

Identity Formation and Status in a Tribe: Case of the Bhilalas of Western Madhya Pradesh

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Abstract

The Bhil, Bhilala, Barela and Patelia form the second largest tribal group in India after the Gonds, which is consisted of 45 sub-groups, according to the 2011 Census (Census of India 2011). The Bhil tribe has itself various sub-groups besides these three other tribal groups which have been clubbed with the Bhil tribe in Madhya Pradesh. The Bhil and the related tribes have their major concentration in the adjoining states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra which form the Malwa region. Malwa covers the whole of Bhil country, excepting some adjoining portions of Gujarat, which has a considerably large population of Bhil and related tribes. The population of the Bhil, Bhilala, Barela and Patelia in Madhya Pradesh is 59,93,921. The districts which were having more than one lakh Bhil population are Dhar (1200502), Barwani (952940), Jhabua (889582), West Nimar (713640), Alirajpur (647653), Ratlam (410992), East Nimar (230857), Indore (195663), Burhanpur (142179), Dewas (136289), and Guna (116239). The focus of the study is on the Bhilala tribe who inhabit largely in the districts of Dhar and Barwani. Although, they have been clubbed with the Bhil tribe, they have their own identity and there is a process of Rajputization among them. The Bhilala assume superiority than other groups in the local milieu of the tribes living there and claim to be the Rajputs. Hence, understanding of this tribal group can be made in the local perspective and their historical background in the present day situation. It is one of the progressive tribes of India.

Keywords: Social Structure; Hierarchy; Status; Identity; Cultural Change; Hindunization; Acculturation; Rajputization.

Introduction

Tribal and non-tribal groups are living close to each other since ages in many parts of India. Sometimes, they were having intimate relationship and established nuptial relations too. This situation led towards acculturation, Hindunization and tribe-caste continuum. In most of such cases, it resulted in formation of new groups, as found from the oral history and mixed naming of many of such tribes. These groups achieved specific identity and

social status in hierarchical order with the time span.

Bhils and Rajputs are two such groups, which remained close to each other geographically as well as socially. Historically, Bhils were integral part of King Maharana Pratap's army of Chittorgarh in Rajasthan, India. Even, while his exile he took shelter in the Bhil hamlets within forest. Continuous social-cultural relationship among Bhils and Rajputs resulted in acculturation and formation of new groups in altered hierarchical order. In other

words, dominant royal Rajputs overwhelm and influenced Bhils and other connected groups so much that they tend to Rajputaization. Thus, they intended to achieve higher status in greater society.

Demography

The Satpuda and Vindhya mountain ranges, which divide North India from the South, are the home of a large number of tribal people. The population of the Bhil and related tribes (Bhilala, Barela and Patelia) is spread over the central uplands of the Indian Peninsula, the bulk of it being in the regions covered by the forest clad trinity of the Vindhyas, Sahyadris and the Satpudas. The area covered by the Bhil population in Western Madhya Pradesh is mostly hilly and at some places densely forested, which served as a shelter for fighting communities of India. After Mughal invasions in India and subsequent conflicts between the Mughals and British rulers, the Rajputs and other groups of people were forced to seek shelter in this area and thus, they developed intimate relations with the Bhils, an aboriginal tribe of this area.

The Bhil and the related tribes have their major concentration in the adjoining states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra which form the Malwa region. Malwa covers the whole of Bhil country, excepting some adjoining portions of Gujarat, which has a considerably large population of Bhil and related tribes. In Madhya Pradesh, the Bhil, Bhilala, Barela and Patelia are mainly returned from Dhar (1200502), Barwani (952940), Jhabua (889582), West Nimar (713640), Alirajpur (647653), and Ratlam (410992) districts. They are also found in a good number in East Nimar (230857), Indore (195663), Burhanpur (142179), Dewas (136289), and Guna (116239) districts. Their total population in the state of Madhya Pradesh is 59,93,921 according to 2011 Census.¹

This western part of Madhya Pradesh coming under 'Malwa' is ethnically rich in tribal population presenting a fertile field for anthropological investigations. The tribal groups living in this area are the Bhil, Bhilala, Barela, Patelia, Seharua and the Korku. Most of the groups have either originated from the Bhil or are related intensively to it in a broader cultural spectrum of the Malwa area.

Social Status, Culture and Identity Formation

Naik^{2,p.19} writes, "It appears that Rajputs at first treated the Bhils leniently. Intermarriages were frequent, especially with the families of the Bhil

Chief. A new community 'Bhilala' that had thus arisen consisted of descendants of mixed Rajput and Bhil marriages". The name of the tribe 'Bhilala' is said to be derived from combination of two words 'Bhil' and 'ala' i.e. those who are ala (superior) than the Bhils.

Venkatachar³ writes that the name of the tribe is derived from Bhilara (or Bhilala), i.e. those accused of being Bhils from ara, a fault. Others also define it like 'Bhil ka Lada' i.e. 'groom of the Bhil'. Once, the Bhilala were as predatory and turbulent as the Bhils. They are now peaceful settled agriculturists in Dhar, Nimar and other areas.

K.S.Singh stated in the foreword of the book 'Bhil Sub-groups in Caste Milieu'⁴ that "the Bhils are one of the historically best known tribes of India. They had founded kingdoms in parts of Rajasthan, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh from which they were later dislodged by the Rajputs. The Bhils have been heterogeneous, territorially segmented and each of territorial segments has an internal order of hierarchy". Due to a variety in historical experience and impact of widely different forces of change, various sub-groups of the Bhils have now acquired distinct identities of their own. Among the tribal groups discussed under the broad category of Bhils, the position of the Bhilalas is comparatively better. The Bhilala occupy the highest position in the social hierarchy among the tribes of this zone. They consider themselves superior to the Bhils and are treated so by the latter. The Bhilala observe Hindu rituals and are increasingly adopting the Hindu deities as well.^{5,p.43}

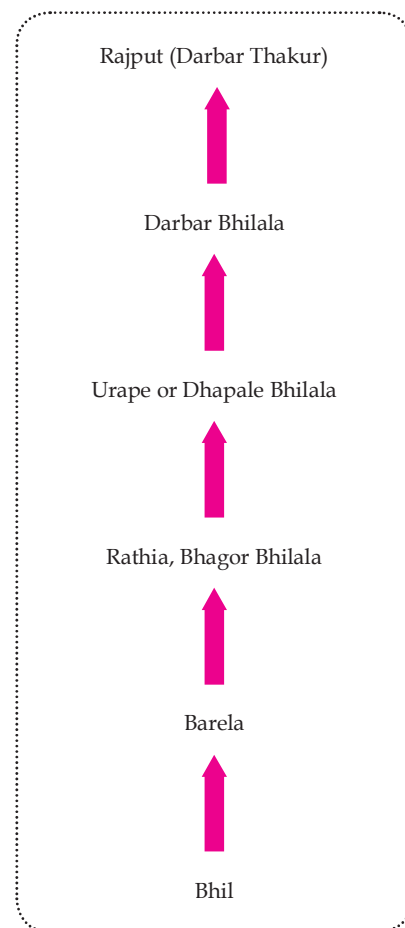
In fact, today most of the tribes in Central India have a Hindunised section. Thus, the Gond, Korku, Bhilala and the Baiga all have groups like the Raj Gond, the Raj Korku, the Darbar Bhilala and the Binjharwar.... In all these cases where social stratification has taken root in the tribal situation, the concept of purity and pollution is very much conspicuous.^{5,p.43-44} The Bhil occupy the lowermost position in the social hierarchy. The Bhilalas of West Nimar district are interested in being called as Darbar Bhilala because they are near to the Rajput pole. It is clear that to strive for the position just nearby in ascending order is very much possible for a group, but is not possible for the Barelals to be as Darbar Barela because they had no Jagirs (estate) and they rank below the ordinary Bhilalas. Fodermayr and Stiglmayr^{6,p.9} write that "the Barela are known as lesser Bhilalas". Deliege⁷ opines that "the Bhilala rank just above the Bhils and resemble the Patelia, a group of similar status". Deliege here considered only ordinary Bhilalas, not the Darbar Bhilala.

Thus, it can be said that each group is trying to improve its rank in relation to others. Mayer^{8,p.48} writes, "The two ways of trying to improve rank may be described as overt and covert. The former consists in making demands, or in taking action which clearly shows one's pretensions. Covert policies are those which improve the caste's prestige in the hope that sooner or later it will be recognized as having risen". Mayer also observed during his study that "the Bhilala decided to build a temple on the river Sipra in the same way as other castes did to call themselves 'Bhilala Rajputs'. A few Rajputs, who now smoke with some Bhilalas, may be connected with the latter's efforts to rise".⁸ The Bhilalas have now constructed temples at Pichhodi (Rinja Mata), Dholya (Hasai Mata), Bijasan (Salai Mata), and Bhilkhera (Kanai Mata). These villages are in proximity to Bhilkhera in Barwani district of Madhya Pradesh.⁴

The Bhils are in the lowermost position. They have many similarities with the Barelals because both of them practice bhanjro / rajibaji (marriage through bhangarh i.e. middleman) or bhagadi (marriage by elopement) types of marriages. They attend bhagoria haats (eloping markets / fairs) just before Holi and most of the cases of elopement take place during this period. The Bhilala also take the help of bhangarh and perform marriage by elopement which is rare in the Nimar area. Alike Bhils, the Bhilala also take the amount of jhagada (compensation) in these cases. Cases of wife-desertion and second marriage are also prevalent among the Thakurs (Rajputs) alike the Bhils and the related tribes. In cases of second marriage a short type of marriage is followed, which is commonly known as lugda-ladi, where all the rituals of marriage are not observed. It is prevalent among the Bhil, Patelia and Bhilala tribes in Jhabua and Dhar districts. The Bhils usually have bow and arrow and use that for hunting, the Bhilala possess bow and arrow in their houses; the Patelia, Mankar and Rajputs rarely have it or do not have it, but, irrespective of their group affiliations, all of these groups use bow and arrow in marriage (ceremonially observed) during Var Pookhana (Worship of the Groom). So, the Barela are just above the Bhils and the Bhilala are just above the Barela. The Bhilalas have relations with the Darbars (Darbar Bhilalas) and Darbars claim to be the Rajputs. Therefore, it can certainly be derived that the Bhilalas were the Bhil Chiefs and immigrant Rajputs who formed marriage alliances with the Bhils and accepted a new name Bhilala. Some of them got Jagirs due to having relations with the Rajput Chiefs and began to call themselves Darbar. 'Darbar' title is common to Bhilalas and

Thakurs in many areas of West Nimar and Dhar districts. Now, these Darbar Bhilalas are trying to establish themselves as Darbar Thakurs and are on the way to make their Rajput identity.

Different tribal groups, which are related to Bhils, have their own individuality, cultural distinctiveness and ethnic solidarity. The members are conscious about their group affiliation, group identity (ethno-centrism) and position ascribed by birth. The Bhils and the Bhilalas have got ubiquitous spread in the whole area. Owing to the incessant cultural contact and interaction with other neighboring groups, they are refining their values, modifying their customs and some of them are claiming to be the Rajputs (Thakurs).



There is a trend of upward mobility among the Bhil and related tribes. The Chaukharia Mankars call themselves as 'Man Thakur'. The Bhilalas are claiming to be the Thakurs and putting their efforts in that line. When we make a hierarchy of the Bhilala tribe and its sections in relation to the Bhil, Barela and Rajput caste, we find a linear progression. The Darbar Bhilalas are very near to the Rajput pole.

The Darbar Bhilalas were the rulers. They have power and marital relations with some of the Rajput

families. So, it is not difficult for them to achieve the status of a Rajput. It is true that some of the Darbar families have taken brides from the Rajputs from Gujarat and other areas, but they do not have marital relations with the local Rajput families. They have marriage alliances with the Dhapale or Urape Bhilalas of West Nimar district and this was recorded by the second author during his field work in the years 1979 and 1981. The Darbar Bhilala family of Bagadi has marital relation with a Rajput family of Gujarat. They have brought two girls from Gujarat in marriage from the Rajput family.⁹

Some of the Darbar families have given their daughters in marriage to Urape or Dhapale Bhilalas. Three women have been married to Bhilalas at Bhilkhera from the Darbar families of Kachhwada and Manakua. One girl from the Darbar family of Onkar Mandhata is married to a Bhilala boy of Bhowti village which is contrary to the opinion made by Sarkar.^{10, p.82}

Conclusion

The Darbar Bhilalas claim that they are the Rajputs or Darbar Thakur (subjective identity) and common public and Bhilalas say that they are the Darbar Bhilalas (subjective public identity), who were at one time associated with the king's court. There is an inclination of somehow upgrading in social hierarchy among the Bhil and related tribes to achieve higher status. It will be interesting to see that how many families succeed in achieving the position of Rajputs in near future by having roti-beti sambandh (eating and nuptial relations) with the Rajputs, only time will show? Likewise, the Bhilalas of West Nimar district are interested in being called Darbars because they are just near to that pole, as the Darbar Bhilalas are putting their efforts (both overt and covert) to achieve Rajput status through socio-political and religious movements. The tendency of achieving higher status and elite identity as Rajput also lead to cultural change. Ordinary Bhils are at the bottom place in this so called assumed

hierarchal social structure.

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