

Social Change through Urbanization in Bhil Tribes of Rajasthan

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ABSTRACT

Transformation refers to a process or instance of change in the myriad cultural, economic, political and social forces that shape a society. It entails change in production and distribution systems, social relations and cultural practices which transform conditions in the local community. The process of transformation has varied meanings for different strata of society according to their phase of development. Its course becomes even more interesting when studied in relation to the tribal groups as firstly, they are isolated and little is known about them; secondly, these societies are highly marginalized and exploited by the subjects of mainstream society; thirdly, they are most neglected mainly because of their distinct and little known cultures and lastly, any little change in their social or economic sphere can never be studied in isolation but has to be studied in a holistic fashion. Rajasthan is the largest state in India with tribes forming an important segment of its society. The tribes in the state are dispersed across the state living in different physical environments, exhibiting varied lifestyles, social habits, religious beliefs and cultural patterns. The issue becomes even more appealing and complex in case of Rajasthan as some tribes are segregated while others are intermingling with the non-tribal population.

KEYWORDS: social, change, tribes, bhil, Rajasthan, urbanization, society, religious, cultural

INTRODUCTION

Bhils or Bheels are an Adivasi ethnic group in West India. They speak the Bhil languages, a subgroup of the Western Zone of the Indo-Aryan languages.



As of 2013, Bhils were the largest tribal group in India. Bhils are listed as tribal people of the states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan—all in the western Deccan regions and central India—as well as in Tripura in far-eastern India, on the border with Bangladesh. Bhils are divided into a number of endogamous territorial

divisions, which in turn have a number of clans and lineages. Most Bhils now speak the language of the region they reside in, such as Marathi, Gujarati or a Bhili language dialect. This tribe has scattered maximum in Rajasthan. According to Ram Pande, in 1881, the Bhils protested against "the census classification, prohibition on alcohol manufacture, establishment of police and customs, and the ban on the killing of witches". Their campaigning was stepped up and given meaning by Govind Guru who was a social and political leader.[1,2]



Bhil Woman in gala dress

How to cite this paper: Ravindra Kumar Badal "Social Change through Urbanization in Bhil Tribes of Rajasthan" Published in International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (ijtsrd), ISSN: 2456-6470, Volume-6 | Issue-3, April 2022, pp.1447-1451,

URL: www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd49755.pdf



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Pande suggests that because of his long-term work among the tribe, Guru was able to talk them round to refrain from consuming meat and alcohol, and to pressurize the state for the formation of village councils which could administer their own affairs and for barring forced labor. In 1917, Mewar State's Girasias joined the Bhils in the struggle to get the petty taxes and forced labour quashed, and to get the land revenues decreased. Taking note of these protests, the jagirdars of Mewar had called on a British political agent to suppress the mutiny. Pande noted that 1,500 Bhils got shot in 1908. In 1921, the tribals and peasants united under the leadership of Motilal Tejawat in the struggle against "forced labour, petty taxes, the disparity in taxes, high taxes and the tyrannical ways of the jagirdars". Tejawat's thoughts drew followers from the Bhils and he "became a notorious offender against the state".[3,4]

Hinduism as a body of beliefs, customs taboos and superstitions, has so much in common with the religion of the Bhils that they consider themselves as Hindus. It is noted that at places the Bhils are forgetting their gods, the lower ones in the hierarchy being ignored and those on the next higher rank coming next and so on. They remember their chief gods but have forgotten about the sons and daughters of those gods. They have started worshipping Hindu gods of the lower strata. Another Bhil named Viswanath Maharaj of Rewakantha also initiated a reformatory movement. He is said to have given the Hindu sacred thread, Janau, to seventy five thousand Bhils. They all become Bhagats, i.e. devotees. They stopped drinking haro and tadi. They took vows not to eat meat, not to drink tap water and not to consume foods prepared by a non-Bhagat. These devotees would visit Maharaj's place once a year on foot and take Prasad (sacred offerings) from him. The Bhils are now taking to the dress of neighbouring Rajputs (Hindus). A Bhil can be seen in a shirt, a short coat and a dhoti. Mercerized Dhotis have also reached the Bhils and the women have started wearing mill-made sarees and city-cut blouses. In fact, the Bhils now know and have begun to use everything that an average Indian living in a village knows and uses. Because of the social contact with neighbouring castes and tribes, they have imbibed some traits of Hindu society. The idea of caste and the idea of super ordinate-subordinate relationship therein is prevalent among them, similar to the Hindus. They also have the idea of untouchability. Bhil women who were not aware of the Purdah (veil), are now seen covering their faces. Many of them do not take part in their own dances, do not sing their own songs, so do not know their mythology and even their own ceremonies.[5,6]



Rajasthan Bhil tribe

The Bhils started emulating the Rajputs by assimilating into the cults of Siva and Parvati. This is evident from their folklore and they celebrate the festival of Gangaur (Gana-Siva and Gaur-Guari/Parvati) with fervor. Records are available of Bhils' participation in Gangaur in large numbers, specially in Gogunda. Every Bhil girl dances with a clay image of Gangaur (image of Gauri) on her head. They dress the image of Gangaur like a Bhil maiden. The celebrated theme of a Bhil folk-song is the gathering of the Bhils at the annual fair of Banswara Mahadev (situated in Dungarpur district on the confluence of rivers Som and Mah). Another important tribe of Southern Rajasthan, the Bhil Girasias also celebrate the Gangaur festival with great enthusiasm. Scholars find a number of traits among the tribal groups similar to those of Rajputs. On the ninth day of the death-rite of a married woman, governee is celebrated by her parents among Rajputs, Bhilalas and Chaukhariya Mankars of the Malwa region. Lok Nath Soni finds that ceremonial relationships and ritual ties or brother and sister relationship between the members of Bhilala, Mankar and Bharud and Brahman, Patelia, Thakurs (Rajput) and Bhils shows the interethnic relationship the exists among these groups.

The Bhagat Bhils gave up their animistic cult; they discarded idolatry and polytheism and discarded their beliefs in ghosts, Bhopas and other superstitions. They rejected liquor and meat; abjured theft, robbery and killing of animals and condemned adultery and deception. They wore a rosary of rudrakash and a saffron turban and started bathing daily. In the social strata, they claimed equal status with the upper castes. As a result of this, the Bhagat Bhils found it difficult to continue their relations with the non-Bhagat Bhils who were non-vegetarians and consumed liquor regularly. Thus the Bhagats formed an endogamous group within their tribal fold.[7,8]

Discussion

Many Gurus preached monotheism and moral precepts to the Bhil Adivasis to take them away from their animistic way of life to Bhagatism. Such movements - known as Bhagat movements – won over a large number of disciples in a short span of time. These disciples styled themselves as Bhagats. In this way, the Bhil tribe aspired to culturally relocate themselves towards a better way of life. They shed superstitions, addiction to liquor and proneness to crime. Thus, the Bhagat movement transformed the Bhil Bhagats into endogamous groups within their tribal fold.



Historically, the transition from a specific mode of organization to another is due to increase in productivity issuing from labour. The emergence of surplus is followed by economic differentiation and change in social division of labour. Due to inventions, discoveries and increased knowledge, productivity has increased as well. These types of changes bring changes in the division of labour which is followed by economic transformation. The direction of economic and social change is determined by the emergence of social surplus and concomitant ecological processes. Meillassoux feels that population density has played a decisive role in the transformation of pre-capitalist societies, with both social and technical reproduction.[9,10]

“As surpluses emerged, economic differentiation and social stratification developed in tribal society.” The penetration of British Colonialism also altered the living conditions and patterns of Indian tribal societies. Initially we find no concept of private property amongst the tribal groups. Kosambi notes that land was only a territory and not a property. Food was shared by all. With the subsequent introduction of various measures, land gradually got converted

into private property. The integration of pre-capitalism into capitalism has brought about a variety of structural changes. As a result of this, the tribal system has got affected as a whole. With the changes in the outside world, the tribal communities have also displayed changes in their economy, polity and cultures. Not being static frozen entities, they struggle to release themselves from the grip of domination, discrimination and control. These tribal societies also possess an internal dynamics as the people and formations keep changing continuously.

When the configuration pattern of a culture comes in contact with other culture, it undergoes transformation. The culture of the first group takes up many characteristics from the impinging culture. In the case of Bhils, the main source of the contacts was the impact from the surrounding Rajput culture. They developed a sense of superiority, claiming that “we are brave, we are the courageous, we are the kings of the forest, we are the children of tigers.”[11]



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Bhil tribe painting

A Bhil named Gulia (later he assumed the title of Maharaj; a saint) started a reform campaign of a more or less religious nature. He asked them not to consume liquor or tadi. Influenced by his sermons, many of the Bhils became teetotalers. Smarting under the consequent loss of revenue from liquor sales, one of the dealers arranged to have Maharaj murdered.

Results

This song commemorates the valour of the Bhils and the Rajputs who fought against Bahadur Khan of the Suba of Baroda in 1700 A.D:

The streets of Bhilod are very narrow. In it was ensnared Bahadur Khan. The Sondachiyas were so brave That fallen on the ground They would shoot arrows! The Golachiyas, the lords of gola, Dealt blows on the back The Khers were strong as the Stumps of the Kher tree; They cut down the camels of Bahadur Khan. The Fichwadiyas were so firm of hand They cut at a stroke the spines of his horses!

The fichtwadiyas from the trees Attacked him with stones thrown from the slings. On the road to Pantalwadi Bahadur was enjoying a horse ride (but said he) "Let me go alive from Bhilod. If I come back, I will eat a swine." The following Rasspeaks of the strength of Damji, the Bhil Chieftain of Sagbara who helped the king of Rajpipla against the British when they tried to take the latter into custody. Damji was the Vasawo of Sagbara And Bahadurio his Vaji; Damji came to see the king, His horse was greenish in colour; It was shining wonderfully, It had a silver saddle. He rode it back a little And pressed his heels against it The horse jumped three jumps together. In front of him and behind him Crowds of Bhils were marching; Damji had a golden ring. A note came from the Government, In Damiji's house there was a copper pot. There was a call to him from Ratanpur. Prepare bricks. Both Kachha and Pucca, And build a hundred bridges; Damji had a silken thread in his house. Put that man's daughter in jail; Damji had a rope for his elephant; Tie tightly that man's wife I will cut down forest and trees and Construct roads along the hills.' He took five guns with him And gunpowder ready with it. 'O Mother, I fall at thy feet; I am thy servant O, you hated one, take off your hat; Otherwise I will auction your corpse[12]



The incorporation of the goddess Vindhyavasini in the state pantheon of Mewar illustrates the importance of the Bhils for the state of Mewar. Vindhyavasini ranks just next to Ekalingaji, the presiding deity of Mewar. She is also the goddess worshipped by the core area Bhils. She is introduced and identified as Parvati (consort of Siva) at the beginning of Ekalinga-Mahatmya, Shala Purana of Mewar. Her tirtha is eulogized among other tirthas of Mewar. Though the cult prevalent in Mewar is of Parvati, it is Vindhyavasini and not Parvati who is integrated into the supra-local pantheistic structure of Mewar. It is evident that the dominant autochthonous deity was royally patronized by the local rulers. This shows that Vindhyavasini of Mewar seems to have undergone a process of Hinduization as is evident

from her identification with Parvati. The incorporation of Vindhyavasini into the state-pantheon drew the Bhils toward the Saiva traditions. This can be viewed as a process of integration of Bhils through Saivism.

On the basis of survey of some Bhil villages, "the presence of Ram temple with priest... and worship of Hindu gods and goddesses shows the inclination of tribal people towards Hindu religion. Pathwari Pooja and Ganga Vdhyapan Pooja done by the Bhils, Bhilalas and Patelias show their connection with the Hinduism of all India spread. Many tribals do Narmada Parikarma and go to Puri and other pilgrimage centres. The celebration of Holi, Gangour, Diwali and many other festivals add to the colour of their social life." Each group tries to improve its rank in relation to others. They try to improve the caste prestige in the hope that sooner or later it will be recognized as having gone up the social scale. The Bhilala decided to build a temple on the river Sipra in the same way as other castes and to call themselves 'Bhilala Rajputs'. A few Rajputs who now smoke with some Bhilalas may be connected with the latter's efforts to rise.[11]

Conclusions

Despite the slow nature of change, the developmental progress of the region due to continuous work of the government, NGOs and the community, cannot be denied. Contributions from large philanthropic organisations such as the Infosys Foundation too have had a momentous impact on the social and economic improvement of the tribal landscape. Such is the nature of any great social movement - its influence is spread over decades of labour while integrating every member of the community in the stride towards prosperity. It may be too soon to dismiss the impact of the social movement orchestrated by the Bhils, but it's never too late to help in whatever way one can. [12]

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