

# Civil Society's Uncivil Acts: Dancing Bear and Starving Kalandar

*Animal rights organisations are campaigning to save the Indian sloth bear, but scant attention is paid to the plight of their owners, the Kalandars, whose livelihoods are endangered.*

MEENA RADHAKRISHNA

There is a serious battle that is being waged to save the Indian (and indeed, the Pakistani) sloth bear for the past decade or so. There is immense dedication and commitment on part of animal rights activists to organise public opinion on saving the "dancing bears" from inhuman treatment by their owners. As one drives down the Delhi-Agra-Jaipur highway, prominent boardings highlight the plight of the dancing bears, questioning whether their torture can be termed entertainment. The "Say No to Bear Dancing" campaign is initiated by the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) as well as the World Society for Protection of Animals (WSPA), and directed mainly at tourists, seen to be the main patrons of this form of entertainment. Moving and emotive, it has successfully got the cooperation of the big hotel and tour operators. Posters and literature are placed in hotels' guest rooms and at the reception to attract attention of the visitors. In addition, travel and business magazines carry complimentary advertisements for public awareness and prominent book stores keep bookmarks and literature.<sup>1</sup> Now, evidently, school teachers and children have been roped in as well and school children from different cities have begun to visit Agra to be sensitised about the issue of bear dancing.<sup>2</sup>

It is good to know that a large number of bears are now safe after being rescued, and that a lot is being done to address the suffering of those remaining. So far so good. It is time to pause for a while and focus on the people who are allegedly ill-treating the bears.

The concerned people are the Kalandars, a nomadic community, which has been involved in bear dancing work in south Asia for centuries. The well known authority on nomadic people, Joseph C Berland,

has written on the commonplace lives of these people as also the traditional presence of Kalandars/Qalandars in the midst of the "civilised" sedentary societies.<sup>3</sup> He emphasises that these communities may be as ancient as settled communities themselves, and figure in sedentary societies' folklore. Berland points out that Qalandars used to make the bears perform in rural areas particularly during the harvest season since at a time of affluence, villagers were more likely to reward the entertaining generously. As postharvest resources diminished, the Qalandars moved to urban settings. His account shows that this has been Kalandars' traditional occupation, and not something they have greedily adopted to entertain dollar paying tourists as some times believed by the public.

## Contemporary Living Conditions

It is instructive to learn (from a sensitive article by Geeta Seshamani and Kartick Satyanarayan) about the conditions of the villages that the Kalandars inhabited 10 years ago, presumably when bear dancing was at its peak, and the Kalandars still had their means of livelihood more or less intact:<sup>4</sup>

By and large the villages examined had only 20 per cent permanent housing; 50 per cent (Kalandars) lived in mud houses, which needed to be rebuilt after every monsoon, and 30 per cent lived in tents made of bamboos with tarpaulin or plastic sheets as roofing. Large parts of all the villages were underwater, and mosquitoes bred freely. Malaria, conjunctivitis and other eye infections, chronic malnutrition and pot-bellied rickety children were the norms in all the villages. Those close to the cities still did not seem to have any clinic or first aid centre near them. The further off the villages were from urban areas, the cleaner and healthier were the inhabitants and their income/diet was

more likely to be supplemented by goat and poultry reared by them.

...By and large their villages have no sewage systems and no running water and only in two cases had they 'borrowed' electricity from overhead wires. The passages between the homes were unpaved and under water. Only one village had a well with brackish water and one had a tank to store rain water in. The Kalandars had to request water from neighbouring settlements. By and large no medical aid was available for people or animals and they relied on themselves for treatment... The girls are not educated or sent to school. Most of the older Kalandars above the age of 30 years had two to three years of religious education but no secular education. The younger generation often had three to five years in a government school but the high degree of unemployment amongst the youth (almost 95 per cent) discouraged them from studying further. Amongst all the villages visited, only two Kalandars had done their Master's degree and after several years of futile search for government employment, one had begun his own welding unit, while another had become a 'hakim' or rural doctor. Five others had completed high school and were idle at home being now untrained for their traditional trades...

The earnings from a bear average Rs 2,000 to Rs 3,000 per month during the good seasons which in north India are the winter months when foreign tourists visit and hotels and "kalakaar" trusts arrange large shows... Their income falls to Rs 1,000 to Rs 1,500 per month when they have to rely on a rural audience. However, the dancing bear owner relies heavily on his rural audience for donated rice, wheat and other lentils and seasonal vegetables.

The above lengthy quotation is important as the study is conducted by two leading activists of Wildlife SOS, the organisation leading the saving the bear campaign. It is to the credit of this organisation that while the animals remain their major concern, they have brought their owners into the spotlight as well. Anyway, for our purposes, what has to be noted in this quotation is not just the meagre earnings of these families at a good time, 10 years ago but their extremely poor quality of life before determined opposition to bear dancing practically banished this occupation from the streets.

Subsequently, all through the last decade, there have been reports of Kalandars being on the verge of starvation once the Indian Wildlife Protection Act was implemented. To take the example of Haryana, the chief wildlife warden directed wildlife inspectors to ensure the immediate compliance

# Uncivil Acts

**PT Brinkman**



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