

STREETCORNER

Christopher Pinney

Professor of Anthropology and Visual Culture

In India, patronage is deeply entwined with history. The first time I ever went to Nagda Jn. in Madhya Pradesh in October 1982 (I have since spent about six or seven years in a village very near there) the first person I saw was Kanniram, a coolie (porter), standing on the station platform in his red shirt. He carried my luggage to a nearby lodging house where I would spend three months before moving to Bhatiusuda village. I still see Kanniram several times a year. Whenever I'm in town he comes for some *dan*, a gift which as someone who has prospered from his labour it is my privilege to bestow. He always comes to the station whenever I depart from Nagda and I press neatly folded notes into his cupped hands. But I see even more of Bheru, his son, who now does the portering at Nagda Jn. I phone him before I arrive from Delhi or Mumbai and he is always there waiting on the platform right where my carriage will glide to a halt. My relationship with the father has been inherited by the son and I now happily support his children's education and mentor them (they hope to work for the Indian Police).

The other person who I met on that first day in 1982 and am still entwined with is Pannalal who sits on a street corner at the junction of Jawahar Marg and M.G. Marg. When I'm in town I get my shoes cleaned every week by Pannalal. You come out of the station, via the foot overbridge heading due north towards the bazaar and there on the right is Pannalal. He repairs shoes and also polishes them. It so happens that when I took this series of photographs in September of last year Pannalal was at his *sasural* (in laws: patrilocal residence and geographic exogamy means they usually live at some distance). So his brother polished my shoes but I told him to split the money with Pannalal when he got back.

Pannalal was away but the whole rest of the infrastructure of that streetcorner was still in place. A backdrop of film posters (on the right of one of

the photographs you can see a poster advertising John Abrahams' controversial film, *Madras Café*, about the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi). To the left of where Pannalal would normally sit there is his brother and then, on his left, the brother's son. In the opposite direction, on the right is Jamila who sells *butte*, charcoaled corn cobs and roasted peanuts in their shells (*mungphali*). Opposite them on the other side of the road is an ever-changing number of villagers selling their field produce. On this day there were three women selling cucumbers. In the middle is the ever pulsating life of the town's main drag thronged with autos, cars, and pedestrians and also two eccentrics who like to spend their days squatting in the road and watching people having their shoes repaired or polished.

When I get my shoes cleaned I take them off and then wear a pair of the old sandals that lie at the front of the stall (they are always much too small). Then I go and sit on a pile of rubbish under one of the film posters while Pannalal (or, as it happened, on this day, his brother) spends about twenty minutes cleaning the shoes with a brush, then applying some mysterious white ungent, then colouring them with a liquid dye before starting the first of three sequences of vigorous brushings and polishing with a mixture of bristles and cloths. In twenty minutes he transforms a pair of battered village-shit-soaked boots (I value the ankle protection because of the local snake problem) which would not be worthy even of a Van Gogh painting or a Heideggerian elegy into magical objects with the burnished patina of occult African artefacts. What I previously hesitated even to touch I now eagerly grasp, and find myself compelled to marvel at the undulating modernist surface sheen. Pannalal is a magician, conjuring transcendence out of filth.

But during this process I'm stuck squatting on an uncomfortable pile of rubbish (offcuts from shoes and other mysterious detritus) which is the



ideal vantage point for the anthropologist. I see a persistent goat dragging corn off the neighbouring stall and Jamila struggling with the animal before then neatly rearranging the salvaged cobs for sale. I try to avoid the acrid smoke from the burning rubber shoes which continually fuel the fire that keeps Pannalal's repair tools red hot. I observe the perverse beauty in the midst of this subsistence existence: the (Kurt) Schwitters-like (or is it Hans Arp?) assemblage of offcuts from coloured plastic shoes, the decorative beauty of the bird on the tins of Robin shoe polish and the ingenuity in piercing

the lid of one to provide a dispenser for some alchemical patina-creating powder, the luminous beauty of the goddess on a tin of re-purposed Lakshmi Special Choor which puts almost all Dutch still lifes to shame. I perch on my small and uncomfortable mountain of old shoes and feel privileged to be once again in the company true artists and old friends.



