



EDUCATE - EMPOWER - EQUIP

"If you empower a child in India, you empower the Family, the Village and the Community - Forever"



On the Streets



With the flat stones balanced perfectly on her head, Ria walked the rope set out by her partner. She held a bamboo rod in a double-handed grip as she made the walk from her side to the far end. The rope hung suspended between two bamboo posts set ten to twelve feet off the ground. Music erupted in a lively rhythm from down below and, without missing a beat, she began to sway and dance on top her perch. With the ease of long practice, Ria balanced on one foot and then the other, swung side to side, and bent low before springing back up all without losing her footing. Jeers rose from the forming crowd below more often than the few

coins tossed in the general direction of her partner. Still, it looked as if today might be a good haul.

When she finished her routine, the chanting and jeering continued for some time before they figured out that she had finished with her street act. Almost sullenly, the crowd broke up, mostly men, and continued with the business that had brought them here.

She noted with some satisfaction that several of the city men from the crowd lingered after the performance. Ria sat on the Y-shaped top of her bamboo post and hiked her skirts up. Maybe she would have some business today. All hopes for that were dashed when an officer swung by and chased them out of the area. He watched her closely even after Ria had walked some distance away. Finally, she had to call it a draw. The man would keep her from her earned coin, but several of the spectators seemed interested in her. She shrugged. They knew where she lived. Maybe, with luck, she wouldn't have to beg again in the streets tomorrow.

Ria began the long walk through the outskirts of the city. With the spectacle over, she returned to

being one of many faceless and invisible rural villagers in a crowd of city-folk and

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merchants. Cars and rickshaws barreled past on the narrow streets with horns blaring and drivers shouting at her to get out of the way. She ignored it all. She continued to walk until she was well outside the city limits and kept going despite the fatigue in her legs from her earlier performance. Much later, she came to the segregated village she called home. Everyone here worked the same trade, and so were kept separate from the rest of India. The men played the music and the women performed. It was the same it had always been as far back as her people remembered.

Now, as she made her way into the village, Ria noticed a large gathering near the open-air meeting place often used for practice for their routines. Curious now, Ria made her way over and was shocked to find men not of her village standing in the gathering. Strange men were not all that uncommon here, but somehow these were different. She thought it had something to do with the machines at the center of the group.

The men were explaining to the group how to work the machines by pumping a pedal with their feet and then holding the fabric the sewer would want to stitch and carefully running it through the needle held by a contraption at the top of the machine. Seemed simple enough, until she got the chance to try it. She was almost surprised when she was allowed to try. They walked her through the process, but her first attempt and her second came out horrible. With practice, Ria thought she could get the hang of it.

cooed at the colorful fabric.

Ria watched them go with a satisfied sigh and set the day's earnings in the wooden lockbox she had purchased some time back. She stretched with a groan. Her feet and back were sore from standing all day at her merchant booth, but something about this work was far more satisfying. Maybe, she thought, it had to do with the smile on the mother's face.

Ria is a Nat, one of India's Dalit communities, formerly known as



tumblers of village India. The Bajania are largely a nomadic community, with the community establishing camps at the end of the villages.

Their common occupation is dancing, prostitution, and the performance of various primitive industries. Their women actively participate in economic activities and contribute to the family income. Men are involved in playing an instrument when people called them on occasions of marriage or at any party. Married women work at home or go begging with their children. Because of economic backwardness, they cannot send their children to schools beyond the primary level.

They need a better source for their livelihood, one with dignity and education. Most of them are not educated and have never been to school. They are also landless and are agricultural laborers when they cannot find work as performers or worse. If we provide some skill training, it will be beneficial for them and may help break the generational cycles of poverty.

Tailoring training is a good start to helping this community. Tailoring can bring awareness among the people, so they can think beyond dance and labor work in the field. We can transform them in their economic, social, and spiritual needs. Right now, our partners in India are looking into how we can serve this marginalized community.

*****While the stories in our articles are based on true events, all names and locations have been changed for security purposes*****

Written by, Michael Eash



Six Months Later

"Here you go! A nice wrap for baby Ada." Ria smiled and handed the beautifully stitched child-sized sari to the woman holding the squirming three-year-old.

The mother smiled back, if somewhat reluctantly, and gave over the agreed upon amount for the child's clothes. Her face split in a genuine grin as her daughter stopped her squirming and

"untouchables." The "Nat" community name is driven from the Sanskrit word Nat, meaning a dancer, a term popularly associated with their acrobatic skills. There are two sub-groups in Northern India, the Bajania Nat and the Brijbasi Nat. The Bajania Nat get their name from the Hindi word *bajana*, which means to play musical instruments. They were traditionally the acrobats and