a belief in forest deities. Perhaps the most fascinating practice of her tribe is the courting ritual. She tells me the story about when her future husband wished to propose marriage. He left a pot of liquor on her father's porch. Although her father was unaware of the identity of the suitor, he chose to accept the liquor. This ritual was repeated two more times, and the third time the liquor was accepted, it was considered a marriage contract. Only then was the identity of her future husband revealed. Unlike the custom of other tribes, Kusumi continues to belong to her father's family, not to her husband's. The key to a whimsical photograph of Kusumi and her stretched earlobe is to ask her to pose in profile as she puffs on her cheroot.

A gift from the spirits

Further into the hills, geometric tattoos readily identify women of the three sects of the Kondh tribe: Kutia, Desia and Dongariya. Particularly distinct are the facial tattoos worn by the Kutia women. As animists who practice spirit worship, they believe that when they die, these markings will help them to recognize each other in the spirit world. I visit with Bahali, one of the villagers, as she fawns over her child. She tells me that he is a gift from an ancestral spirit; the reincarnation of a dead ancestor whose identity was determined through divination. In spite of this belief, until

British rule, the Kondh practiced infanticide to ensure a better yield of tumeric, and human sacrifice to appease their deities, the Earth Goddess and her 12 disciples. I ask permission to photograph Bahali, but find that the natural light washes out her tattoos, so I ask her to stand in her doorway instead. Setting my flash at minus one stop gives me the perfect exposure to capture the details of her tattoos, as well as a beautiful catch light in her eyes.

Lost in time

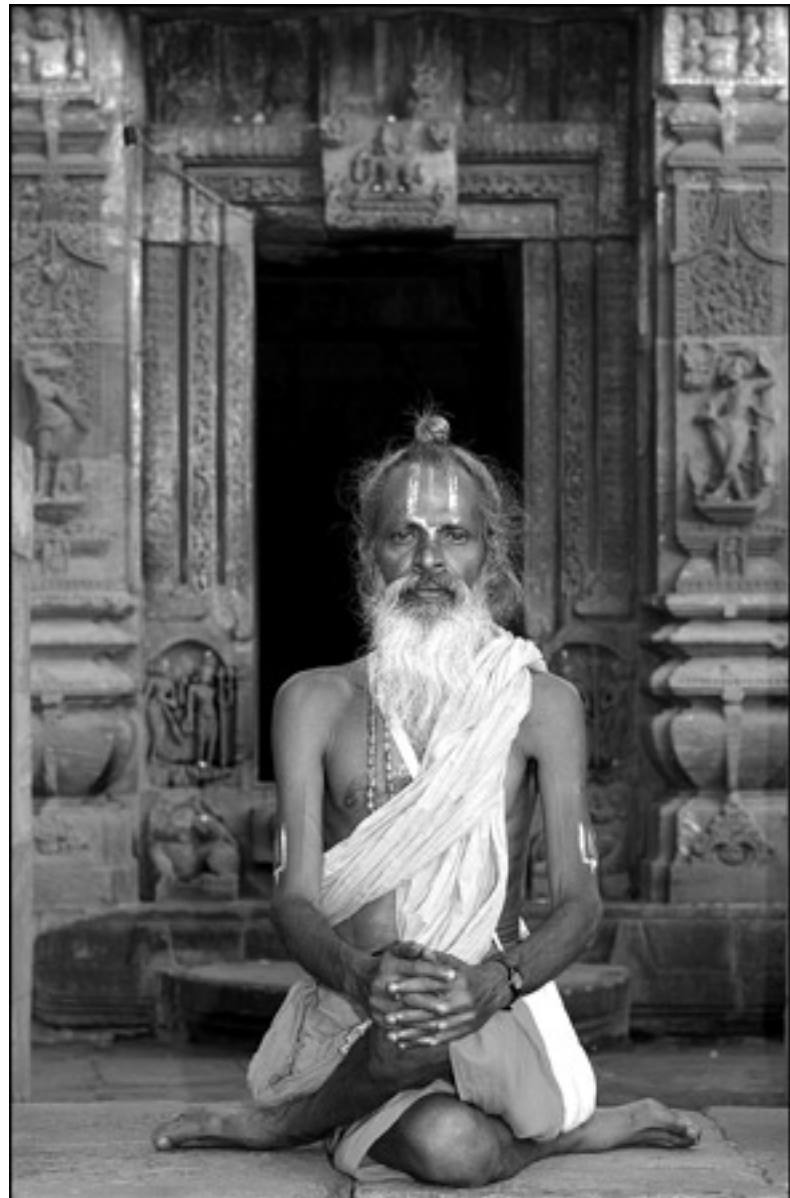
Eager to photograph the tribe described by an anthropologist as "the wildest, fiercest, rudest, and possibly the most fascinating tribe," I arrive early to the weekly market of the Bonda. They are expert farmers, hunters and fishermen. They are also strict animists who practice black magic and witchcraft, and



Debbie Jefkin-Elnekave
debbie@uncommonimages.biz

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Debbie Jefkin-Elnekave

Sadhu at 7th
century temple





Mother and child

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believe that death is the work of evil spirits. They also practice ancestor worship and house the spirits of dead ancestors in a wooden post in their homes.

Known as “the naked people,” the women wear a costume that consists only of a colorful cascade of strands upon strands of tiny yellow, orange and white beads, and a matching scullcap. A brass nose ring and silver ear hoops complete the ensemble.

From the early morning throng of villagers entering the market, a six-year old child emerges. She approaches and stands before me, under the watchful eye of a village elder. Her name, Sombrani, means Wednesday, for the day of the week on which she was born. There is a certain paradox in her demeanor: an innocence, yet a seriousness; a simplicity, yet a complexity; a lost-in-time essence, yet an awareness of modern encroachment. A

paradox that is indispensably linked to the threat to her dwindling, 6000 member stone age tribe.

Oh...and one more thing...Bonda men carry bows and arrows, which they won't hesitate to use if you even think about stealing their palm liquor or pointing a camera in their direction. Luckily, the women are the most captivating and they're keen to be photographed.

The market is also attended by members of the Gadaba tribe. Pageants of women in brilliant *saris* emerge from the surrounding hills, laden with basketloads of eggplant, jackfruit, tomatoes, tumeric, pineapple and bananas, balanced gracefully on their heads. They carry with an ease that bewilders, yet it is second nature to them. The ground is rocky; their feet are bare. How much heavier does it feel after the first mile? How long since they left their village? How soon before they begin the long journey home again?

Answering the drummer's call

I wander into a nearby Gadaba village at a most serendipitous moment. The rustic strains of two drums and a hand-made wooden flute hang in the air in a hypnotic refrain that can only be described as indigenous. Something extraordinary is clearly about to unfold as dozens of women materialize, seemingly out of nowhere. I am lucky enough to find a high vantage point from which to photograph, with the camera set on continuous focus mode to keep up with the action. The women link arms in a vigorous choreography of their native dance, which appears to me as an endless rendition of *hava nagila* on steroids. The women invite me to join in my own two-left-footed version of the dance. But this is more than just an afternoon of entertainment. It is evidence of the unshakable foundation of their deep cultural heritage. The revelry continues for an hour, then ends as abruptly as it began. The village is quieted now, utterly tranquil in contrast to the festivity of the dance. Until the next time the Gadaba women answer the drummers' call, signaling another ceremony is about to begin. Even the passage of time will not intrude upon their steadfast commitment to uphold the tribal customs that define their existence.

I end up in Vishakapatnam, back to civilization as I know it. Sitting in the lobby of the luxuriously modern hotel, I wonder if I had landed in a time warp, or if I had spent the past two weeks in some strange, wonderful



Konark sun temple

world of dreams. Etched in my mind are images of exotic dances, ancient architecture, historic treasures, timeless traditions, and of the past kept alive by the fierce determination of tribal stewards of living history. I turn to

my traveling companion for his reflections on this unforgettable journey. Not one for hyperbole or effusive observations, he sums it up perfectly: “Wow! And I *really* mean it.” I couldn’t have said it better myself. 🙏



Bonda Women