

History of BHAGNARIS

by
Hari K. Nasta

*Dedicated in Loving Memory of my Parents
whose death made me feel like an orphaned
Child even at an age beyond 65*



Gangabai K. Nasta
1917-2003

Kanayalal C. Nasta
1914 - 2002

Foreword

Most of young generation of our Bhagnaris hardly know our history and origin. Many must be wondering who and what we are. Since long the need to know ourselves has been felt. My friend Hari Nasta has since long been promising to write history of Bhagnaris to the group of senior Bhagnaris who meet at park club every evening. Now at last he has come up with this small booklet which gives detailed history of our community. I am sure our members specially the young generation will enjoy reading about their roots and ancestors and appreciate the efforts put in by Hari Nasta

Lachhu Gehi

President, Shree Bhagnari Panchayat

History of “WE BHAGNARIS”

This is a brief history of a community that, at last count, would not number more than 2000 individuals. Which has made Mumbai its home, and whose core is centred around Kataria Colony, a landmark in Mahim, Shivaji Park and in Dubai. It is the story of a community of youngsters and others, who have ventured beyond the shores of India, to other lands, like Dubai, Kuwait, Hong Kong, USA, Canada and Australia, making these their karmabhoomi. It is the story of a community that has placed its faith in life's 2 'E's Education & Enterprise. It is a liberal, progressive community that sometimes can be as dogmatic and as unbending in some ways, like most Indian communities. For the most part, this history is based on authoritative sources and panchayat records. A small part of it is anecdotal.

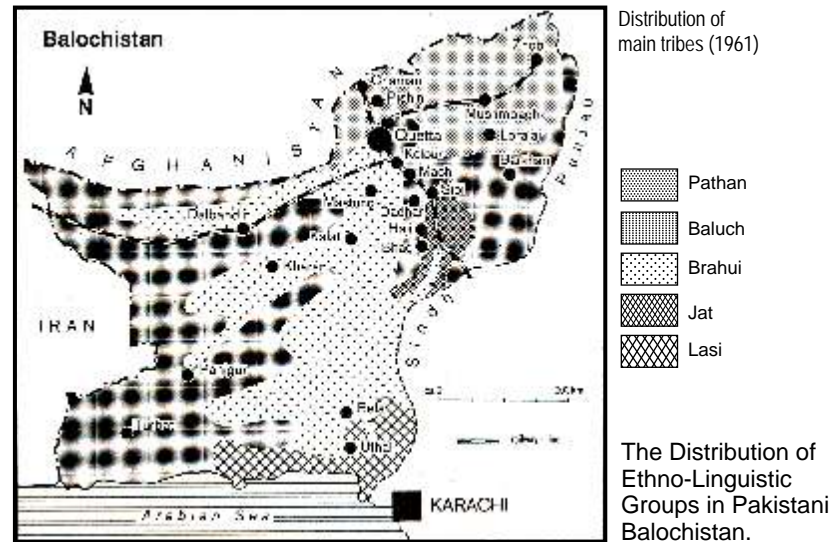
Sources of Information

1. Marginality and Modernity - Balochistan
by Paul Titus (Oxford-Karachi)
2. Website of Government of Balochistan
3. Report of Shree Bhagnari Panchayat 1949-1955
4. First hand personal Knowledge of the author

History of “WE BHAGNARIS”

The Origin:

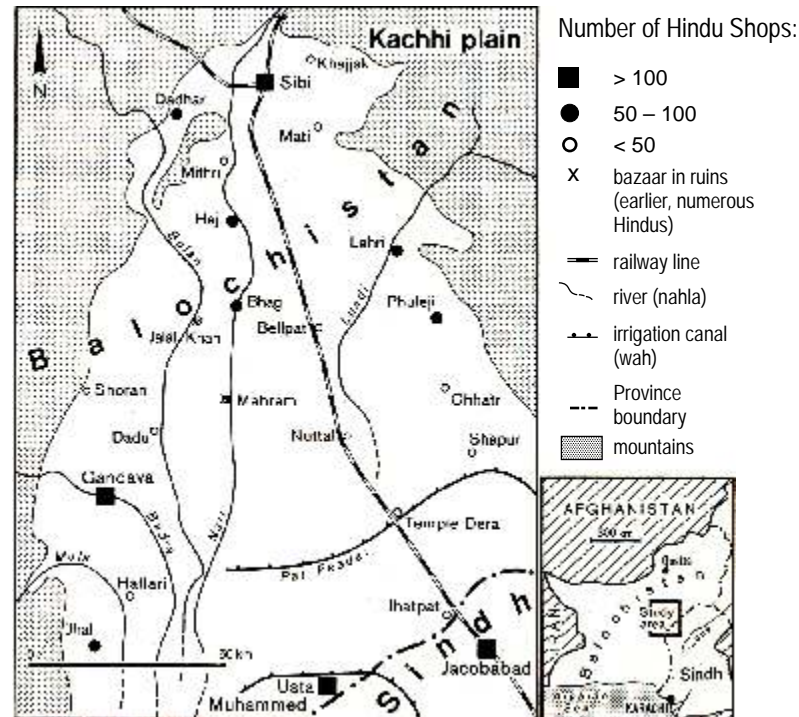
We are original habitants of the villages Bhag and Nar (twin villages) in the princely state of Kalat in Plains of Southern Baluchistan, also known as Kachhi plains, which is a lowland bay opening southward from Sibi towards Sind (See map).



The region was mainly inhabited by Muslim tribes known as Brahui and Baloch. Hindus were a small minority (about 5%). However, near-about all the business was in the hands of Hindus and they were generally respected by all the Muslim tribes. The Hindus got themselves affiliated to particular tribes. In pre-colonial days there was constant warfare and blood feuds between various ethnic tribes. But the Hindus were generally not harmed although affiliated with rival tribe. In fact, there was an unwritten law that in case of inter-tribal wars Hindus will not be harmed.

Almost all the business and trading activities were carried out by Hindus. They organized exchange of goods between highlands of Central Baluchistan and Afghanistan on one hand and lowland of Sind, Kachhi and Las Bela on the other. The goods produced in the highlands included grain, wool, woven carpets, skins, tobacco, almonds, potash, dates and dry fruits while imports from lowlands included textiles, oil, fats, shoes, utensils, spices, salt, and cattle. The

History of “WE BHAGNARIS”



Kachhi Plain : Towns with Hindu Shops (1990)
 Source : Survey General of Pakistan, Topogr. map 1:250.00,
 Nr. 340, 34P, 39C, 39D. Surveys between 1987 and 1990.

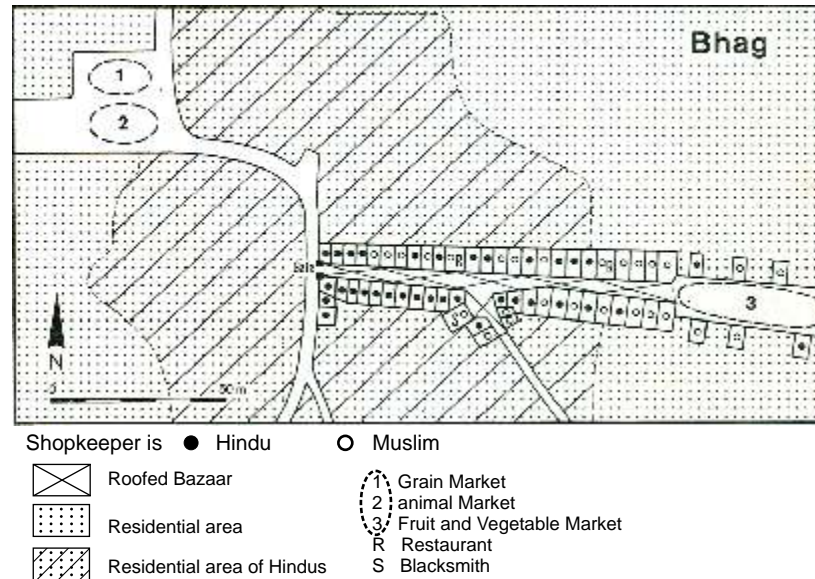
nomadic Muslim tribes provided camels for transportation and protection necessary to secure caravans. The Hindu merchants also used seasonal migration of nomadic tribes for transport of their goods.

The growing tendency towards a settled way of life in many tribal territories brought the construction of permanent housing and Bazaar shops. The numerous Hindu families thus separated from their affiliated tribes and moved into the various settlements which include BHAG, Dadhar Sibi and Bela.

Search for a Better Life:

However our ancestors, who were enterprising and forward looking, wanted a better life both socially and economically. They

History of “WE BHAGNARIS”



Bhag Bazaar; Hindu and Muslim Shopkeepers.
Source : Mapping, August 1990

therefore migrated to safer and more prosperous places like Punjab and Sind. The migration was not sudden and en-masse, but gradual spread over more than half a century from early nineteenth to late nineteenth century. They had to encounter lot of difficulties en-route. There were no modern means of transport available. There were no bridges built over Sindhu River and other waterways.

While very few migrated to Punjab most of our ancestors migrated to Jecambad, Shikarpur and Sukkur in North Sind and Hyderabad and Karachi in South Sind. Those who migrated to Punjab and North Sind merged with the local population of the respective places as they were few in numbers. Since the number of Bhagnaris who migrated to Jecambad, Hyderabad and Karachi was high, they could preserve their individual identity.

“Bhagnari Nyaat”

Those of us who migrated to Hyderabad (Sind) and hailed from Bhag village preferred to be called "BHAGIS". The few who hailed from Nar village were called "NARIWALS". As the time passed both

History of “WE BHAGNARIS”

BHAGIS and NARIWALS got united and thus BHAGNARI COMMUNITY was born.

Most of the Bhagnaris, barring few, who had earlier settled in Hyderabad (Sind), came to settle in Karachi, which was a bigger city and had better opportunities. In Karachi, most of Bhagnaris lived in "Pamoo Dalal Street" (South Karachi) and a few families settled in north of Karachi city in Soldier Bazar, Dhobi Ghat and Camp areas. Gradually, barring a few families all others shifted to "Pamoo Dalal Street". Later this street became known as "Bhagnari Pada". Incidentally even today "Pamoo Dalal Street" in Karachi, Pakistan is known as "Bhagnari Pada". As more and more families came to south Karachi, they settled in the adjacent streets of Bhagnari Pada viz. Chainamal Street and Mohamed Shah Street. The Bhagnari Pada is part of Karachi old town where first Hindu inhabitants of Karachi including Bhagnaris were settled. The other Hindu inhabitants were Chhaprus, Nasarpuris, Wawas, and Brahm khatris. The Bhagnaris were among the first Hindu settlers of Karachi.

Shree Chainamal Mohandas was the first President of Shree Bhagnari Panchayat.

Bhagnaris, being hard-working and enterprising people, WE BHAGNARIS, struck deep roots in the soil of Karachi and made rapid progress in all the fields. Some Bhagnaris started their own businesses and few among them constructed their residential buildings and rented out excess accommodation to Bhagnaris only. With the passage of time many Bhagnaris entered business and most of them were successful in their ventures.

The above events prove that Bhagnaris who had migrated to Karachi progressed well and prospered there too. Four Bhagnaris had the honor of being Justice of Peace and many also held license of Revolvers/Guns. One Bhagnari Mr. Kalumal Nasta was chief judge of Sind Small Causes Court.

We were in Karachi (Sind) for over a century. We studied in Sindhi medium schools and were Sindhis in all other respects yet we did

History of “WE BHAGNARIS”

not leave our Bhagnari language.

The following Monuments were built in Karachi for the benefit of Bhagnaris:

- ← Kanyashala - School for Bhagnari girls
- ← Community Hall - Shree Bhagnari Panchayat Hall, which was only a furlong away from Bhagnari Pada
- ← Temple - Shiva Temple in the compound outside Panchayat Hall
- ← Darbar- Guru Nanak Darbar near Shiva Temple
- ← Temple - Laxmi Narayan Temple
- ← Bathing Ghat - Private Bathing Ghat
- ← Social & sports club and gymnasium adjacent to community hall

During the Second World War (1939/1945) when the threat of Karachi city being bombed was looming large, our Panchayat purchased a plot at Jhimpir, a place about 100 kms south of Karachi and constructed a fortress on an area of about 15,000 sq. ft for the safety of Bhagnari brethren. This area was surrounded by 2 feet thick and 12 feet high wall. Indeed it was a small but safe and secured fort for all the Bhagnaris.

Partition And Its Aftermath:

The members of our community were well settled, with most of them leading a contented and peaceful life. The Partition of India caused a huge disruption in our lives in 1947. The provinces which had a Muslim majority were included in Pakistan while other parts of the country remained in India. Since Sind state had a Muslim majority the same was included in Pakistan.

Once again, a life of uncertainty, fear, religious and economic persecution by Muslims, left the community with no other alternative but to migrate to India. The life had become full of panic and anxiety. Situation was getting very tense. There was always fear of breaking communal riots by Muslims who had migrated from provinces which were included in India. They wanted to occupy properties of Hindus and drive them out of Pakistan even kill them. The Bhagnaris stored heavy soda water bottles and acid in their

History of “WE BHAGNARIS”

homes for self defense against the rioters. In order to save their lives and valuables, all Bhagnaris and Hindus wanted to flee Pakistan as early as possible and reach India safely.

Since land route to India was unsafe and the trains were being attacked and passengers, massacred, the only safe route out was by sea. However, only a limited number of ships were available and securing tickets was a big problem. Thanks to a few selfless and courageous Bhagnari social workers, who not only arranged tickets for most of us but also helped us in salvaging what ever possible, we were able to reach India safely.

All of us had to leave behind our properties, homes, business and rich heritage. This was the second time Bhagnaris had to fight against religious tyranny and move to save their traditions. Thus another chapter began in India for all of us.

In India

Most of Bhagnaris settled in Mumbai and primarily in Mahim area. With this the tradition of our Panchayat began to revive. There are many Bhagnaris from other parts of Pakistan particularly from Jacobabad and Bhag (our original native place), who migrated to Udaipur and Indore. Many residents of Kataria Colony have relations in Udaipur and perhaps in Indore.

Picking Up The Pieces

The early life of Mumbai was not an easy one. Instead of getting a sympathy of local people we were not only un-welcome, but also earned their ire. Slowly, by our tolerance we were able to adjust to the new life-style and started blending with the local population. Most of the Bhagnaris started acquiring accommodations as per their needs and financial capacity. Those of our unfortunate Bhagnari brethren who could not afford to acquire accommodation on their own had to move to the Government refugee camps at Kalyan, Bhandup, Matunga and Chembur. The life in these camps was rough.

History of “WE BHAGNARIS”

Revival of Shree Bhagnari Panchayat

In the year 1948, after meeting unofficially, several times only in groups, the first organised meeting of the Panchayat was held on 24th April 1948. Initially during the first year after migration i.e. from 24th April 1948 to 13 November 1949, several meetings of the Panchayat were held mainly to reconstruct the records of Bhagnaris. During the years between 1949 and 1955 about 80 meetings were held and most of the records regarding our community were regularised. Since our Panchayat did not have office of its own, all the meetings were held at the residence of our Head Maharaj Ramchand Sharma in Mahim. We express our sincere gratitude to late Ram Maharaj.

Panchayat:

Gradually, Bhagnaris started taking interest in all activities of Panchayat. Traditional festivals like Maha Shivratri, Holi, Shravan, and Umavas were revived and celebrated. The first constitution of Panchayat was published in 1954 but was not registered with any Government authority. The official membership of Panchayat had reduced from 240 to 200 due to deaths, migration of some of our brothers to other places. However the membership soon started picking up specially after the building of Kataria Colony and at present, membership is over 500 families.

Poor Aid:

Huts were constructed at Malad for our unfortunate brethren who could not afford to have roof above their head. Monthly monetary help was rendered to the deserving and needy Bhagnari families. In some cases, clothes and foodgrains were also distributed to our needy brethren. The poor aid in form of monthly allowance to poor widows, medical assistance, educational aid was also continued to be given even after most of the Bhagnaris had at least permanent shelter and means of livelihood, but this was not being done in organized manner as there was no permanent corpus for this purpose.

Donations used to be collected as and when need arose from generous Bhagnaris. In 1974 when Shree Kanayalal Nasta was

History of “WE BHAGNARIS”

Mukhi, he constituted a separate charitable institution under the name of "Bhagnari Welfare Society" and got it registered with Charity Commissioner, Government of Maharashtra. The permanent corpus was built up by collecting donation from generous Bhagnaris. The corpus kept on increasing, specially due to the special efforts of Mukhi Naraindas Talreja who has devoted his life to the betterment of less fortunate Bhagnaris. Apart from income of corpus to help needy Mr. Ramchand Popley has been funding in a very big way including expensive Hospital treatments. The community will ever remain grateful to him. Of late many Bhagnaris from Dubai are coming forward to help. Special mention be made of Mr, Ashok Gehi who has been generously helping in meeting medical expenses.

Birth of Kataria Colony

Ever since Bhagnaris came to Mumbai, our revered Mukhi Late Shri Takandas H Kataria had a desire that most of the Bhagnaris should live in one locality, preferably in one residential complex. His dream came true when he purchased a plot of land at Cadell Road, Shivaji Park- a decent higher middle class and peaceful locality. Even before collecting the cost of the plot from Bhagnaris, Late Shri Takandas H Kataria started the construction of the site. Thus BHAG CO-OPERATIVE HOUSING SOCIETY LTD. came into existence. The first building of our housing society number 'A' was funded by Late Mukhi Shri Thakandas H Kataria himself. Loans were granted to deserving Bhagnaris to acquire flats in the said society. The building was completed in 1954 and was offered to allottees for occupation.

Later, an adjacent plot was also purchased for construction of additional buildings for accommodating more Bhagnaris. All the buildings were designed by our architect Shri Issardas Motumal Kanar, who was later elected as President of our Panchayat. Construction was being supervised by Late Shri Harkishindas D Gehani who took over as President of our Panchayat after the sad demise of Mukhi Shri Takandas H Kataria.

History of “WE BHAGNARIS”

In the finest display of Bhagnari teamwork, Shri Takandas H. Kataria, Shri Issardas M Kanar and Shri Harikishindas D Gehani, Shri Naraindas Talreja, Shri Parsram Motumal Nasta, Shri Vishindas Katreja and other dedicated Bhagnaris, 'B', 'D', 'E' and 'F' buildings were subsequently completed. 'G' Building was completed in 1968. In 1974 'H' building was also redeveloped and A LANDMARK, appropriately named KATARIA COLONY, housing 150 Bhagnari families came into existence.

One Last Problem

There is a very interesting and glorious episode behind the coming into existence of G building in which present Panchayat hall is located. When the plot of land of our society was purchased there was a cluster of 4-5 hutments right in the middle of the plot occupied by the people who were engaged in manufacture and supply of illicit liquor. Those were the days of complete prohibition. Their business was very lucrative and the police often worked hand in gloves with bootleggers. As these people were legal tenants and were paying their rents regularly, it was almost impossible to evict them by usual process of law.

They were offered reasonable compensation but they refused to budge or even negotiate. So the buildings 'B', 'C', 'D', and 'E' were constructed (old building F was already in existence) around the periphery of the plot leaving the hutments in the middle untouched. This was a big eyesore.

Tough Stance

After the death of Shri Takandas Kataria in 1966, Shri Harkishin D. Gehani was elected as President of our Panchyat. He was a man of courage and determination. He just could not tolerate the existence of scum like illicit liquor den right in middle of our colony. He wanted to get rid of it by any means without taking law into our own hands.

He hit upon an idea. He called meeting of young men of the colony, appealed for their co operation in this matter which they readily

agreed. He said that some how we have to stop the customers of bootleggers coming inside the colony. This was not possible just by instructing regular watchmen who would succumb to either threats or bribes.

Taking Up Vigilance

So Shri Harkishindas proposed that our own young men in group of 2/3 at a time should keep vigilance at the gate at all the time by taking turns. These young men would stop the prospective customers and politely persuade them not to patronize illegal liquor bar and also warn them of police action. The boys minding the gate were told to blow the whistle if they are physically threatened so that other young men would come out to their help. After few days of this surveillance bootleggers business went down drastically and they were forced to come forward for negotiation. A settlement was reached. They were paid a reasonable compensation and they gave up the possession peacefully.

Brooking No Nonsense

But there was one last holdout. This group was not agreeable still to vacating their premises, despite the offer of compensation. They had constructed a big thatched verandah before the house's entrance. Since this was not part of the original house, Shri Harkishindas called on labourers to clear this encroachment. When the tenants threatened the workers. Shri Harkishindas pressed the siren button on 'B' building, the signal for emergency. Practically every male Bhagnari came rushing down in the quadrangle. Shri Harkishindas nearly grabbed the hammer from the contractor 's labourer to demolish the verandah shed.

After this formidable show of strength and unity from resident Bhagnaris, the last tenant, too, left. The vacated tenements were immediately demolished and a bonfire was made of the debris amidst dancing and rejoicing. This example shows how strong determination and a cooperative spirit can accomplish a task in a

History of “WE BHAGNARIS”

few days, which otherwise would take years or even decades,
Bhagnari Panchayat Hall:

A noble Bhagnari, Shri Thariamal Khemchand donated his ENTIRE LIFE'S SAVINGS to the Panchayat without any precondition. This amount was utilised for purchasing two flats in 'A' building of our colony and were converted into a Community Hall. This Hall was named as THARIAMAL KHEMCHAND BHAGNARI PANCHAYAT HALL in his cherished memory.

In 1968 the Panchayat Hall was shifted to 'G' building. This new Hall was suitably designed to meet various needs, such as Satsang, meetings of our Panchayat and Society and other occasions. The rest of the History of our community is very recent and therefore not illustrated here. We have tried to cover the History of our close-knit community to best of our knowledge and ability, especially for younger generation who are very little aware of our origin and growth.

“WE BHAGNARIS”

A special mention needs to be made about the sterling contribution that Shri Naraindas Talreja made in bringing the community together during his tenure as Mukhi from 1995 to 2004

He renovated the Bhagnari Panchayat Hall. And mooted the concept of holding a community celebration of Ganpati Festival. Thanks to his single-minded zeal, the Bhagnari Panchayat Hall becomes a place of joy and celebration and togetherness for the community. He coined the slogan “WE BHAGNARIS”. Holi, Mata-da-Kirtan are other occasions where the Bhagnari community comes together as brethren. For many, these feasts are the first time they meet their friends and relatives after a long gap in time.

Migrating to the Gulf

The migration of Bhagnaris from Karachi to Mumbai was in effect their second migration. The first was when they moved from their original abode of Bhag and Nar villages. These resettlements were inflicted upon them by circumstances which are now part of the

History of “WE BHAGNARIS”

history and took a heavy toll on the community. Several well-to-do Bhagnaris had to start their business from scratch. Some of them even collected and sold empty cartons and khokhas from the market to put together some money and keep the home fires burning.

By the late sixties and early seventies, many families realised that their businesses were not good enough to be handed over to their children. This made the enterprising Bhagnaris look for greener pastures and many started settling in the Gulf, mainly in Kuwait and Dubai. While the initial thrust was into Kuwait, the later exodus saw several young Bhagnaris head towards Dubai. The unfortunate situation created by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait resulted in most Bhagnari families residing there migrating to Dubai, although a few went back there once the conditions normalised.

Bhagnaris had been visiting Dubai since mid-fifties for business. However, it was only in the mid-sixties that they started settling in Dubai with permanent employment. The newly found oil had given a boost to the country's economy. Due to this several labourers and white collared workers were required, as the local population was small.

These were the days when UAE was known as Trucial States and was under British rule. The Arabian Gulf was known as Persian Gulf. Rupee was the official currency of the country. All the Emirates were ruled by their own respective Sheikhs within the frame-work of treaties signed with the British. It was only on 2nd December 1971, when the British left, that the Emirates were united as an independent country, which is now known as the United Arab Emirates, with Abu Dhabi at its capital. In 1973 UAE Dirham became the official currency of the land. For a short period before this the QAR (Qatar Arab Riyal) was the operating currency.

Bhagnaris' El Dorado : Dubai embraced a lot of Bhagnaris. The records of the Bhagnaris in Dubai have been maintained since the mid eighties. Towards the end of eighties there were approx. 300

History of “WE BHAGNARIS”

Bhagnaris in Dubai. The end of the Gulf war renewed people's confidence in this place and it saw a further surge in the economy, which had dwindled during the eighties. This also attracted several more Bhagnaris to Dubai. There are over 600 Bhagnaris in Dubai now and the related database continues to grow. Most Bhagnaris who decided to make Dubai their home continued to live here. Some of them have lived here for over 35 years.

The entrepreneurial nature of the community has led a number of them running their own business. Many have supported the community by employing Bhagnaris in their companies. With approx. a third of the community here, this place has really been a savior for us. Almost all families have at least one member in Dubai. We hope that this place grows to prosper more and provide an avenue to many needy Bhagnaris.

Social Evolution- From Tribal to Modern

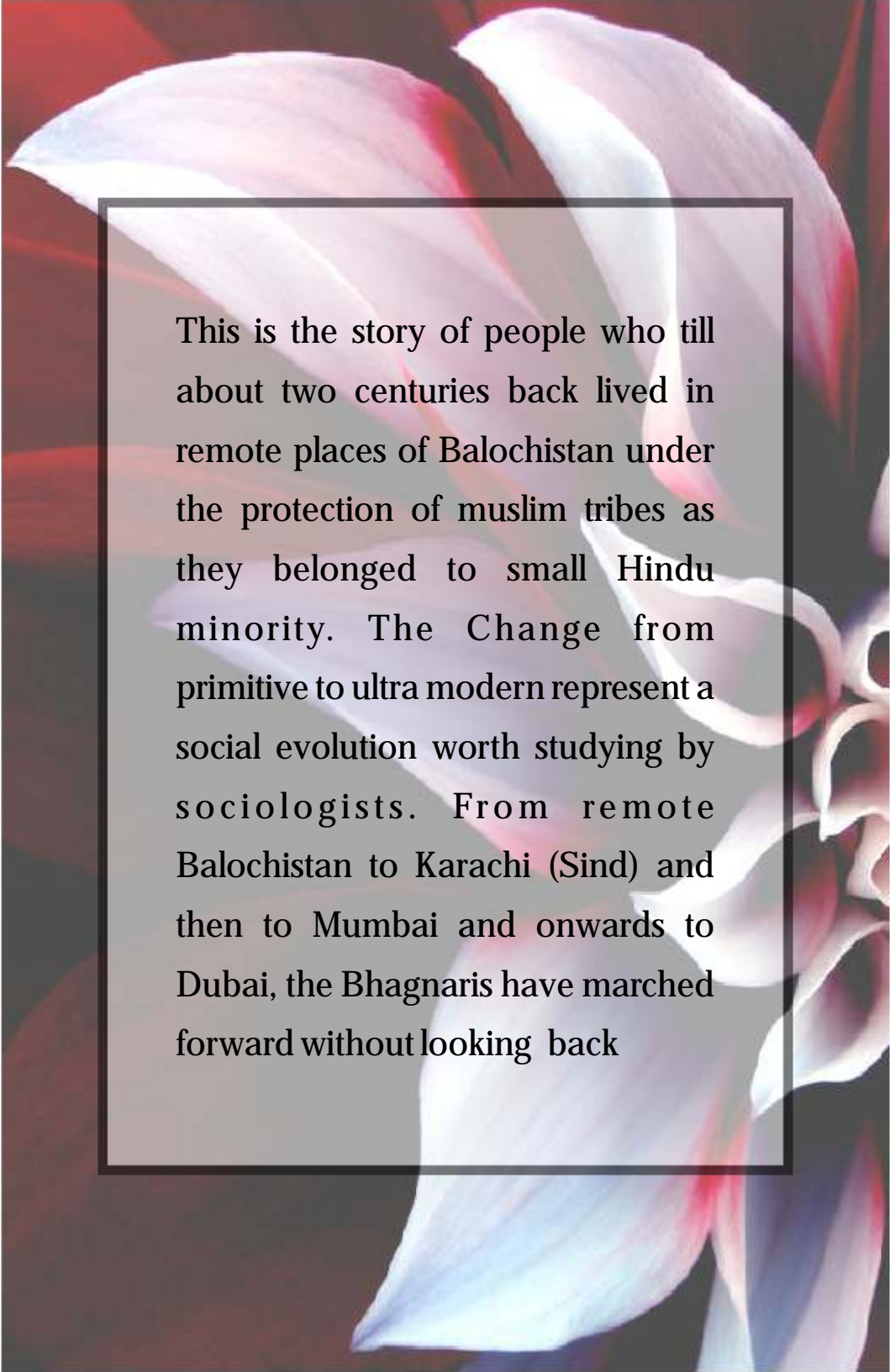
The Culture can not be and should not be frozen. Through evolution of society, historical events, discovery of new lands, scientific invention and birth of new ideas have changed our culture from tribal to most modern. The large joint families used to be common in our community. The change in way of our work, more and more working women, increased mobility and migration, have made nuclear families part of our culture. The other change that has come to our community is inter caste marriages. Till some years back endogamy (marriages within the community) was the rule. However in recent times marriages with spouse outside the community have become more frequent. In modern times this can not be prevented. This phenomenon poses long time challenge to the very existence of our community. We can convert this challenge into opportunity by encouraging non Bhagnari spouses (both sexes) to integrate themselves in our community by becoming members of Bhagnari Panchayat. We Bhagnaris have adjusted well to our present environments and will continue to do so. The change is a challenge and Bhagnaris will meet it face on in right direction.

LET US STICK TOGETHER

History of “WE BHAGNARIS”

PRESIDENTS OF SHREE BHAGNARI PANCHAYAT (SINCE INCEPTION)

1. Late Shree Chainamal Mohandas
- First President - Karachi
2. Late Shree Moorajmal Mohandas
- Second President - Karachi
3. Late Shree Tirathdas Mohandas
- Third President - Karachi
4. Late Shree Verhomal Pahlajrai
- Forth President - Karachi
5. Late Shree Shamdas Keshavdas Sapra
- Fifth President - Karachi
6. Late Shree Takandas Hemraj Kataria
- Sixth President - Karachi-Mumbai 1931-1966
7. Late Shree Harkishandas Deepchand Gehani
- Seventh President - Mumbai 1966-1973
8. Late Shree Kanayalal Chunjimal Nasta
- Eight President - Mumbai 1973-1979
9. Late Shree Issardas Motumal Kanar
- Ninth President - Mumbai 1980-1992
10. Late Sugnomal Essardas Gehani
- Tenth President - Mumbai 1992-1995
11. Late Shree Naraindas
- Eleventh President - Mumbai 1995-2004
12. Shree Niranjan H. Gehani
- Twelfth President - Mumbai 2004-2007
13. Shree Lachhu Gehi
- Thirteenth President - Mumbai 2007-(Current)



This is the story of people who till about two centuries back lived in remote places of Balochistan under the protection of muslim tribes as they belonged to small Hindu minority. The Change from primitive to ultra modern represent a social evolution worth studying by sociologists. From remote Balochistan to Karachi (Sind) and then to Mumbai and onwards to Dubai, the Bhagnaris have marched forward without looking back