My Head for a Tree

The Extraordinary Story of the Bishnoi, the World's First Eco-Warriors

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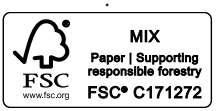

For the Bishnoi, carers of our natural world,
who asked me to share their story

How can these be the right things to do? You have no fear of God but are ready to frighten others; you perform no good deeds of your own but expect others to do so; you say nothing that is kind and ask others to speak cruelly; you do not want to die but are happy to kill others. Practise before preaching. Make sure you do what needs be done before you die.

A tree covered in greenery is my temple and my home.

Guru Jambhoji

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Preface

Ram Niwas Bishnoi Budhnagar

For a Bishnoi, caring for the natural world is a completely natural and traditional way of living. It is unimaginable not to do so. We learn it from our parents and our children learn it from us. It is a continuous process that is passed from one generation to another. Our children remember the last words of Amrita Devi, who sacrificed her life to protect the green trees three hundred years ago. We are always ready to give our lives to protect trees and animals, because they give us so much.

Our Guru Jambhoji taught us how to live in harmony with nature. He learned this lesson from the times of severe drought in the desert of Rajasthan. In that distant time, in the sixteenth century, he was a man who could see our future. The lessons from then apply globally to the current climate change emergency. We don't ask that people become Bishnois, but we know that many of you care deeply about our planet and the trees, plants and wildlife with which we share it. Please read this book, learn something about the Bishnoi, and see how we live our lives; it may help you live yours.

Author's note

The Bishnoi are 'probably the most ecologically conscious community in the world'.[1] Bishnoism is the one world religion that has environmental protection as its very core. Their founding guru, Jambhoji (1451–1536), is an equivalent of other religious founders such as Jesus, Buddha and Mohammed, only more recent. Born into a farming community in Rajasthan, he removed himself to a hilltop retreat and received a world-changing vision while in meditation beneath a tree. From this he delivered rules for living that guided desert people how to survive a fierce and enduring drought. They learned how to shift their way of life away from competing with the natural world and toward living in harmony with it.

In perhaps the bravest acts of nature conservation ever seen, Bishnois have redefined how humans should interact with the living world. Though they might not call it brave. Would a mother think of herself as brave for snatching her child out of the path of an onrushing truck? You do what your own nature calls you to do.

The story of the Bishnoi is one of those 'greatest stories never told'. Or at least very little told in English, and not that well known even in India.

So how come I was given the chance to write it?

I was at a festival in Jaipur to present a book I had written about eco-lawyers saving the planet. My life is something of a quest, and previous visits to India had led me to transformative experiences with spiritual leaders and sacred places. My new goal was to encounter people who dedicated their lives to protecting natural habitat. That's why a leading conservationist in India directed me toward the Bishnoi.

From a base in the city of Jodhpur, Bishnois guided me to their farms, their homes, their schools, their temples and animal shelters, and a village funeral. Perhaps, in retrospect, I was being vetted. Some elements were in place: I had written a book about people saving the planet, was out in the world to deliver its message, and was a university professor, eager to learn. You'll read in the coming chapters how this book was 'commissioned', before a large and receptive audience of Bishnois and in a way I could not refuse. The Bishnoi are doing their best to save the planet, but the current ecological crisis is dreadful and time is short, and the way of life they practise, the teachings given to them by their desert guru, shouldn't be secret. The West should know about them.

I am not a Bishnoi and can never become one. You can only be born a Bishnoi. I would never have presumed to write this story, but having been asked to do so, the best I can do is offer my Western perspective on a people who live more kindly on this planet.

The Bishnoi lead by example. We would do well to follow, as best we can.

Foreword

Peter Wohlleben

When I first heard about this book, I was electrified. There's a community in India who protect trees with their lives? How could it be that I'd never heard of the Bishnoi? These must be my brothers and sisters in spirit, I thought, whose environmental stance is similar to my own. As I continued to read the manuscript, I realised that the principles of the Bishnoi go much further and with far more consequences than my own. One of the key events in the history of this religion is a well-documented massacre – 300 years ago – of villagers who prevented the felling of their trees by hugging them. Today, tree hugging is seen more as an opportunity to connect with nature, to slow down, or to shift our regard of these gentle giants.

Modern nature conservation efforts suffer from the same problems that drive the overconsumption of industrial nations: we attach a price tag to every living thing to prevent it from being overlooked in our value system. Examples of such

price tags include the amount of carbon dioxide trees contain, how much oxygen they produce, the measurable amount of cooling they can provide, and the impact on available fresh water. In other words, trees are deemed valuable in relation to their usefulness to us, and the associated monetary worth.

These aspects are undoubtedly important, also for the Bishnoi, and the monetisation of ecosystem services (what an unwieldy, technical term) has at least helped to curb the worst excesses of environmental degradation. However, what we are currently seeing is that conservation is often used as a political pawn, sacrificed at the altar of other interests. In Europe, the protection of our forests, indeed all protection of climate and the environment, is being hollowed out in an effort to leach support from right-wing parties. The truth is, unfortunately, that despite various partial international successes, environmental protection efforts are not improving. Market-based measures that are meant to constrain environmentally harmful lobby groups are obviously not working.

It is precisely at this point that the book begins, and it is precisely why its key message is so important: the protection of the environment, of trees and of animals must function at an emotional level; it must be an internalised necessity for every human. It is essential that the refusal to harm trees and other fellow creatures becomes a social norm. The Bishnoi embody this attitude in its purest form. They teach me humility – me, who sees himself as an ambassador for the trees but who has never considered going to such extremes. At the same time, the Bishnoi fuel my desire to dedicate my life to the protection of trees and forests.

What an enormous contribution Martin Goodman offers by bringing this culture and religion closer to us. This book, thrilling to the last page, fills a gap in the environmental debate. It can offer inspiration to many readers who wish to concentrate on the truly important things in life. We cannot all be Bishnoi. Indeed, one must be born into that culture to belong. But this book may help us to grow in our empathy and to do more for the trees in our forests, our streets and our gardens. This isn't about saving the trees so much as it is about saving ourselves, since the natural environment is a reflection of who we are.

Peter Wohlleben is the author of *The Hidden Life of Trees*. His foreword was translated from the German by B.L. Crook.

My Head for a Tree

TO SAVE TREES
3 BISHNOI PEOPLE SACRIFICED THEIR LIVES IN 1730 AD IN VILLAGE

1

Amrita Devi and the 363 Martyrs

Let's start with a true story. The year is 1730. The village of Khejarli is in the Thar Desert, which sweeps through north-west India. Thirteen miles to the east lies the fortified city of Jodhpur where the Maharajah Abhay Singh was building himself a new palace.

In the early mornings the village people washed before pouring ghee on a sacred flame and chanting their prayers. Then the genders divided. The men gathered their flocks of goats and herds of cattle. Grass was sparse, growing in tufts among rocks and bare dirt. The men, white turbans around their heads and wearing white smocks and trousers, walked long circuits with their herds until the beasts had found their food.

The women's clothes blazed with the hues of fire; oranges and reds and yellows and pinks. It was the women who scrubbed and pounded and hung the men's clothes in the sun and kept

them white. No white for them – it was the colour of mourning. The cattle's movement out of the village stirred the animals' guts; cow pats could still be steaming when the women took them into their hands. They moulded them into bricks of fuel and left them to bake in sunlight. Before lighting these cow pats for their fires the women ran their palms and fingers across the bumps of their surface, puffing gusts of air from their cheeks, blowing and brushing any insects to safety.

These were desert women who knew not to cut limbs from a living tree. The life in a tree is too precious. Any twigs on the fire had to be dead when found. One particular species of tree is foremost in holding the soil of this landscape in place: the khejri.

The thin branches of desert khejri are spiked with protective thorns. Its leaves are like the veins of a leaf without the green in between, tiny and feather-like and dark and waxy. They don't want their moisture to evaporate. Eventually they grow beyond the reach of a camel's lips and spread a canopy. Seen from afar those leaves could be a large cloud of insects. They cluster so thickly that camels rest in their shade.

A 'forest' of khejri sees the trees spaced out, offering places of shelter with their pools of shade. When the ground is monsoon-wet, villagers plant sapling khejri in the more open spaces. The trees form part of an ecosystem. They offer shelter to animals and their roots help hold the desert in place. Khejri are also leguminous, so those roots are fixing nitrogen into the soil and so encouraging crops to grow between the trees.

On Monday 11 September 1730 (although this reads like a fable the details are recorded, including the names of the

people involved) the men of Khejarli were away with their herds. The monsoon rains were recent so a woman of the village, Amrita Devi, was tending the crops with her three daughters – Asu, Ratni and Bhagu. She lifted her head. She had heard men's voices. But it was too early, surely, for the village men to be returning with their herds. She heard creaks from wooden oxcarts and the thwacks of sticks on hide, shouts to goad oxen through mud.

Amrita rushed through the trees like a red flame. Men in the uniforms of the Maharajah's forces were pulling axes from the backs of the carts. One man was giving orders and Amrita stood herself in front of him.

The men had marched out from Jodhpur, she learned, where the Maharajah had plans for a new palace. Its construction needed lime, and for the lime they needed fire and to fuel the fire they needed trees. The men had come to chop down the khejri forest and haul it to the city to be burned.

This could not be allowed to happen.

Pay us a bribe, the officer suggested, though he called it a tax. A tax for every tree. And then the men would march off and chop down someone else's trees.

Amrita could no more pay a bribe than she could kill an animal or eat meat or herself harm a tree. Her life worked because she was a Bishnoi who lived by a clear set of twenty-nine rules set down by her guru more than two hundred years earlier, which saw accepting bribes to be as sinful as stealing. These rules governed her life. One was an injunction to protect all living beings. Another was not to cut trees that had the sap of life still in them. So she hugged her body close to a khejri tree, and as the men approached she spoke the words

that children would learn and recite for generations to come: *Sar sāntey rūkh rahe to bhī sasto jān*. 'My head for a tree; it's a cheap price to pay.'

A man with an axe chopped off her head.

Amrita's three daughters, Asu, Ratni and Bhagu, watched their mother's sacrifice. They heard her last words. They saw the blade cut through her neck and her head fly free. They saw the fount of blood from her body. They were young.

Asu stepped forward to hug a tree.

As did Ratni.

As did Bhagu.

The axemen chopped off their heads.

Word of the attack went round the other Bishnoi villages. The old who didn't roam so far were the first to arrive and as they grabbed on to trees they too were beheaded. Then the news reached the men of Khejarli, who ran home ahead of their goats and their cattle, arriving into a massacre. They too held on to trees and gave their lives. Other Bishnoi walked in from nearby villages, grasped hold of a tree, and were chopped to death.

'You villagers,' the officer in charge of the Jodhpur troops scoffed, 'you're only sending in the old and the weak.'

In response, young men came, and women and more children. Each held on to a khejri tree, chanted holy mantras and the words of their guru, and gave their life.

A couple were passing, fresh from their wedding. What good was their life with all its hopes if they walked on past this killing of a forest? The bride and groom each took hold of a tree. Each was killed.

Word spread further still and people kept on coming. One hundred people. Two hundred people. Three hundred people. They gave their heads to save the trees. Word finally crossed the thirteen miles of desert to Jodhpur and the Maharajah.

Shocked by the news, the Maharajah ordered his men to withdraw. When the killing ended, three hundred and sixty-three villagers had been martyred. The Maharajah issued an edict: it was now forbidden to chop down a living tree, and to hunt or poach any animal, throughout Bishnoi land.

The martyrs of Khejarli were all Bishnois. They have a word, *sakasi*, for those who sacrifice their life for others. The first recorded *sakasi* came from 1604, a hundred and twenty-six years before the Khejarli massacre. In the village of Ramsari, near Jodhpur, two women called Karma and Gora were beheaded in defence of trees. Then in 1643, when trees were being felled for use in celebrations of the goddess Holi, a local Bishnoi named Buchoji killed himself in protest.

Are twenty-first-century Bishnois prepared to put their lives on the line to save trees? They are.

Would I die to save a child? I'd hope so.

Do I love trees? Yes.

Would I die for one? Not yet.

But who are these people who would?

2

One Morning with Cranes

Watch out for the Bishnoi. Giving your life to save a tree is one part of their character, but don't view it as being passive. See it as fierce. Attack what they hold dear and they'll come for you.

Ram Niwas is in his thirties, sturdy, watchful, his round face flicking disarming smiles. Watch out for those smiles. He's assessing. Waiting his moment.

Ram Niwas was fifteen when India's most famous man put on night-vision goggles and stole into a Bishnoi village. The man committed an outrage. Upset beyond belief, Ram Niwas joined a band set to wreak justice: the Bishnoi Tiger Force.

He grew up to be their leader.

We'll shortly learn the tale of Ram Niwas Bishnoi Budhnagar (most Bishnois carry Bishnoi as their surname, while a middle name denotes where they live: in Ram Niwas's case Budhnagar, the name of his home village).

Right now it's just past dawn on a January day and he has volunteered to be my guide into the Bishnoi world.

In 2021 Jodhpur absorbed 395 surrounding villages and so doubled in size to 2.3 million inhabitants. Ram Niwas drives us toward the city's village crust. He talks to his phone more than to me, in the local language Marwari and the related Hindi. My European languages leave me effectively mute, or as a child for whom words don't yet hold meaning. And indeed I've come because language has let me down. For Bishnois the tale of Amrita Devi and the 363 martyrs is a foundational story: it reminds them how to act. I understand the narrative well enough, but I clearly don't understand trees in the way the Bishnoi do. That's the understanding I need, how a person can value a tree's life more than their own, and I'll go wherever I'm taken to discover it. For now, I'm strapped in a car on an outing to who knows where, expectant and ripe for wonder.

On the rim of the city a road rises up a hillside. The hill is a sand dune. It blew into place as sand dunes do but then shrubs and trees grew roots to stop it moving further. We ascend this dune. Ram Niwas parks the car and gestures me to step out.

It's a sound I hear first, like a shallow stream rushing over pebbles, but that's not what it is. This is desert with no such streams. Around me bare ground is studded with stones. And a mass of rounded grey boulders ... that are moving.

Those grey boulders are the round bodies of a vast flock of birds, their long black necks dipping heads toward ground. White feathers shoot a plume from behind their red eyes. The sound I hear is a gurgling in their throats. They are hundreds of demoiselle cranes, feeding off scattered grain.

Ram Niwas signals me to stay and watch. I find more crowds of birds, all feasting, while some beat their wings to fly their silhouettes against the dawn sky. They bred in Mongolia and the Caucasus and then flew over the Himalayas to get here, a two-week journey at altitudes up to 20,000 feet, melanin painting their wingtips black to toughen them against fierce winds. They land here each December, glad of a milder winter, and stay into March.

Demoiselles are thirty inches tall and weigh just over six pounds, the smallest of cranes but still bigger than a Canada goose and heavier than a great blue heron. Cranes mate for life, and in their pairs they dance. The larger species such as sandhill cranes indulge in gymnastic leaps, but the demoiselles move as in a ballet. Their dance is an act of ecstatic mirroring.

Valmiki, the bard who wrote the sacred Indian epic the *Ramayana*, once saw a hunter kill a demoiselle crane. Its female partner danced a spiral of grief around her dead mate, her long neck straightening and twisting, a lament keening from her throat. Touched by the horror of what he had witnessed the poet told the tale in verse. The *Ramayana* is viewed as a text channelled from divine sources. In contrast, this verse tale of the cranes came not from the gods but from the poet's pained human response to the male crane's killing and then witnessing the female's grief.

Poetry's human origins were thus sparked by destruction in the natural world.

The sounds of gurgling cranes lead me around a temple's high earthen walls. This is the Bishnoi temple of Jajiwal Dhora, and after a further circuit of crane-watching I enter through its gates.

I thought to find Ram Niwas but all I see is a small shrine on an empty earthen floor. Inside the shrine, seen through open doors, is a portrait of Jambhoji. Bishnois say that name often, and with fondness. He was their founding guru, shown with hair and beard in long white tresses, wearing a saffron robe and a conical saffron cap. Early morning worshippers have already come to this temple shrine and gone away, leaving a fire burned to ashes on a tray outside.

I come upon Ram Niwas on the far side of the shrine, beside a teenage priest who smiles and ushers me through a gate. Inside an enclosure I am suddenly surrounded by infant reddish-brown gazelles. It's a species known as chinkara. Even with their large pointed ears these young ones are no higher than my knee and they push at me with their heads, grapple my sides with their front legs, pull threads from my jacket with their teeth.

These chinkara are orphans, and part of the temple's mission is to nurture them till they are old enough to re-enter the wild. The priest looks after a further pen containing young and wounded blackbuck, a desert antelope, and it is he in his saffron clothes and sandals who at dawn carries and spreads the grain for the demoiselle cranes.

The species' name, 'chinkara', denoting a sneeze, derives from this gazelle's alarm call; when startled they stamp their front feet and emit a sneeze-like cry. Bishnoi children are made sensitive to this chinkara sneeze, ready to run to the animal's rescue when they hear the sound.

We now head to meet some of those children. Ram Niwas drives to a small nearby town and turns through an archway into the courtyard of a school.

Ram Niwas is an entrepreneur after my own heart, in that his ventures don't make money. He is a social entrepreneur, out to do good. This school, the Saviour Children's Academy, is one of his biggest ventures. School fees are kept just high enough to pay the teachers' salaries: the whole point of the school is to give an English-language education to Bishnoi children that is affordable and not far from home.

A class of children, around twelve years old, are happy to talk to me in English. They sit in their dark green uniforms behind wooden desks, the girls with bright red ribbons at the ends of their pigtails.

I am a writer, I say. If you were writing a book what would you want it to say?

Chanchai, a girl in the middle of the classroom, puts up her hand. 'We must protect birds, animals and trees – do not cut the trees and kill the birds.'

At the very front, Santosh, her round face supremely confident and smiling widely, raises her hand. 'Trees give us oxygen and without oxygen we cannot live.' Santosh then questions me. 'What is happiness?'

I give her my answer and ask for hers.

'Taking care of the small things.'

What about ambition? What would she like to be when she grows up?

'A good citizen.'

What makes a good citizen?

Santosh is unfazed. 'Helping the development of my country India, and caring for others.'

At the front a slender boy raises his hand. Yuvraj is the one child with a *bindi* marked onto his brow, a thumbprint of ash

from the fire of the morning's Bishnoi ritual. He's been thinking through this matter and has one thing to add: 'Remember the three hundred and sixty-three people who died at the nearby village of Khejarli to protect the trees.'

Why did they do that? I ask him. Weren't their lives as important as trees? Would he die for a tree?

Yes he would. 'Trees are for all,' he answers. 'I am for just one family.'

And he has more advice. 'You must visit Khejarli.'

On the road to Khejarli, Ram Niwas pulls into the side, opens his door, slides out, and makes sure I do the same without making a noise. 'Look!' an urgent whisper. 'Look!'

I look. A field of tall grasses.

And yes! Animals. A herd of what would be deer where I come from. They're tawny but with white bellies and rumps, and erect pointed ears like a giant jackrabbit's or hare's. There are twelve of them. These are females, not deer but ...

Ram Niwas is waving his hand, not there, look left, left.

And I see where he is pointing and draw breath.

Those females were blackbuck and this one is a male, his upper body black. White patches like goggles ring his eyes. His chest is broad and solid, while his horns, black and spiralling high as twin corkscrew shafts, pierce the sky three feet above his head. He looks as mythical as a unicorn. The female blackbucks stand in a group and he is separate but of course he's not, he is emitting a force field that contains the herd who graze placidly within its protection. His eyes are on us, probing for danger. Blackbuck and chinkara recognise Bishnois, their men in white clothing, as their friends. Ram Niwas passes muster.

Spring rutting season is about to start. No other adult males are allowed inside his acreage. These blackbuck are grazing now, but can reach speeds of sixty miles an hour. Marked as 'Near Threatened' on the United Nations Red List, an inventory of the conservation status of biological species, about forty thousand blackbuck live in India, mostly in Rajasthan. Herds are strongest in areas controlled by the Bishnoi.[2]

The male blackbuck is growing restless.

Time to leave them. They were a bonus. Ram Niwas has a treasured place to show me. It's close.

Local Bishnois run an animal rescue centre beside the road. That's handy, seeing as many animals come here when struck by traffic. Others are savaged by feral dogs. One baby chinkara is in its own pen, a dog bite gouged into its leg. Ram Niwas takes it into his hands, hoists it in the air and holds it nose to nose, presses it to his chest and against his heartbeat, as his eyes grow moist. Is he being sentimental? Does he really see this animal as being like his own injured child?

Yes, that's how he sees it.

A newly planted garden surrounds the animal sanctuary's walls, filled with 363 young trees, one for each of the Khejarli martyrs. The site of the massacre is further along the road. The highway has ripped away Khejarli's remoteness. Our car slots into the traffic of trucks that thunders through the town. Store owners slump on wooden chairs outside their shop doors; the town's string of low buildings are dirty and crumbling.

A mile further on is the site of the massacre, wrapped inside high walls of white stone. Each September many thousands pack the place, gathering for speeches, remembering the

martyrs on the anniversary of their deaths, chanting the words of their Guru Jambhoji and singing devotional songs around sacred flames. They buy khejri seedlings from the forestry department's stands and take them to plant at their homes. Large enough for a fleet of buses, today the gravel car park is empty. Peacocks scuttle between the trees, surprised at human interruption.

The khejri trees near the opening are fairly young, with trunks you can wrap inside two hands. Khejris are evergreens, their leaves a dark blue-green, and what leaves they shed fall at the end of winter. It's now January, with just a thin scattering of leaves on the higher branches. I touch the trunk of one, feel its dryness, hug my arms around it, move on.

I'm looking for some large trees, ones that could be hugged by those martyrs, but the ones I find are not khejris but jaal, handsome trees that don't burn with the intense heat of the hardwood khejri. These are twenty-five feet tall, their broad bases ringed by concrete and their trunks so thick, like several trees twined into one, that several people would need to hold hands to hug. Their leaf-thick crowns cast shadows that touch an old temple, small and white and boxlike. Two battered panels sit on the floor of its whitewashed interior. They are graphic paintings of Amrita and her daughters' beheadings.

The chip-chip of stonemasons' axes directs us to a new temple. Built of pink and cream stone, its three domes let in light to illuminate the sandstone carvings on its walls. They reveal the narrative of the massacre. You see villagers at prayer around the fire in the morning ritual that started that tragic day. The men walk off to their day's work while the women and their young daughters stay behind and draw water from a

well, kept company by a small gazelle. Their homes are small and round and roofed by thatch. The Maharajah's men arrive. Tragedy ensues.

The original memorial to the 363 martyrs is an austere thirty-foot high cenotaph, a solid block of sandstone topped like a battlement. Masons are working on a fresh memorial, carving the martyrs' names on a circle of giant slabs. Inside a pagoda at the centre of the circle stands a statue of Amrita Devi. Is it a statue? She moved, didn't she? And it's so: the statue is dressed in a cotton saree that stirs in the breeze.

The khejri trees here are newly planted saplings. Ram Niwas leads me between them. He has spotted someone, a slender, smiling man with close-cropped grey hair, in a singlet and *dhoti*, his red sandals on the floor, sitting cross-legged on a cot with a walking stick hanging from it. This is the priest of Khejarli. He explains that he has knee trouble. Me too, I say, but at least you can sit cross-legged.

'By the grace of Jambhoji,' and he raises his hands and spreads his fingers and looks up into the sky.

His gaze into the heavens gives him words to describe this sad site. 'This is the only place in Rajasthan, in India, in the whole world, that honours a community who gave their lives to save the environment,' he says. 'That is our message to the world.'


DEPARTURE

3

Bishnois versus Salman Khan

A few miles on from Khejarli, beside the highway, is a bare concrete platform raised above road level. You want the bathroom? It's at the back. Which means pick your way through the rubbish and go where you like. This is a roadside restaurant with a roof but no walls. This highway is at the fringe of the village of Kankani and we are hosted by the restaurant's owner Hiram Ram Bishnoi. He is also the village *serpench*, its elected chief official, greying hair beneath his white turban. He looks to the side as he speaks, recalling the events of 1998 when events here became world headline news. His village is where the most famous man in India came with night-vision goggles.[3] And came up against Hiram Ram's uncle and cousins.

This world-famous invader was the film star Salman Khan, a man regularly topping the Forbes Indian Celebrity List for fame and fortune, then in his early thirties. Filming for his latest all-star family drama began in Mumbai, but in October