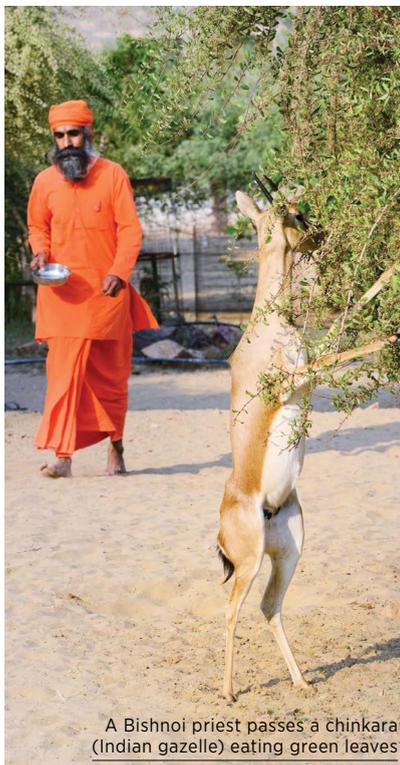


PERFECT HARMONY

A SMALL VILLAGE IN RAJASTHAN HAS SET HIGH STANDARDS OF ECOLOGICAL LIVING, RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE AND CONSERVATION THAT ARE WORTH EMULATING. BY BINDU GOPAL RAO



Bishnoi women and children sit outside their simple houses



A Bishnoi priest passes a chinkara (Indian gazelle) eating green leaves

“WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE THE BLACK BUCK?” my driver asked me on a recent visit to Jodhpur. Being a wildlife lover, this was a no brainer for me and I immediately said yes. And this innocuous question became an eye-opener as I stepped into the small village of Bishnoi, 22 km away from Jodhpur city.

Today, we know that the Bishnoi community loves nature and can give their lives to save trees. However the story behind this dates back to 1730, and is about Amrita Devi, a Bishnoi woman who lived in Khejarli village, whose name came from the khejri trees found in abundance in the village. One day a large number of people descended on the village on instructions of Maharaja Abhay Singh, the ruler of the kingdom of Jodhpur to cut the khejri trees for the wood for the construction of the Maharaja’s new palace.

When Amrita Devi heard this, she

protested and refused to give them money as a bribe to let them go. Instead she said she would give her life to save the trees and her head was cut off. Her daughters also met the same fate but the felling of green trees continued. It was then that the villagers decided that for every tree cut, one of them would sacrifice his/her life. Eventually after 363 people lost their lives, the tree felling was stopped.

The king issued a decree banning tree felling and also hunting. To date this community continues to ensure that its flora and fauna are protected against all kinds of encroachment. Do stop at Khejarli village that has a memorial called Shahid Smarak, a pink-hued building in honour of the 363 people who gave up their lives fighting to save the trees. This place is filled with peacocks and birds like kingfishers and parakeets, among others.

Another interesting fact about the



From top: The black buck is revered by the Bishnois; a Bishnoi prepares an opium drink for a welcome ceremony; and Demoiselle Cranes at the Guda Bishnoi lake

people here is that they follow their own religion which lists out 29 principles to be followed. Incidentally, the name of the community comes from bish that means 20 and noi meaning nine and per principles. Prominent among the principles: the prohibition of killing animals and the felling of trees. This sect, although Hindu, buries its dead as they do not cut trees for the wood required for cremation. In fact Guru Jambheshwar, founder of the Bishnoi sect, had also mentioned that the black buck would be his manifestation after his death and should be conserved. This is why you will see animals like deer, blue bulls, black bucks, chinkaras and freely grazing in fields here.

When I was here, I met the village head who welcomed me to his home and even gave me a cup of tea made with fresh cow milk. The men wear a white dhoti and shirt and don colourful turbans while women wear sarees and cover their face with a dupatta. The married women wear large circular nose-rings as well. This is

where I learnt that opium is grown for religious purposes and hence there is special permission for the community even though it is banned everywhere else.

The major crop is pearl millet or bajra which is a staple here. The small hamlets in which the villagers live is referred to locally as dhani and have thatched roofs and mud floors plastered with cow dung. A key factor is that cleanliness is most important and all homes have a granary and a place to store water.

When you are here, stop by at the Guda Bishnoi Lake, a natural lake that doubles up as a picnic spot and is home to several migratory birds like the Demoiselle Crane that travels over 6000 km each year to nest in these waters. This apart the natural vistas here ensure that you will spot several wild animals like deer, antelopes and the endangered and revered black buck. The 243 hectares of land here has been declared as 'Guda Vaishnoi Conservation Reserve' under the provision of the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 to protect and conserve the chinkaras and black bucks.

If you want to experience a slice of desert life, there are several village camps that offer lunch/dinner, a camel safari, jeep safari, folk dance and music, camp fire as well as accommodation in traditional huts. When you are here, head to Sangasani village which is home to the traditional block printing and at Kakani village the clay handicraft makers who will be very happy to give you a demo of how to make clay pottery.

I also met the weavers at Salawas village who make rugs from cotton and wool in traditional patterns and bright colours. What makes a visit to Bishnoi different is the way people live here. And the best part is that the community is happy and exudes a warmth that city dwellers must learn. After all it is 500 years since man and animal have lived in perfect harmony here and if that is not a lesson to be learnt what is? ■