

THE BHIL CULTURE IN CENTRAL INDIA

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Abstract

There is a vast diversity of cultures in Asia. This diversity is under threat by the pressures of nationalism and of globalization. This essay discusses the Bihil culture of central India as a microcosm of some of these issues facing cultural diversity.

It is with much joy that I compliment the organizers of this colloquium at the Assumption University on the theme "Origins and Destinies of Cultures". This being a continuation of last year's colloquium that focused on Asian cultures and the current issues of importance to them, I see a great significance in delving deeper into the origins and destinies of cultures which will in some ways take us closer to each other and forge better brotherhood and sisterhood in the Asian context.

An Intricate Area of Study:

A major hurdle that one comes across while attempting to study Asian cultures is their sheer diversity; there are hundreds or even thousands of cultures present in the Asian continent that are so different from one another, and it takes a great deal to make sense out of them before one can form an informed opinion on their distinctiveness. Moreover, there is overlapping of some aspects of different cultures in Asia that often becomes a daunting task to delineate the fine nuances of one culture from another. As for instance, the East Asian cultures are heavily influenced by the Chinese culture, although distinctive elements have also been found in the cultures of Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Japan. In the same manner, the south Asian cultures are strongly influenced by the In-

dian Culture although there are elements of these cultures that seem quite unique. It goes without saying, therefore, that any dominant culture in an area will have its influence exerted on smaller cultures, creating in the process a spectrum of cultures in a given area, and in our case in the Asian continent.

The Origin of Cultures.

The concept of culture of a particular group of people is defined by things ranging from language, religion, cuisine and social habits, to music and the arts. All these aspects manifest the collective ethos of a given social group that has been developed over a period of time and have been accepted and endorsed by it.

However, the discourse on the origin of cultures is fraught with several difficulties particularly in the Asian context for the simple reason that by and large there is an absence of importance placed on historical accuracy. One can often come across a phrase – “once upon a time” – in the common parlance of daily discourse of many Asian communities. This common phrase points to a less than serious attitude towards historical accuracy; what passes for historic is often mixed with fables and myths that are integral to popular discourse of a given culture. That said, one can not totally dismiss the historical elements present in the fables and myths for the reason that some of them have been ‘created’ in a historical context of a particular place and over a period of time. What is to be noted in this context is that there is a definite distinction in understanding the significance of historicity in the Western and Eastern cultural milieu. To that extent searching for historically accurate points of beginnings of a certain Asian culture may not be as feasible, as for instance, arriving at a more accurate point in history when a Western culture may have originated.

Where can one find the sources of a particular culture? The historians rely on findings in Archeology in order to ascertain the origin and growth of a culture and civilization. And the Archeologists in their research also come across many aspects of a culture that aid them to get a clearer view of it. It is also a fact that sources of a specific culture are

mostly found in the folklore, songs, dances, paintings, dress patterns and cuisines, art and architecture, profession and life style they adopt. In the absence of recorded historical accounts, most ancient cultures heavily relied on oral traditions for transmitting their cultural ethos to successive generations. And in this transmission process art and artifacts play an important role.

An Enquiry into the Bhil Culture of Central India.

Although I belong to a culture other than what I am going to present before you, my credentials to speak on this culture lies in the fact that I have been associated with it for a couple of years through education and other development works. And any serious development works requires a fairly good insight into the community and its culture, and hence I did some work in understanding the Bhil culture, which is classified as Tribal in the Indian demographic classification. Tribal or Adivasi in Hindi language denotes the origin and socio-economic status of this and other similar communities in India which constitutes about 8% of its population.¹ And because of socio-economic backwardness of this section of Indian population they have been provided with affirmative action by the Constitution of India.

There are over 500 Tribal communities in India and they are considered as the 'original' inhabitants of the land while other segments of the population are considered to be migrants at various points in time.² This sense of 'rootedness' to the land is even better denoted by the Hindi term –Adivasi or Mulnivasi as some prefer to say – which literally speaks of the status of the inhabitants as those who lived here from the 'beginning'.³

The place of their habitation was and to some extent even today is largely in the forests, place quite removed from the towns and cities, the modern man's places of habitation. This forest habitation of the Tribals helped them to remain isolated to some extent from the vicissitudes of modern life style; they could preserve their unique culture and cultural traits from the invasion of the modern cultures. The Bhil Tribals have their own social customs and traditions, some of which are unique to

them while others share some commonalities with other cultures.

The word Bhil is derived from the *Bil* or *Vil* which mean Bow. They are the largest tribe of South Asia and constitute 39% of the total population of the state of Rajasthan. Bhils are known as bow-men of central India. Bhil tribe is divided into two groups, the Central or Pure Bhils found in the mountains ranges of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Eastern Rajput Bhils are found in eastern parts of Tripura. The Bhil Tribes are mentioned in epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana.⁴

Indian Mythology says that Bhil women offered *ber* to Lord Rama, when he was in the jungles of Dhandaka, searching for Sita. In the history of independent India the Bhil tribes of India were regarded as the fighters who were in a battle against the Mughals, Marathas and the British. Bhils furnished the needs of Princes of Mewar⁵ with bowmen, supplies or by guarding their families. Some famous names of Bhils are Bhim, Bhim Singh Maharana, Bhimisi and Bhindar. They were employed by the Rajputs as *Shikaris* (hunters) and as Warriors in colonial times. The Mewar Bhil Corps today is a much-admired Corps of Mewar. They are the best archers and possess tremendous knowledge in geography and rank as the third largest tribe in India after the Gonds and Santhals. Bhagat or *Gurus* (teachers) perform the religious rites for Bhil Tribe. Bhils village headsmen (*Thadavi*) deal with their disputes. Bhils strictly follow rules and regulations and marry only in their own Tribes.

The Bhils religious practice differs from place to place. They worship local deities like Khandoba, Kanhoba, Bahiroba, and Sitalmata. They worship Tiger God called ‘vaghdev’. Bhils don’t have temples of their own and consult *Badvas* –the hereditary sorcerers on all occasions, as they are highly superstitious people.

Dance and music are given importance by the Bhils due to their rich cultural history. The famous dance among the Bhils is Ghoomar and Gair which are the religious dance drama performed by men in the month of *Sharavana* (July and August). The Bhil Tribes are talented in sculpture work and make beautiful horses, elephants, tigers, deities out of clay.

The Unique Marriage Custom of the Bhils.

While in most Indian cultures, including the Tribal cultures, it is generally the bride's party that pays a dowry, in the Bhil Tribal culture, it is the Bridegroom's party that has to pay to the bride's party. In a way, it is as if the girl is purchased by the groom's family. The Bhils marry quite early, usually the boys between the age of 14-16 and girls between the age of 11-13, and it can be arranged by the parents of the couple, or by elopement.

Polygamy is allowed in Bhil culture, but because of the bride price, most Bhil men opt for monogamy. If a man has more than one wife, the first one has the authority in the family but each wife has her own rights safeguarded.

If there is a problem with the marriage, divorce is easily obtained by repaying the money paid to the girl's family and sending the girl away to her family along with her children. Very often it is the woman who decides on the divorce if she is dissatisfied with her husband. The final decision is taken by the village leader (*Thadavi*), whose opinion is final and binding on both parties.

Is the marriage custom among the Bhils a gender level playing field or does it give rise to gender discrimination? Going by the social status accorded to women in Bhil culture, it may be argued that gender equality is still a far cry as there is a clear patriarchal model still at work in their society. The women in the community are not given any legislative power in their society; they are meant to follow the dictates of the male elders in the village whose decisions in social matters are treated as binding. However, women are given an equal status when it comes to social gatherings; they also share in the locally brewed beverage, and dine with the male members of the community. This is in contrast to most other socially advanced societies of India where usually the women are given separate place in social gatherings, and socializing between men and women is usually to the very minimum.

The Youth Dormitory System among Bhils

Another interesting and perhaps quite unique social custom among the Bhils is the practice of young men and women living in Youth Dormitory where they socialize and even initiate courtship between them. It is quite unique in the sense that the youth are provided with an opportunity to socialize in a formal context so that they are able to get to know each other and make proper decision to choose a life partner. The young boys and girls living in Youth dormitories are not free to follow their own whims and fancies; they are under the strict vigil of the elders who teach and guide them on the Bhils culture and its way of life. It is a formal way of socialization among young members of the society, and also prepares them to enter into marital state of life.

Influence of Modern Cultures on the Bhils

The impact of religions like Hinduism, Christianity and to some extent Islam on Bhil communities has long been recognized. The Bhils Tribe has been influenced by certain traditions of Hindus living near them. Hindu religious literature like Puranas and epics have references to interface between Hindus and Bhil tribe .For instance there are references to Bhil tribe in the epic Mahabharata. Lord Rama lived in Chitrakut⁶ forests in the company of tribes. Sabari who offered fruits to Lord Rama hailed from Bhil tribe.

The Bhil tribe has assimilated at different levels the caste structure of the Hindu society. In Central India sanskritisation⁷ among certain sections of Bhil tribe has been attributed to the Bhagat movement. This movement started in 1914 among Oraon tribe of Chotanagpur meant for purging beliefs in ghosts and spirits and directing their faith to the Hindu deity of Mahadeo. Bhagats today are quite influenced by the Brahminical way of life.

After India came under British rule, Christian missionaries living among the Bhil tribe contributed much to their socio-economic development, which resulted in some changes in their culture. The first impact of conversion to Christian faith was visible among the Bhil tribe about 100

years ago when some of them accepted the Christian faith. Conversions began first at individual and family level. In course of time the pace of conversion increased and some villages came to accept Christianity. The major concentration of Tribal Christians is located in North east states. In Central India the highest number of Christians is among the Kharia tribe. Christianity has been responsible in changing the outlook of tribals in the fields of education, festivals, social and economic life. The Bhils have become more conscious of the value and need of modern education; they have also integrated Christian elements in their festivities, and they began to interact with members of other social groups, and have moved to areas of economic activities other than agriculture.

However, there is the view that impact of Christianity led to the disintegration of traditional and cultural values and also in the creation of caste-like groups among tribals. At the same time many sections of different tribal groups have come under a single religious leadership of the Church. Among those tribals who have accepted Christian faith have changed some of their indigenous tribal festivals, youth dormitories, traditional dances and values.

Some of the tribals face cultural change due to acculturation, regionalism, assimilation and so forth. Acculturation is responsible for the change in ways of life of some tribes like Raj Gonds and Tharus. When some cultural traits of a powerful group are imposed on a weak cultural group, there is the danger of the weak group losing its cultural identity. In such a context the weak group may rise against the stronger group in order to regain its cultural identity. Such contra-acculturation process is manifested by the solidarity movements in Rajasthan and Jharkhand.

The Bhil Tribals are no exception to the process that other Tribal groups are faced with today in India. Where the Christian presence has been strong with large number of Tribals opting for Christian faith, their life standards have also undergone tremendous change. That was possible because of the multi-faceted development strategies adopted by the missionaries who worked among them. In addition, the Federal Government's affirmative action has also enhanced the level of education and health care among the Bhils.

Today, the Bhil Tribals are found in all segments of the Government. Besides in the political leadership roles, they are also found among

administrators, entrepreneurs, service sector and so on, and making their own mark.

Endnotes

¹India has about 8.2% of Tribal population according to the 2001 census. This segment of the Indian population belongs to a galaxy of various Tribal communities with their distinctive culture and ethos. For further information on this, see...Indian Tribes: R.C.Verma ISBN81-230-0328-5.

²There are several theories regarding various races of people migrating to India, some of which are also contested today among scholars, but the fact remains that India has multi-racial population.

³The term 'Adivasi' is comprised of two words – adi and vasi. Adi means beginning and vasi means the dwellers. Similar is the meaning of 'Mulnivasi' which also means – from the very root of habitation.

⁴Fuchs Stephen, The Aboriginal Tribes of India, Delhi, Madras, Bombay, MacMillan, 1974.

⁵Mewar Kingdom in the present day Rajasthan state of India was a well-established dynasty, one of the oldest dynasties in the world starting from around 600 AD until year 1947.

⁶Chitrakoot is a town in Satna District in the state of Madhya Pradesh. It has a religious significance for Hindus and has a historical and archeological importance.

⁷The term sanscritization denotes the process by which Hindus, the majority religious community of India has been trying to assimilate the Tribal and other communities into the social structures, religious practices and customs.