

Historically analyzing Gujarati Tribes based on their literary tradition

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Abstract

This article examines the historical and cultural significance of Gujarat's tribal communities through their literary and oral traditions. It explores the historical presence of tribes such as the Bhils, Dungri Bhils, Panchmahali Bhils, and Rathwas, with particular attention to their languages, folk narratives, songs, rituals, festivals, and Pithora paintings. The study highlights oral literature as an important historical source for understanding tribal identity, social organization, religious beliefs, and relationships with nature. It also discusses the marginalization of tribal languages and the contributions of scholars and institutions in documenting and preserving these traditions. The article argues for recognizing tribal literature as a vital source of Gujarat's history.

Keywords: *Gujarati Tribes, Tribal History of Gujarat, Tribal Literature, Oral Tradition, Oral History, Adivasi Literature, Bhil Community, Tribal Languages, Folk Literature, Folk Songs and Folk Tales, Cultural Heritage, Tribal Identity, Pithora Painting*

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I. Introduction:

Generally, people living in the mountainous, hilly and forest regions are thought to be simpletons and have a very simple way of life. Such people are known as "Vanasis" that is forest-dwellers. They are the original inhabitants of these areas. In Sanskrit, the term for them: "Adivasi" derived from "Adi" means original and Vasi, means inhabitants. They living under different environmental conditions, they are fully dependent on nature. 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. International Associations recognize them as aboriginals. Rivers, a British anthropologist, used the word tribe with reference to a people of mental depression, living in scattered groups on hills and river sites.¹

If we want to know about origin or cultural life of tribal in Gujarat region first we need to find out sources where they mention in the Gujarati literature. There are two types of historical sources in that process, one is recorded the tribal life in literature or evidences were tribal people not direct part of this materials but they were subject of this literature and second is the literature directly belongs to tribal in literary and oral both the form. In this paper I trying to highlight the literary tradition which directly belong to Gujarati tribes.

Gujarati Tribes:

According to Dr. H. D. Sankaliya the resemblance that the Indian tool types bear to the African type suggest that the early man in India might have come from Africa. His investigation on the prehistoric archaeology of Gujarat were evidences find out on major rivers of Gujarat viz., the Sabarmati, the Mahi, the Narmada where early men lived.² Other archeological and literary sources like Vedic literature, Buddhist literature and literature belonged to Mauryan Dynasty and Gupta Dynasty were somehow mention the tribal inhabitants in Gujarat region from pre-historic time.

¹ Mukerjee Satya V., Census of India, 1931, Vol. XIX, Baroda Part I, The Times of India Press, Bombay, 1932, p. 390

² Sankalia, H.D., Pre-History and Proto History in India and Pakistan, Bombay University, Bombay, 1962

Dr. A.F. Homle expresses that the Gujars (in the 6th century) came from Central Asia to India. The other races who came to India were Huns, Chalukyas, Gujar-parihars, Parmars, Parihars, Kachhwas, Chapas etc. Gujar's came from Kashmir to the Punjab and settled in Gujarat and many other races also came from north³.

There is a debate on oldest tribes of Gujarat but as much as if we look in to original records or the scholars who worked on it the conclusion is the Bhil tribe is oldest inhabitation of Gujarat. Bhils are more ancient than Aryans or Dravidians for the name itself is derived from a Dravidian word 'Bil' for bow. The Bhils have therefore important claims to be regarded as one of the most ancient tribes of India. The earliest traditional rulers of Gujarat were Bhils or Kolis namely 'Asha Bhil the founder of Ashaval, Ashapalli; the oldest site of the modern city of Ahmedabad.'⁴

With the political changes taken place in Gujarat these tribal population shifted their support with their convenience or forcefully by rulers. Like during medieval period they didn't have that much disturbances, even Rajput rulers also sometime seek the help of tribes. During Maratha rule they directly declared their support against enemy.

Present day the tribal population in Gujarat region is inhabited with many differences based on their physical appearance and cultural or traditional differences. Presently Gujarat administratively divide into 33 districts and 250 talukas out of that 9 districts and 30 talukas were more than 50% population of tribal inhabit.

According to 1981 Census, there are some twenty-eight main tribes in Gujarat. Among them, there are ten Bhil tribes who accounts for a population of more than one lakh. They are the Dublas, Dhodias, Gamits, Nayaks (Nayakdas) Rathwas, Chodhris, Konkans, Kunbis, Dhankas and Warlis. The other tribes like the Patelis, Kolis (Kutch), Kolidhars, Vitolis and Pathars range in population between 7,500 and 15,000 and the other tribes are at ten thousand in population. They are the Rabaris, Vaghris (Kutch), Siddis, Khthodias, Parghis (Kutch), Bamnyas, Chamis, Katchi Bhils, Bharwads, Gonds - Rajgond and Barda. The other two tribes namely the Pardhis and Pomlas are less than five hundred in population. Some of these tribes are still most economically backward. They are considered as the most primitive. They are, for instance, the Kotwalis, Kathodis, Kolthas, Padhars, Siddis, etc. Some clans of Bhils such as the Dubla Bhils, Dungri Bhils, Varlis etc.

Literary Traditions of Gujarati tribes:

According to Prof. Arun Vaghela, tribal oral-traditional literature is available to us in two forms: 1.Oral literature, 2)Literature transcribed from oral traditions

There is a general norms prevailed in so called modern societies like the tribal doesn't have their own literary traditions, tribal people doesn't have their history. Because before 19th century we didn't found the effective narration on tribal history by any scholars or some were we failed to understand the tribal languages and criticized or consistently degraded their languages as 'Bad Speech'. Many research carried on to understand the tribal communities in their own words. Even the translating the oral record or other cultural sources into mainstream literature also carried on by various scholars or organization.

Many scholar who believed that because of marginalization of tribal language they couldn't become part of mainstream society. This language politics in India badly harm to tribal voice. Traditional literature such as the rich adivasi literary tradition is completely ignored as the upper caste and class literature form the language standard⁵.

Nishant Choksi clearly made difference between those who speak clear Gujarati and adivasi language, the language known in Gujarati word use like 'Sudhareli Bhasha (Improved language) and 'Chaloo' or 'Desi Bhasha' (broken language). In Gujarat a number of organizations and individuals who have been working for the past several decades toward preserving Gujarati's adivasi cultural heritage in the form of documenting and translating the adivasi oral literature and languages.

Many prominent Gujarati writers of 19th & 20th century who enthusiasm to collect the adivasi historical sources and made them part of their writing. Example like Mahipatram Rupram Nilkanth was a Gujarati educationist, reformer, novelist and biographer from 19th century India, Jhaverchand or Zaverchand Kalidas Meghani was a noted poet, writer, social reformer and freedom fighter from Gujarat. He is a well-known name in the field of Gujarati literature, Pannalal Nanlal Patel was author known for his contributions in Gujarati literature. He wrote more than 20 short story collections, such as Sukhdukhna Sathi and Vatrakne Kanthe, and more than 20 social novels, such as Malela Jeev, Manvini Bhavai and Bhagyana Bheru, and several mythological novels and many other like Narmad, Govardhanram Tripathi, Mohandas Gandhi, K. M. Munshi, Umashankar Joshi, Suresh Joshi, and Rajendra Keshavlal Shah they all somehow touch the adivasi content in their writing.

³ Dr. Patel G.D., Gazetteer of India, Gujarat State, Panchmahal District, p. 78, Ahmedabad, 1972

⁴ Majumundar D N., The Bhil of Gujarat, Journal of Gujarat Research Society 1942

⁵ Choksi Nishaant (Edit.), Tribal literature of Gujarat, Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore & Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, Vadodara, 2009

But in very late 20th century many individual researchers who became prominent part in tribal literature of Gujarat, named Bhagvandas Patel (born 19 November 1943) is a Gujarati folklorist who pioneered research into Gujarat's tribal literature and brought the state's oral literature to the attention of the literary community. In 1995, he compiled the first published tribal version of the Ramayana, *Bhili Lokakhyān: Roam Sitma ni Varatathe*, the Ramakatha of the Bhil people⁶. Shankarbhai Tadvī another prominent writer who wrote like *Aadivaasi Lokmela*, *Mevaas ni loksanskṛiti*, *Lagna Patrika* and many other. And Manoj Chaudhari, Vikram Chaudhari, Dhīru Patel, Kulin Patel, *Painted Words: An Anthology of Tribal Literature Language*.

In tribal belt of Gujarat Ganesh Devy and his NGO, Bhasha Research and publication centre, with its publication of *Dhol manganine* in several tribal languages and the conglomeration of adivasis and scholars are working together to promote adivasi languages or literature and have must some success.⁷

Some Example of Tribal Literature:

Here I would like to discuss the literary traditions which prevailed in tribal society of Gujarat. They have their own tradition, culture, festivals, songs, stories, and paintings and many others also; based on this resource we can define the literary traditions.

In north Gujarat large number of tribal population inhabited these all the tribal have their own literary tradition, like Dungri Bhil, they are found in the Danta and Palanpur talukas of Banaraskantha district. Some of their clans are pandor, Parmar, Moria, Damor, Gameti, Taral, Bagora, and Katara. Like most adivasis, their main livelihood is settled agriculture. Their deities include Jalukar Bhagwan, Vasu Nagdev, Kabariya Thakor and Shyamlaaji. The main festivals of the Dungri Bhils are Holi which is particularly important, Diwali and Navaratri. They also hold large cultural fairs at various times during the year⁸.

The Dungri Bhils have a large stock of folk stories and songs in their language. One of the most remarkable feature of this folk tradition is the alternative version of India's great epics the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. These epics existed entirely in the oral form in the tribal areas of Sabarkantha until Bhagvandas Patel, a high school teacher and an avid researcher of the Dungri Bhil oral tradition transcribe them in their entirety. He started the documenting and publishing the literary tradition of Dungri Bhil.

The Dungri Bhil storytelling tradition usually follows a seasonal cycle with stories and songs representing various seasons of the year. Each stories and songs has a particular ritual and seasonal significance. The story telling known as 'Vahi' means the person 'Bhuva' sing the stories. The stories about gods and creation witches are a popular genre of Vahi. The belief in witches stretches throughout the adivasi belt of Gujarat and often times is a methods used by men to punish assertive or idiosyncratic female behavior or to exploit single women. So as such stories documented by Bhagvandas Patel and other sources like Administrative reports of Baroda Princely State and Bombay Presidency record.

Another way or literary tradition found in Dungri Bhil is in form of Songs, the tribal people express their culture through songs, in which they express love, family clash, happiness, sadness, and some traditional rituals.⁹

Another tribal community lives in central Gujarat known Panchmahali Bhil and they have different kind of literary traditions. Panchmahal now separated into two districts, Dahod and Godhra, has one of the highest concentration of adivasis in Gujarat. The major division among them being the Bhils, the Patelias and the Naikas. A vast majority of Panchmahali adivasis are Bhil with clans such as Damor, Vasaiya, Parmar, Hathila, Rathoda, Solanki, Mahida and Vasava.

Each clan has its own dialect, the Panchmahali Bhil language is similar to stander Gujarati than most other adivasis languages in Gujarat. As Dahod is located on the borders of both Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, the influence of Hindi, Rajasthani, and Bhilala is visible in the areas bordering these states. The main contain of their stories is gods and goddess and specially about Devi Shakti. Through that we can known the ritual and culture of their life¹⁰.

In Panchmahali Bhili Songs the rural life of that communities or their activities they sing. One of the tasks of young girls in rural India is to fetch water from the well or any nearby water source. Young Adivasi girls in the Panchmahals go together to bring water. Their daily walk to the well is a bonding time for young girls, wherein they chat, play and form friendship.¹¹

⁶Yagnik, Hasu, A study in tribal literature of Gujarat, Nayan Suryanand Loka-Pratishthan, 2004.

⁷Choksi Nishaant (Edit.), Tribal literature of Gujarat, Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore & Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, Vadodara, 2009

⁸Choksi Nishaant (Edit.), Tribal literature of Gujarat, Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore & Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, Vadodara, 2009, Pg. 03

⁹ Bhagvandas Patel, *Bhili Lokakhyān: Roam Sitma ni Varatathe*

¹⁰Choksi Nishaant (Edit.), Tribal literature of Gujarat, Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore & Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, Vadodara, 2009

¹¹ Shailesh Patel, Compilation of Bhili songs.

The Rathwi language of the Rathwa tribe, a group of Bhil family, is spoken primarily in Chotaudepur, Kanwant, Naswadi and Pavijetpur of Baroda District. The Rathwas have a wealth of stories and songs and are known for their celebration of the Pithora. Elaborate Pithora paintings are drawn on the walls of homes with motifs from Rathwa mythological history intermingled with scenes from contemporary social life such as migration, farming, police and so on. Rathwa's wedding songs also compiled many scholars.

So that kind of tribal oral record documented many scholars in all the tribal communities live in Gujarat. Modern day it is not that much difficult to compile and translate their oral sources. In the literary discourse it is very important to maintain their originality through start use their own language in literature. Many other tribes of Gujarat also have their literary discourse like Garasiya, Dehwali, Chaudhari, Gamit, Kunkna, Warli, etc.,.

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