

# *New uses for elephant shit*

## *Khadi papers*

Nigel Macfarlane

explains the story of the Indian paper making industry he helped start.

**P**aper is shit. Well, that's part of the story anyway. In Kerala, in South India, there is a temple which has a lot of elephants. These elephants have been bought and presented to the temple by wealthy devotees. Elephants make good presents. They are conspicuous and auspicious. They are also expensive to feed. Banana leaves by the truck load are delivered daily to the elephant compound. Someone had the idea of turning the elephant dung, which was in effect pulped banana leaf, into paper. This was a nice idea. Maybe it would pay for the leaves. Banana leaf fibre was already being used in small scale papermaking in India and here the hard work, mushing it up and turning it into pulp, was being done by the elephants. The fibrous dung only needed to be mixed with water and formed onto a mould to make paper, maybe thick and lumpy paper – but still paper and possibly useful for some purpose.

For various reasons the project never developed but the thinking behind it was interesting, involving many of the issues in papermaking, more especially in small scale and handmade papermaking, in India. Issues of reusing, renewing, recycling, of converting waste into a product which has value, of working with organic materials (and what is more organic than elephant shit?), even issues of small scale production and intermediate technology. So, we learn from the elephants ...

I started working with Indian papermakers around twenty years ago. I loved – still love – India, the way people use their hands, the wonderfully natural and unprecious attitude to handmade things. You only have to watch a potter turning hundreds of small clay drinking pots (from a wheel made from a truck tyre) to understand something of this. He throws them and puts them aside without a second glance. None of them are perfect and all of them are perfect. They are made



for drinking tea or curds or buttermilk. One use only and then they are smashed, returning to the Earth.

Handmade paper in India is a bit like this. The aesthetic of Indian handmade paper has a lot to do with the idea of making something in a simple and direct way, letting the process determine the look and feel of the paper, forming one sheet, then another and then another without that backward glance. The imperfections, the natural wave of the edges, an accidental impression on the surface – these are what make it interesting.

But why make paper by hand? There are plenty of good reasons. In India making paper by hand was one of the traditional village industries, like the spinning of cotton yarn and weaving on handlooms, which had collapsed during the colonial period under the impact of mechanised production. These village industries were revived by Gandhi in the 1920s and 30s as part of his Swadeshi movement, also known as the Khadi movement, after khadi, which is handspun yarn.

The revival of these village industries was not just about aesthetics. There was mass unemployment in the villages and there were practical economic imperatives for getting these industries going again. Since then handmade and small scale papermaking has received