



## India

### CULTURE

## A Village Comes Into Its Own

*Anees Jung is an Indian writer whose books explore her country's people and culture. Here she reports on life in Chapoli, a small village in the Western Ghats about 250 miles south of Bombay. Jung finds that after generations of isolation, decline, and neglect, the villagers finally have a reason to hope for a better life.*

The village is 60 kilometres [30 miles] from Belgaum, a town that is growing with industry and has an airfield. It seems far as we travel up a bad tar road, circled by clouds of red dust that gets into our hair, fogs our vision, gradually settling down as town yields to jungle, deep, green and still primeval. In this wilderness of less than 100 houses live invisibly a thousand people. There is little land on their forest slopes where paddy [rice fields] can turn green. Wheat is a luxury here, where flour is crushed from a wood-like root and made into bread.

The forests that once treasured a thousand perfumed flowers where bees droned and made honey have begun to recede. Walking around this desolate hamlet we realize that its isolation from the world is more than physical. Strangers inspire fear and suspicion. Women move away from open doors and take shelter behind frail walls. Children stare without wonder and prefer not to follow us around.

One lone old man remains sitting in the morning sun as if its magic warmth will drive away his cold and fever. He has no access to medicine. The nearest health centre is eight kilometers [about five miles] away, in the township of Jamboti, where a bus stops, linking this wilderness to the world beyond. In the government inventory, though, Chapoli has already earned its way into the “civilised” world for it has, as does every village in the state, electricity, a bore well [drilled well] and a school.

Chapoli's school house is . . . one bare room with a mud floor and a grass roof. It is empty except for a wobbly wooden chair that has collapsed from disuse. It nevertheless suggests authority, that of a school-teacher. In this case as in many across the land, the teacher is an absentee functionary [government employee] of the education department who trudges down from the next village, when convenient, to register his presence.

. . . [Recently, however,] the school has acquired a vague sense of importance. A new teacher has been appointed. Children have begun to trickle in. There will soon be a blackboard in the school house. . . . “Where nothing has happened there is only hope,” says one old man who claims to be a freedom fighter. Efforts, seemingly small, have begun to spell hope, even change.

It all began when a team of young enthusiastic men from the nearby plant of Indian Aluminum [“Indal”] in Belgaum decided to adopt Chapoli as one of the 10 villages in the company's rural development scheme.

“When we first came here no one came out to meet us. Not even the children,” says Patil, Indal’s public relations man. . . .

“In their minds a company meant jobs. We told them that we had come not to give them jobs but [to] help them in keeping themselves employed. When we approached the village headman and asked him to arrange a meeting, only 22 people . . . turned up. . . . All were very poor. Few of them had land. They were farm labourers who during off season migrated to seek work in Goa [a nearby state on India’s west coast]. They were keen to go back to bee-keeping, an ancient vocation [occupation] in these parts. Earlier they would walk into the forest and bring back honey-combs to extract honey. We decided to give them bee hives that they could safely keep in their yards with women of the house looking after them. We selected ten persons from the poorest families in ten villages for intensive training in bee-keeping. We will arrange to have the honey processed and marketed. . . .”

As an ancient art is being revived, the economic base of the village is beginning to change, albeit slowly. “Very little has changed here in my 80 years of life,” says the old freedom fighter. . . .

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**Understanding What You Read** After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. On what activity was the economy of Chapoli traditionally based? Why did the village’s economy go into decline?

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2. In what ways is Chapoli isolated? How have the villagers been affected?

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3. Why do the villagers have reason to hope their lives will get better?

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**Activity**

Imagine that you are a resident of Chapoli. Write a letter to persuade the government to help your village.