

In the Name of God

The Road to Freedom for the Ramnamis

Captions

1. Ram Sadhak ji offers his prayers to the Almighty.
The name of Ram is etched in parallel lines across his forehead.
2. The *mukut* or headgear stand as a strong cultural emblem for the Ramnamis, constituting their religious identity. The helm is painted with bright colours with a white piece of cloth tied around it that mentions the name of Ram in repetition. On top, a flock of peacock feathers signify its rich mythological connotation.
3. Ram Pyare ji, the *Adhyaksh* of the sect, lives a humble life as a farmer in his village. He often reminisces the struggles in his youth as a Ramnami.

4. The Ramnami sect was started by Parasuram in the 1890s. The shack that once saw the rise of the rebellion is now home to the *Upasak* of the tribe. Karthik Ram ji, the son of Parasuram, now sits at the top of the hierarchy. He has grown weary with age, but his spirit remains indomitable to this day. The tattoos on his skin have lost their permanence in the transience of time. Every now and then, he breaks into a *bhajan*, sung in praise of Lord Ram.
5. The frail hands of an elderly couple caress a memory from their past. This studio portrait of Karthik Ram ji is one of their prized possessions, more so because it highlights his tattoos that once were his weapon of resistance.
6. *Ramcharitmanas*, the holy scripture followed by the Ramnamis, talks about the deeds of Lord Ram through its poetic lines. The book acts as a source of inspiration for the community and establishes a sense of morality in their conscience. Quotes from the scriptures are often found to be painted on the blue walls of their homes.

7. The love of this elderly couple has lasted throughout the decades. Sukhwara bai and Karthik Ram ji live a life of peace, always catering to each other's needs. This old memoir, however, highlights a sense of vigour in their personality that they possessed during their fight against social injustice.

8. The *Bhajan Mela* is a time of the year when the Ramnamis living in villages far apart gather together to celebrate their heritage and legacy through their traditional folk songs. The *bhajans* narrate the story of the conquests of Ram and reflect on the undying fidelity of the Ramnamis to their deity. Karthik ji proudly holds up a picture showing the community of elders, some of the original Ramnamis. Unfortunately, many of them lost their struggle to Covid and the last of the tattooed women passed away the previous year.

9. The white attire of the Ramnamis draws a contrast to their mud houses. A few of the settlements have undergone a modern transformation, although still possessing a rustic charm from the bygone era.
10. Blessed with two young grandkids, most of Ram Pyare ji's days are now spent playing with them. The rebellion against systematic oppression has subsided, hence the younger generation find it unnecessary to tattoo themselves. However, the faiths and beliefs of the people remain true to their identity.
11. Two school kids stand at the entrance of the meeting hall that was once used to host conferences amongst the elders of the clan. The advent of modernity has led a wave of change through the village.
12. The name of Ram is found in every nook and corner of the villages. It rightfully reflects on the devotion of the Ramnamis to their religious hero.

13. Denied entry into temples, the Ramnamis discovered their own way of connecting with the Almighty. They set up shrines in nature, made out of rocks - symbolising their deities. The shrine of Hanuman, located right outside their home, is worshipped by them to this very day.