

A Cultural Study of the Rathwas

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Abstract: Gujarat is a hub of tribes which constitutes 14.8 percent of the total state population.¹ Herein we find many of tribes such as Gamith, Dhodias, Siddi, Barda, Vasawas, Rabari, Rathwas etc. Among these, the focus of my paper is “The RATHWAS”. They constitute the group and sub-groups of aboriginal people native to Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh. The tribe gets its name from the ancient Dravidian term ‘Rath-bistar’ which means the hilly and forested regions in the above states. They are a distinct tribe in Gujarat famed for their rich culture and characteristic art tradition, the Pithora wall paintings which significantly is a ‘living’ tradition. This paper is an attempt to outline and examine continuity and change in the socio cultural life of Rathwas as is noticeable in their belief systems, dress, festivities and fairs.

Objective and Methodology: This paper is an attempt to examine the patterns of change and continuity in the socio cultural life of Rathwas on the basis of their Fairs and festivals and art. This paper involves anthropological method for intensive study as well as survey technique.

Keyword: Rathwas, Badvo, Pithora art, Belief system.

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I. INTRODUCTION:

Gujarat, the jewel of Western India bounded by an extensive coastline, is a land, diverse in topography, culture and cuisines. This western state is not only famous for its multifarious cuisines and vibrant culture but also tourism, tradition and its people. And along with local people, there are many tribal communities also known as Adivasis which reside in Gujarat, each having a specific place and distinct features.

The Adivasis are “the first ones who were here”– the indigenous inhabitants of India. With over 70 million people and more than 460 peoples and communities, they make up the world’s largest indigenous population within the borders of a country.

According to Dr. Haddon “the word tribe would connote a group of simple kind occupying a concentrated area, with common dialect, a common social organization but undeveloped and primitive in mental equipment and civilization”ⁱⁱⁱ G.W.E. Hunting Ford defines “A tribe is a group united under common name in which the members take pride, by a common language, by common territory and by a feeling that all who do not share this name are outsiders, ‘enemies’ in fact.”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

The tribal communities have always attracted attention because of their vibrant culture besides habitat and related attributes. The tribal belt in Gujarat consists of the districts of Surat, Broach, Baroda, Panchmahals, Sabarkantha and Banaskantha and tribes such as koli, Siddhi, Rabari, Bhils, Ahirs, Bharwads and Rathwas. Among all these, “Rathwas” are highest in number and also a very colorful tribe. The Rathwas live with nature. Although these people are generally perceived to be backward and live a simple life, their social and religious customs are very fascinating, which is the subject focus of my paper.

II. ORIGINS

“According to John Malcolm’s Memoir of Central India (1823), the Tendlah area of southern Malwa and the hilly area of the Vindhya range up to the river Narmada is known as the ‘Rath Area.’ This region includes Alirajpur, Jobat, Bhabhra and their surrounding areas. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the western part of it was merged into the Chhota Udaipur state, and therefore the adivasis who live in this area came to be known as Rathwas”^{iv}. The Rathwas is one of the leading tribe with population of 151,236 in Vadodara.^v The Rathwas belong to the category of scheduled tribes which usually resides in the hilly areas of the states namely Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. These tribes are basically residing in the regions of Chota Udaipur, Jabugam and Navsari in Baroda district. The volume XX of the 1931 census of India pertaining to the Central India Agency, mentions that ‘the Rathwas (as the community is referred to in the book), a section of the Bhil tribe’ It suggests that they acquired their name from the ‘Rath country which now forms a great part of Alirajpur State’.

The world Rathwa makes its appearance for the very first time in the Gazetteers of Bombay presidency in 1880; and after that it figures in G. A. Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India^{vi}. As per this survey, "Rathwas" are adivasi who live in the forest of northern area of Chota Udaipur state in Rewakantha and the southern part of Deogarh Baria state and they are natives of Alirajpur's Rath area. In fact, the entire Rath area was a part of Alirajpur state in former times. This state was divided into 5 districts: 1. Rath, 2. Chaktala or Kosariya Bara, 3. Chandpur, 4. Nanpur and 5. Bhabhra. In the early nineteenth century, Rana Pratap Singh was the ruler of Alirajpur State and the Chota Udaipur state was ruled by Maharaja III Raisingh. This was the time when Alirajpur had to face numerous invasions. Hence in 1808 A.D. to facilitate recruitment of new soldiers, Ranapratap Singh decided to pawn three 'talukas' 1. Dod or Sursi, 2. Amba Daberi and 3. Chaktala or Kosariya Bara.

Later as time passed, the Alirajpur state failed to clear the debt completely; and as a result Dod or Sursi taluka became a part of Chhotaudepur state. Since this taluka earlier formed a part of the Rath district, it is possible that the people residing here have been called "Rathwas". On the basis of a study of their oral traditions, it appears that the Rathwas may have migrated into this area more than one thousand years ago from the central India's Malwa state and its surrounding areas.^{vii} In the stories and the mantras of the Rathwas about their Devas (deities), we get a direct reference of Raja Bhoj, the ruler of Malwa, a province of Central India from 1010 A.D. to 1055 A.D. He had his capital in Dhar, and hence he was popular as "Raja Bhoj of Dhar". He was a patron of literature, and showed a kind behaviour to his subjects. He performed many works to ensure their welfare. Maybe, an invasion occurring in this period might have forced the "Adivasi" to migrate towards the Rath area, and till to this day the Adivasi revere Raja Bhoj. In the meantime, the adivasi would have experienced the rule of several kings of Alirajpur and Chhota Udaipur, but even today the impact of Raja Bhoj is apparent. Although the Alirajpur State came into existence in 1438 AD, the stories of Raja Bhoj have been preserved in the memories of Adivasi residing there till this date.

Historically, the Rathwas have a rich culture and living traditions which make them fascinating to study. This paper is an attempt to discuss and trace the patterns of continuity and change.

1. **Religious Belief:** As is typical with tribal societies, the Rathwa tribes lead a simple, quiet and monotonous life. They reside in the lap of nature and their activities are largely defined and are in sync with the seasonal cycles. They have a strong conviction about their religious practices which is a combination of animistic religion and interestingly an adaptation/influence of subtle Hindu rituals and practices with their beliefs. Their strong conviction for supernatural powers dominates their religious life and rituals.

The religious beliefs of the Rathwas and their ritual practices recognize the existence of two different sources of supernatural forces. The first centers on beliefs in a host of non-human spirits that inhabit certain localities and the other on veneration of ancestors, who in their 'living' state after death control many activities of the living. Balvo or Badvo (Shaman) is the religious chief practitioner, village priest, who directs all religious activities and holds a formidable influence over all social and economic matters of the village. He is a diviner and an interpreter of supernatural phenomenon.^{viii}

All the people in the village believe in Badhas (vow to restrict oneself till a desired wish is fulfilled). If they face any problem in their life they take badha for it, and once their wishes are addressed and fulfilled, they complete the process of badha with the help of the Badvo. There are **Badhas of Ind, Puja Pithora's Badha, Badha of sacrifice of goat or cock, Badha of coconut**. Badhas are performed by "Badeva Bhuva" who is believed to cure the ill person and souls. Bhuva performs all ceremonies of Badha, Manta, and sacrifice. Among all these badhas, **Badha of pithora has a special value. Pithora ritual is also very elaborate and expensive.**

Badha of Pithora: "The ceremony of Badha of Pithoda is performed wherein white dry colour is brought from the shop. Oil is added to that colour and figures of about 100 to 150 horses are drawn with that colour. Thereafter, the Bhuva shakes his heads, and while shaking his head gives names to the horses drawn on walls. Thereafter, when the burden of Bhuva is lessened, he stops shaking his head. Then liquor is poured in the earthen Katri (pot) and five dhebra (thick millet bread) of blackgram on the head of pot of katri are tied. Thereafter, a goat is sacrificed. All soak the head of goat, and offer paddy and leaves of bill tree on its head. Once the goat shakes its head, its head is cut and five marks of its blood are made. Then, the mutton of the goat is cooked and eaten as prasad."^{ix}

Jawara and Bali are among their other beliefs. Jawara, is a practice in which different types of food grains are grown in pine bamboo pots and then placed in a field and worshipped for nine entire nights. Further a goat is selected for sacrifice on the occasion which is worshipped along with the paddy, and its cooked meat is eaten the next morning. The participants dance and drink throughout the night. The pots of Jawara are then thrown into the river.

Bali, is another badha, in which they sacrifice a chicken or goat when their vow is fulfilled. They have very strong belief in the efficacy of these rituals, irrespective of its rationality to the outside world.

2. Art Form of Rathwas “Pithora”: Much has been written about the Pithora art form which is integral to the Rathwas and is a living tradition.^x Moreover, a strong connection between tribal community and urban people is noticeable in recent times. Significantly, this tribal art form is undergoing socio-cultural change in view of demarcations between the tribal world and the mainstream society reducing. While this art form has come to enjoy great popularity in the urban areas besides the diaspora and we also find the mainstream influences changing their life. There are already numerous studies done on the “Pithora” as mentioned above. But the question is that, what changes we have seen now a day if we compare it to the earlier time. An overview of the traditional “Pithora Art” may be worthwhile.

Traditional Pithora Art: It is right to say that Pithora Paintings are much more than colourful paintings on the wall in a Rathwa home. It is a type of painting through which the Rathwas express their gratitude towards their god, for fulfilling their wish and redeeming them for sufferings. This Painting is auspicious, done to invoke Baba Pithora, their most important God.

A narrative on this ritual is well explained “The head priest of the rathwa community, who is called ‘Badwa’, is summoned when a problem like illness, bad omen or anything untoward happens in a family. The problems are narrated to him who then offers solutions, which almost always involve the painting of Pithoras on the walls of the house. The Pithoro Baba is considered to be the reigning deity of the community and his presence and blessings are considered to be the solution of all problems. The first wall of the house is considered to be the right place for a Pithora. A Pithora is however, considered to be a three-wall affair, so the first wall and the other two walls around it are prepared for the painting. This process is called lipna. Herein, the walls to be painted are first plastered with mud and cow dung by the unmarried girls of the household, and then coated with chalk powder. And then the painters proceed to do their work.^{xi} The completion of the painting is accompanied with song, dance and celebration.”^{xii}

Here, we discuss that how this art form is in undergoing change with passage of time, in terms of –

I. Colours: Pithora is ritualistic form of painting which is believed to bring happiness, peace and prosperity to the family. It is a painting which is characterized by animated figures. All the things used for Pithora painting are natural in which vegetable pigments derived from leaves, flowers and other forest produce are mixed with milk to prepare colours. But now a day the contemporary, the hinterland leaves an impact on this art form. The colours which they use are not strictly organic and are often available or sold in market; the brushes in earlier times made from tender stem of tress are now replaced with modern paint brush.

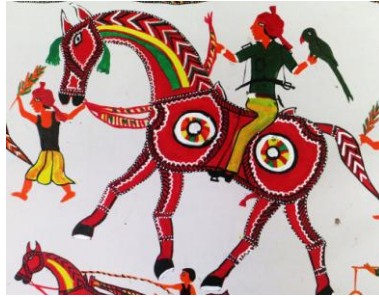
II. Theme: “The motifs in the Pithora painting represent the mythology of the community along with exclusive depiction of the most essential aspects of the daily life. The protagonists of the entire painting are horses of the gods and goddesses and ancestors in vibrant colours. The painting is adorned with motifs from nature, daily human activities, animals, farming, trade, important members of the community, along with several new elements, which symbolically represent modernity. The chief deities that appear in the Pithora painting are Baba Ganesh, Baba Ind, Baba Pithora, Pithori Rani, Rani Kajal, Baar Matha no Dhani Raja Bhoj, Abho Kunbi, Nakti Bhuten, Lakhari & Jokhari and Purvaj na Panch Ghoda.”^{xiii}

“A Pithora painting can have up to 165 different types of motif depicted. Each motif is associated with an extensive literature signifying its importance within the painting. Each character is presented as a protagonist in an important event of the vast mythological epic of Baba Pithora. The motifs reveal the manner in which the Adivasi view their world. They represent the significance of elements of nature, flora, fauna and celestial elements, and their influence on their lives.”^{xiv}

But instead of these above motifs, there’s a changes in the traditional art form, it is that they have started incorporating few variations in the composition of the original painting and they have begun to include airplanes, trains, buildings, computers and other so called modern elements or objects from contemporary times which allows them de-contextualize their traditional art form before selling it. Second, is that they have gradually begun to allow their ritualistic art to be used as a wall hanging, or being printed on some cloth though older tribals seem sceptical of using their sacred art on sarees or duppattas.^{xv}



Baba Ganesh



Baba Pithora



Pithori Rani



Baar Matha no Dhani
(‘The Enlightened One with 12 Heads’)



Raja Bhoj and his elephant

Festivals, Fairs and Attire of Rathwas: Festivals symbolize people cultural, social and religious aspirations. Every month of the calendar year is enlivened by a number of festivals. These religious, seasonal and tribal festivities are a riot of colour, customs, feasting, rejoicing, music and dance. From the numerous festivals, here I want to focus on their major festival, Holi.

Rathwa celebrate their own colour Festival, a unique way to celebrate this festival which gives immense pleasure and fascinate people towards their culture. There’s a town Chota Udaipur which is about 100Km from Vadodara, where the Kawant village fair is “the heart of the Rathwa community”. The annual fair at Kawant is a gathering of the tribal community as they recreate the joy of existence and lif. This is a prominent tribal festival in the north-eastern part of Gujarat falling after the 3rd day of Holi. It is a sheer delight to watch the exuberance of Rathva men and women dressed in their distinctive finery gradually congregating to sing and dance, discuss marriages and liaisons, barter goods and services all rising to a grand crescendo of gaiety and high energy which almost draws one forth into the mesmerizing world of Rathva culture. The older generation meanwhile set themselves down with their paraphernalia of snacks and condiments to muse about times gone by and matters of import regarding the future of their tribal ethos.



“Kavant fair is a harvest festival celebrated with wild abandon through dance primordial blending the rhythm with the sashaying of the forest and the frolicking of the animals in the undergrowth. Surrounded by the beating of drums, the susurrations of a variety of flutes and the stamping of feet, the Rathwas dance in a vast group keeping time to the rise and fall of the crescendo of rhythmic music in their tryst with destiny where partners are sought. The men folk wear a belt attached with pebble filled gourds and a string of brass bells. Some of the men carry cane sugar signifying the harvest and wear an elaborate headgear which is a conical hat

stuck with small framed photos of local deities surrounded by an array of peacock feathers. Rice paste and ash are blended to make a dye painting the bodies with circles and dots in a ritualistic salutation to the jungle cat. Some men and women gather together to form a human pyramid and the surrounding atmosphere rides with the heightened energy and human spirit^{xxvi}

Dance: The primordial dance resembles the movement of animals and trees with nature in its soul.



Ornaments and dress: They wore numerous ornaments which have become a fashion for the urban. In the following photos we see jewellery which is an integral part of especially the festivities which we also have seen in navratri festival outside this region, but the jewellery worn is not in the silver, it is not precious metal, but it is inspired and adapted from there.



Attire: “Adorned with an array of peacock feathers on head, they paint their faces with dots and circles with rice paste paying salutation to the feline family of the fauna of their forested abode.”^{xxvii}



When going through these fairs it shows that how the community of the society functions, it's all about their celebrating harvest, marriages, meetings, fun and frolic for their society but contemporary it is an important as far as the tourism in Gujarat is concerned. And also within the society we found the influence of the urban most strongly as an evident in the dressing either it is their sunglasses or the peacock feathers, or the dotted paints.

III. CONCLUSION

This paper has simply trying to examine continuity and change in the socio cultural life of Rathwas as is noticeable in their belief systems, dress, festivities and fairs in above discussion. It shows that how the life of the tribal people cannot remain unaffected by the outside world. It is not wrong to say that any unique cultural factor of the tribes has to be utilized for their own social and economic benefit, obviously it is observed that how

they have a strong belief in supernatural powers and this belief make them integral to this society. It is also found that their belief system is community based either we talk about Badhas, or for Jawara or Bali, the whole community involves, so that it manifests in day to day life. Moving to their art we highlight so many new dimensions have crept into what is a traditional art form among the Rathwas. Pithoro painting is a ritual process where the boundaries are re-demarcated and those changes in capacity to produce and reproduce. In the world of modernization and globalization it is observed that the eagerness for assimilating into the main stream somehow they are moving away from their cultural roots either in terms of colour or in terms of motifs. However, it is about that the society has never completely remained cut-off from the main stream either it is about their religion, about their painting, their festival or their attire. They are in the process of undergoing change, change means that their culture going outside their world and outside i.e. the mainstream coming inside, which is a two-way process. Going Outside is about the growing popularity of the pithora paintings among the urban populace and the diaspora, and the outside coming in is the influence of the urban contact as is manifest in the enlarged perception of their world in their pithora representations, besides the Gujarat tourism. A pertinent question emanating from their religious beliefs and perceptions is whether the epic emanate from tribal society or the epic tradition is a part of mainstream which is influencing the tribal. While they are separate categories, they do not seem to prevail in complete isolation at any point of time.

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