



Lesley J Saunders

India - A Labyrinth of People!

As I deliberated about India, I came to the conclusion that it is much like a labyrinth. It looks quite straightforward, with neat blocks and straight roads, metaphorically speaking.. until of course you reach that twist aptly placed within the maze, then the vision takes on a totally new look.

As I continued my travels in Southern India, I was pleasantly surprised when I strolled down a street in Hampi to be faced with one of the Lambani tribal women. Her beautiful costume stood out amongst the crowds, the vivacious colours complementing the beautiful sunny day. As she moved her head, the mirrors mounted on her headdress sparkled in the bright light and the coins framing her face jingled as she laughed. Her hair was plaited and displayed colourful hair ornaments of braids and silver. Typical to this tribe, the woman completed her look decked with jewellery including nose rings and bangles. She was certainly having fun and being observant and it wasn't long before she noticed my camera and started posing. I'm not sure who had more enjoyment, me taking the photographs or her posing! She was certainly relaxed and full of life. As is tradition amongst these tribal women, she was preparing her pitch in readiness to sell her handicrafts. The maze I was ambling through had certainly taken a different turn. I hadn't expected to come

across these intriguing people on this expedition.

It wasn't long before I encountered another member of the Lambani tribe. Like the previous woman, she was bedecked in her colourful attire and festooned with jewellery, but her emotion was the opposite. She sat quietly creating handicrafts to sell. There was no mistaking the importance of concentration and pride with which she worked. It did not appear as if fun was her top priority but being successful at the task at hand was.

I clicked away happily capturing as always that precious moment, those hidden emotions that we all try and hide at times, regardless as to who we are and where we are. It was like looking through a lens at an artist's canvas - beautiful colours, bright light and a backdrop of some of the most wonderful artifacts in the world. What a delight for photographers!

As I rested in the midday sun, my thoughts wandered to the amazing opportunities I had been privileged with so far during my journey through India. The traditions bestowed upon the different tribal communities in India were an enigma alone. So many different principles within one culture, the tribal civilization, and yet India is so full and rich with different cultures. I tried to compare some of the traditions of India with customs displayed



▲ Inner beauty: This amazing lady was adorned with gold rings, a symbol of the tribe she was accustomed to. She sat proud with a distinct inner strength.

in other parts of the world and although well travelled, I struggled to think of a country that displayed anything near to the mixture we see in India. The UK certainly lacks in traditions and many of the original customs no longer exist. Although it's always good to move on and change can be exhilarating, I still wonder if there were still the traditions in place, how different life might have been.

As I relived my visit to the tribes in Andhra Pradesh I found myself comparing the different tribal women, their appearance, dress and especially the work they performed. Here was a group of women making handicrafts to sell. They were very forthcoming individuals standing out from the crowds with their effervescent personalities harmonised by their dress.

In contrast, while the women in the villages in Araku Valley wore more sober colours and less jewellery, they still prided themselves with their appearance. The different dress code reflected the different type of life they led. Many of these women work in agriculture, either in rice or crop fields or on the coffee

plantations. The women of the elder generation stay behind to perform the daily chores and look after the small children. Some of the younger females participate in tasks around the village such as grinding maize, drying and preparing rice, making sweets and working in the village schools.

Although the outlook and traditions differ between these groups of tribal women, there are some common denominators, appearance being one of them. All the women I have encountered so far take huge pride in their appearance. Another commonality amongst the tribes is that they all have a passion for dance. The Lambani women are renowned for their dancing and the extremes they go to with their flamboyant clothing. The females of this tribe control their traditional dance, as women only perform the dance. However, in the tribal hamlets north of Andhra Pradesh both the male and females perform dances and they look upon it as an opportunity for the villages to get together.

I cannot help but admire the strength and beliefs of these women. Whether they are extroverts or introverts they



▲ On guard: I captured the image of this tribal woman who sat relaxing in the comfort and safety of her own dwelling. However, her expression seemed apprehensive. Was she expecting an unwanted visitor?



◀ Joyful: A beaming smile hid any discomfort that this young woman may have encountered during her daily work in the coffee plantations. How often do we hide behind false smiles.

follow their faith and respect their culture and there is a strong feeling of belonging amongst these people. I wondered if they ever felt alone like many of us do at times, especially when we are travelling and away from our loved ones.

You can read more about my perceptions and experiences and why I choose to capture the images I do in my travels, in further editions of *Asian Photography*.

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— Lesley J Saunders