

Balancing Tradition and Modernity: The Bhils' Approach in the Era of Globalization

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Abstract

The Bhils are one of the oldest and largest indigenous communities in India has a rich cultural heritage that spans centuries. Spread across the western and central regions of the country, primarily in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Maharashtra, the Bhils have traditionally been forest dwellers and farmers with a deeply rooted connection to their natural surroundings. This connection is reflected in their unique customs, art, folklore, and religious practices, which collectively form a distinct cultural identity. However, the Bhils have faced significant external pressures, including economic marginalization, political changes, and the spread of urbanization, which have impacted their traditional way of life. This paper highlights how indigenous communities navigate identity in a rapidly evolving world, emphasizing the resilience and adaptability of the Bhil tribe in maintaining cultural integrity and balance between tradition and modernity.

Introduction

H. H. Resley defines tribes as a group of families having a common name and sharing common descent from their mythical and traditional ancestor, but it is not necessary to denote any specific occupation, although in some parts of India, they usually share a common profession, culture and traditional practices as well (Gupta S. D., 2019). They usually worship nature and consider land as '*Dharti Mata*' (Mother Land) (Guha, 1996) and frequently prefer to live in forest areas; thus, they are often called as '*Banwasi*', meaning those who live in the forest (Gupta R., 2007). Defining the tribals, Ramnika Gupta said that they are indigenous people who cannot be categorized in any caste or religion, as they have a distinct way of life, and they only believe in worshipping nature or the spirit of their ancestors rather than worshipping in temples and other institutionalized setups. Although it is quite difficult to define a tribe in a formal definition because of the existing heterogeneity within tribal communities on a regional and cultural basis (Gupta D., 2020) but Indian Constitution terms these communities as '*Janjati*', which means a group of indigenous castes (Gupta R., 2007). UNO, in its declaration, defined Indigenous people as "Descendants of people who have inhabited the present territory of a country wholly and partially at the time when persons of different cultural and ethnic origin arrived from other parts of the world, overcome by the conquest, settlement or other means and reduced them to non-dominant or colonial conditions." Whereas the British relied on a racial basis to categorise tribals and considered them inferior, as in the census report of 1872 they relied on Aryan theory and called one as 'Aboriginal tribes' and another as other as 'Semi-Hinduised Aboriginals' means one who are not follower of Hindu tradition and other who have some essence of Hindu tradition, whereas on regional ground they were classified as one who were largely living in central and southern areas are categorized in one category and another living in north eastern area were categorized in one, based on their race. But in contemporary debate, Verrier Elwin's categorization of whole tribal communities in three categories based on their transition and mobility seems more acceptable (Guha, 1996).

The notion of Tribes in India is very distinct from existing mainstream social and political discourse. The Bhils are one of the oldest indigenous groups and the largest tribal community, among 705 recognized

Scheduled Tribes in India, primarily settled in central India, around the Aravalli, Vindhya, and Satpura mountain ranges, with significant concentrations in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra (Tandon, 2021). They represent approximately 38% of the total tribal population, with an estimated population of 17 million. They are characterized by unique cultural and physical traits, residing mainly in hilly, isolated areas. They speak their own dialect, “Bhili,” with regional variations, and follow traditional beliefs rooted in nature in the form of animism. But with the passage of time, their customs, traditions and beliefs underwent significant transformation in many ways, in terms of religion, where some started believing in Islamism, some in Christianity, and many others. Similarly, for occupation, they shifted and were limited to agriculture labours (Ram, 2000; Naik, 1956; Biswas, 2022). This paper highlights how indigenous communities navigate identity in a rapidly evolving world, emphasizing the resilience and adaptability of the Bhil tribe in maintaining cultural integrity and balance between tradition and modernity.

Origin and history of the Bhil

The Bhils, though marginalized in the socio-economic spheres, make up the largest and oldest ‘indigenous’ communities of South Asia inhabiting its western part (Khan & Thakur, 2025). There are numerous hypotheses concerning the origins of the Bhils, as well as various racial theories that attempt to connect them to other peoples. Nevertheless, there is no exact information regarding the racial classification of the tribe. Meanwhile, anthropologists have made several attempts to classify the Bhils into different racial groups. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, this tribe was recognized as belonging to the Dravidian racial groups by prominent anthropologists like Herbert Risley and William Crooke, while C.V.S. Venkatachari suggested their links to the proto-Mediterranean race; however, Eisenstadt, Shah, and Guha related them to the proto-Australoid groups, like the Gonds or Veddids. On the other hand, anthropologist B.S. Guha claimed that it would be wrong to assign Bhils to the Dravidian subgroup since they represent an indigenous group of people. Dr Majumdar stated that although Bhils are distinct from pre-Dravidian groups, they share certain physiological traits with higher caste groups, implying that the Bhil identity may have been a social label imposed by invaders on the native, simpler people of the region (Naik, 1956; Ram, 2000; Maan, 1978).

Further supporting the idea of a mixed racial origin, Ghurye noted the likelihood of hybridization over centuries. Because Bhils were believed to have intermingled with neighbouring groups, thus forming a distinct but ethnically complex identity. George Grierson also identified non-Aryan and Munda-Dravidian influences in the Bhil language, adding to the uncertainty around their origins (ibid).

Colonial interpretations of Bhil's origins were influenced by the Aryan invasion theory. British officials, such as Sir William Jones, stated that India's original inhabitants, including the Dravidian and indigenous groups, were displaced by the invading Aryans from Central Asia. This racial mixing supposedly led to a hierarchy, where those with more Aryan lineage were ranked above those with Dravidian descent. According to the given reasoning, the Bhils and other forest-dwelling tribes were seen as remnants of India's ancient tribal people, as opposed to the Aryanized, caste-based communities of the plains

(Tandon, 2021). This view influenced the British administration's approach towards the former, regarding them as "primitive" who needed "civilizing." Furthermore, the British regarded the Bhils as a "tribal" group different from mainstream social order, prolonging stereotypes of "otherness" that reinforced a sense of separation from dominant social groups (Tandon, 2021).

In ancient Sanskrit texts, the Bhils are often referred to as "*Nishads*" or non-Aryans. The Manusmriti explains their origin as the offspring of a Brahmin father and Shudra mother, placing them outside the Varna system (Naik, 1956; Mehta, 2000). Other Puranic accounts portray them as residents of mountain regions, born from the thigh of Vena, who was an issueless sage descended from Manu Swayambhu. Another well-known legend portrays Bhils as the descendants of Mahadeo and a forest woman, described as a wicked and ugly child exiled from society. Whereas many of Bhil origin stories notably draw their association with Hindu legends (Naik, 1956; Ram, 2000), some associate themselves with Eklavya, the remarkable archer who symbolized loyalty and skill, and Valmiki, the author of the Ramayana who began life as a Bhil bandit before transforming into a sage (Naik, 1956; Bairwa, 2015; Ram, 2000).

Another prominent legend narrates about a Bhil archer named *Jaratha*, who accidentally injured *Krishna* and consequently faced a curse that his subsequent descendants would not be as skilful archers as before (Bairwa, 2015). For the inhabitants of Rajasthan, the Bhils' ancestral connection to the Rajputs confers a degree of status, and some Bhils trace their roots to the Rajputs who were declassified for misbehaving, for instance, marrying Bhil women or deliberately violating the sacred prohibition against beef consumption. To this day, some Bhils identify with the Rajputs by adopting surnames synonymous with the Rajputs, including Rathore, Parmar, and Sisodia. The association with Rajputs has improved the social status of the Bhils among the Rajasthani people, with select groups such as the Bhila Rajputs choosing to assimilate into the Rajput community (Ram, 2000). Similarly, in Gujarat, subgroups like the Vaswa and Tadvī Bhils claim Rajput descent, connecting their origins to Rajput rulers who, after attempting to annex land and subsequently being defeated, sought refuge in the forests (Whitehead, 2007).

Some Bhils still use Rajput surnames like Rathore, Parmar, and Sisodia, which increased their status in the caste system in Rajasthan, and some of them, such as the Bhila Rajputs, were eventually incorporated into the Rajput community (Ram, 2000). In the same way, in Gujarat, there are subgroups of the Bhils, for example, the Vaswa and Tadvī Bhils, who also claim their Rajput origin and connect their origins to the Rajput rulers who had failed to take possession of the land and had been driven to the forest (Whitehead, 2007).

Tribalization of Bhils

Tribalization refers to a process by which an existing socio-political community, which has been integrated into the larger society, withdraws from the mainstream social order and starts to live in isolation in remote places, reorienting their worldview. Singh (1985), in his study, observed tribalization as a process where a dominant group/community isolate themselves and starts to adopt tribal models

and beliefs to acquire tribal status in a region. In the context of the Bhils, it is also believed that they were not a non-interactive community from the beginning. But they underwent the process of tribalization into a group with distinct tribal characteristics and territorial traits (Chauhan, 1978). Instead, they had an interactive history with various mainstream communities, showcasing their engagement and integration rather than isolation. Historical accounts reveal that the Bhils and Rajputs coexisted closely, with Rajput rulers relying on Bhil cooperation for their rule; however, during the 15th and 16th centuries, Rajput exploitation intensified, exemplified by acts of violence such as the beheading of Bhil leaders and the appropriation of their lands. The Bhils, happens to be a respected warrior class, became gradually marginalized, pushed into poorer lands, and sacrificed for the magical beliefs of Rajput rulers, as their heads or complete bodies were used to put in the foundations of forts. Rajput invaders annexed Bhil lands and named these territories after Bhil chiefs to legitimize their authority, as *Banswara* was named after Bhil chief *Bansia*, portraying the Bhils as integral to the region's identity (Ibid; Ram, 2000; Grinko, 2014; Tandon, 2021). They were used to perform the Tilak or Teeka ceremony of Rajput kings with thumb blood (Edwardes, 1925), where their blood symbolized a connection and affiliation to the land, reinforcing their subservient role in the socio-political landscape. It is believed that Rajput leaders, like Maharana Pratap, recognized Bhil's contributions by granting them lands. Even in the historic Battle of Haldighati, Rana Punja, the Bhil chief of Panarwa, led his infantry valiantly against the Mughal forces. By using guerrilla tactics, the Bhils were able to not only carry messages for Maharana Pratap but also cut off the Mughals' supplies, managing to liberate substantial territory for the prince before his death, although it remained relatively insignificant compared to the following atrocities occurring in the region and the constant attacks of the British and Marathas (ibid). Later, the British Raj imposed restrictions on the forest use of the Bhils, labelling them "criminal tribes" under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, resulting in the community being relegated to the "second-rate" status in the minds of many (Tandon, 2021; Singh, 1978; Rajpurohit, 2021).

Bhils as an ethnic community: what makes them different?

Lokur Committee set five criteria to identify any community as a tribe. These are: a community must possess certain primitive traits reflected in their way of life, have a unique culture involving various customs and rituals, be alien or isolated in their geographical location, maintain limited contact with the broader community, and be more or less socially and economically backward in comparison to the other communities leading a self-sustained economic life (Xaxa, 2014). The Bhil community is not defined by adherence to a single religion; rather, it follows diverse beliefs and practices. They traditionally worship spirits and ghosts, reflecting a strong animistic and nature-oriented orientation. They also recognise and honour totems associated with their clans, such as *Bagh* (tiger), *Mor* (peacock), *Magar* (crocodile), *Pipalasa* (pipal tree), and *Pawar* (pigeon) (Naik, 1956). Notably, they avoid cutting trees associated with their totems and eating the flesh of the animal totems (Naik, 1956). However, the Bhils have adopted Hindu beliefs alongside their traditional animistic faiths, as they also worship Mahadeo, a Hindu god, in addition to their ancestral gods (Katewa, 2017). The Bhagat movement, a socio-religious reform initiative, firmly influenced the Bhil community, as the reformation split the community into the "Bhagats"

and the “non-Bhagats” (Katewa, 2017). The latter remained committed to their traditional beliefs, while the former adopted Hindu rituals and rejected the evil practices of their origin (Katewa, 2017). Even though they worship Hindu gods, the Bhils are not fully integrated into the Vedic framework because they do not recognize the superiority of the Brahmins and reject practices such as idolatry (Naik, 1956). Nevertheless, the Bhils do not use idols in their worship; they hold fairs (Jatras) in honour of their gods (Naik, 1956). While the majority of the Bhils have embraced Hinduism, there are also Christian and Muslim minorities among them (Katewa, 2017).

This assimilation process, which manifests in slow changes in culture and traditions, can be referred to as ‘Hinduization’ or ‘Sanskritization.’ The evidence shows that Bhils have changed with time and accepted some Vedic rites and customs (Khan & Thakur, 2025). However, they also managed to preserve unique traditions (e.g., the notion of the absence of the caste system). According to Ram Ahuja, Hinduism is not a foreign imposition on the Bhils, as they have always practised an indigenous religion (Ahuja, 1965). Moreover, they still have superstitions about witchcraft and spirits (Katewa, 2017). They also appeal to three different traditional priests (*Badwan*¹, *Bhopa*², and *Kotwal*³) who express various beliefs relating to the forces of nature (Naik, 1956; Mehta, 2007). The Bhil language is locally called ‘Bhili’ or ‘Bhilodi’ and is spoken in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra, where it has developed many dialects. S. S. Thompson, who published Bhil’s grammar, stated that it is most similar to Gujarati; however, it has also borrowed many words and phonetic sounds from Hindi, Mewari Gujarati, Khandeshi, Marathi, Malwi, and Vagri and Nimadi in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh (Mehta, 2007).

In terms of social structure, the lifestyle of Bhils is significantly different from other communities. Unlike the centralized village layouts common in mainstream society, this community traditionally live in small, scattered settlements in rural and hilly areas called ‘pals’, which are close-knit, endogamous communities of about 10–15 families. While prosperous Bhils also reside in plain areas, poor in remote areas, and in contemporary dynamics, their mobility is seen towards village areas to access government welfare programs and bring them closer to mainstream society. However, the traditional Bhil way of life, with its distinct community-centric and kinship-based settlement, stands in contrast to the hierarchical, integrated societal models around them (Mehta, 2007; Biswas, 2022). Bhil society follows a nuclear, patriarchal family system, unlike the extended families common in caste-based communities. Gender equality is highly valued among Bhil women. They enjoy considerable freedom, including the right to choose marriage partners, and the celebration of Daughters alongside sons.

Marriage customs such as the ‘*Dapa*’ (bride price) enhance the value placed on daughters, while polygamy, though permitted, is a rarity among the wealthy (ibid). Marriage is both different and more liberal in some respects among the Bhil compared to the rest of mainstream Indian social order. Child marriages are uncommon while exogamy prevails and young women enjoy greater freedom of choice in their marriage preference. There are nine recognized forms of marriage among the Bhil, the most common of which are traditional marriages by mutual consent of the bride and groom and marriages by elopement, which are not quite formal but get socially approved after the payment of a customary fine. Marriages in the Bhil community typically involve the payment of *Dapa* (bride price) and not dowry.

Women have the right to remarry in cases of widowhood or desertion by their spouses. Such practices reflect a relatively liberal attitude towards women compared to the broader society. However, while women work alongside men in everyday life, they do not possess any property rights (Mehta, 2007; Naik, 1956). The tribal clan system of the Bhils, known as the 'Ataks' (Clans) and associated with a Totem (Devakas), presupposes respect for nature.

The clan-based, self-governing justice system is a pivotal aspect of Bhil society that distinguishes them from the prevailing legal system in the broader societal framework (Mehta, 2007). In terms of culture, the tribal people maintain their rich cultural heritage through arts, music and attire, although there are growing tendencies towards modernization and assimilation (Biswas, 2022). Their houses are decorated with *Pithora* paintings⁴ which depict folklore and gods, while skilled artisans make bamboo, earthenware items and dolls (Biswas, 2022). The youth are not very interested in the handicrafts as they embrace the wider society's economy, thus diminishing the need for the craft. Their attire is adorned with *Angarkha*, *Dhoti* and *Ghagra* alongside ornaments made of beads and coins to indicate their social status. Their folk dances include Bhagoria, Doha, and Ghoomar, along with songs accompanied by instruments like the Jhanjh and Mandal, bringing communal joy to celebrations such as Holi and weddings. Meanwhile, Bhil dietary customs, rooted in natural resources, include foods like dal-Paniya and Kadaknath chicken, with Mahua liquor central to their rituals (ibid). But current restrictions on forest access have reduced their dependence on forest products and pushed them toward agriculture; meanwhile, low-fertility land and poor irrigation have contributed to economic hardship and limited progress.

Continuity and Changes in Bhil Traditions

In the contemporary era, the phenomenon of Sanskritization and Modernism has significantly impacted the life of the Bhils. This has led to the transformation of the socio-economic status of Bhils. Modernity as a concept represents a transformation in human societies. It is characterized by rapid industrialization, technological advancement, and changes in social, economic, and political structures. It emerged in Europe during the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution, and brought with it ideas of progress, rationality, and individualism. In modern times, scientific knowledge, urbanization, economic globalization, and bureaucratic governance have become the key characteristics that set people apart from the traditional, rural, and community-based way of life. Yet, in many ways, this process appears to be contradictory to people's traditional identities and modern aspirations.

Indian tribes have been in a continuous process of transformation, affected by numerous social, economic, and cultural factors, and have been the subject of historical research. This phenomenon is regarded as the outcome of both external and internal forces that alter people's social organization, worldview, cultural traditions, and way of life. It is worth noting that traditional anthropologists attribute this change to the progressive erosion of Indian cultures within the larger perspective of societal development (Xaxa, 1999). However, such an assumption may appear to be misleading, because it implies that external pressures and exposure to a broader cultural environment are bound to undermine

the uniqueness of a given culture. For example, even though they have undergone a significant degree of changes and interactions with other cultural groups, the Bhil community managed to maintain some key elements of the traditional culture, such as animism and the variety of traditional festivals (Tandon, 2021).

The Bhil tribe, one of India's largest indigenous communities, has experienced profound cultural transformations through the processes of Sanskritization, which some also call Hinduization (Singh, 1978; Xaxa, 1999), involving the adoption of Hindu beliefs and practices influenced by dominant caste communities. Central to this transformation is the Bhagat movement initiated by Govindgiri, which significantly encouraged the integration of Hindu practices among the Bhils (Whitehead, 2007; SINGH, 1982; Vashishta, 1991). This movement elevated the status of its followers, known as Bhagats, led to stratification among the tribe and created superordinate-subordinate relationships influenced by Hindu society. This exposure led to the practice of untouchability within their community. The Bhagat movement further shaped their social structure, transforming Bhil Bhagats into distinct, endogamous groups within the tribe (Badal, 2022). It facilitated the adoption of idol worship alongside traditional animistic beliefs.

Many Bhils began to associate their deities with Hindu gods and participated in Hindu festivals like Diwali and Holi along with their own tribal festivals (Bagchi & Baranda, 2018). Another factor contributing to the Sanskritization of the Bhil tribe is the impact of the dominant caste communities such as *Rajputs* and *Brahmins* (Katewa, 2017). Besides the Hindu religion, Christianity and Islam also had some impact on tribal culture. As the Bhils have been regarded as backward and also have a feeling of inferiority about themselves, they look upon the customs of higher caste groups as signs of status. For example, the introduction of the dowry system in place of *Dapa* by a few Bhils reflects a change towards norms that are associated with caste community marriages (Wiesinger, 1967; Naik, 1956). This acculturation process has brought further restrictions on women and their status according to the norms of the surrounding Hindu societies.

In addition, some Bhil women have taken to wearing veils as the Rajputs do, indicating a change in gender relations within the tribe (ibid). Despite this, many Bhils have retained core aspects of their traditional way of life, such as animism, totemism, and the observance of festivals like *Baneshwar*⁵ and *Bhagoria*⁶ that are enthusiastically commemorated (Biswas, 2022). The fact that they have been able to preserve these aspects of their culture despite adopting Hindu beliefs and practices demonstrates their remarkable resilience and adaptability. In contrast to the caste system, tribes are free from social, cultural, and ritual norms. Despite being exposed to and adopting some Hindu beliefs and practices, the tribesmen were not reliant on the caste system for their social and cultural needs. They could exist independently and adapt to the existing system while maintaining their cultural practices (Xaxa, 1999). However, this coexistence of two different cultures is a double-edged sword; although the Bhils have adopted some Hindu practices, they have not given up on their customs entirely.

Apart from Sanskritization, the Bhil community has also been subjected to significant socio-economic change brought about by the phenomenon of Globalization, i.e., a change from being sedentary agriculturalists, and the post-independence development projects, which forced them into settled agriculture. In this process, the Bhils became highly dependent on moneylenders, resulting in a huge amount of their land being mortgaged and hence vulnerable to exploitation (Doshi, 1974). They lost their traditional way of life since the forest had been enclosed from their access, thus constraining the resources they had traditionally gathered. As a result, they were forced into lower-level labour jobs and hence economically and culturally disenfranchised. Large-scale development projects such as the construction of the dams on the Narmada and the Karjan rivers significantly impacted the socio-economic status of the Bhils in the post-independence era. For instance, the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam, which is a part of the controversial Narmada River project, resulted in the submerging of several villages and the displacement of thousands of Bhils without adequate compensation. Moreover, the resettlement compensation did not provide sufficient income for those who survived, as many resettlement sites lacked fertile land for cultivation. For generations, the Bhils had been subsistence farmers; however, they were forced to embrace commercial farming as they lacked enough resources to begin farming anew after their villages were submerged (Rahul, 1997; Menon, 2024). For example, they were required to grow cash crops such as sugarcane and wheat instead of engaging in subsistence farming that would provide them with food security. Moreover, the migration of men in search of better employment opportunities in urban centres has been an underlying factor for the community's socio-cultural change. Since the men were willing to do hard labour for higher wages, they left for towns and cities, leaving behind women and children. As a result, women had to step up to take up roles that had been considered by men before the community underwent tremendous change. The women had to assume greater responsibility by working alongside men as labourers. The change in economic status has had adverse effects on the socio-cultural practices of the Bhil community. For instance, the higher demand for labour resulted in women taking up more significant roles in the community's socio-economic development.

The Bhil community has a long history of fighting against oppression and exploitation exhibited through their consistent engagement in several significant movements and uprisings. One such example is the *Eki* (Unity) movement, led by Motilal Tejawat in 1921. It was part of Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement, so it immediately gathered a significant following among the oppressed poor. The movement was a response to the exploitation of Bhils by Thakurs and local elites through debt bondage, taxes, and forced labour. Soon it attracted many followers and became strong enough to rally in both Rajasthan and Gujarat. They protested state taxes and the *Begar* (forced labour) system, demanded their rights to the forest resources, and illustrated their determination to reclaim autonomy and dignity (Nilsen, 2015). Although the movement faced violent repression, it epitomized the Bhils' enduring commitment to collective resistance and their adaptability in adopting new forms of activism inspired by the broader national freedom movement. In the early 1900s, another movement called Bhagat Andolan, led by Govindgiri, demonstrated that leadership has always been the cornerstone of successful social change (Aurora, 1970). Govindgiri preached social reforms and the upliftment of the Bhil tribe and protested

against the injustice committed against them. He called for an end to bonded labour, debt slavery, and other old traditions. Once again, the movement met with the government's oppression as unarmed protestors were shot at the Mangarh Hill in 1913 (VASHISHTHA, 1991). As a result, many people were killed, and the repressive policies of the British Empire were further cemented. Yet again, the bravery of the common Bhils has shown that they are willing to make extreme efforts to gain their rights and freedoms.

Historically, the Bhils have experienced several challenges, including land dispossession and marginalization, and often resisted the attempts by both Rajput and British rulers to conquer their region. During the British colonial rule, Bhil chieftains such as Gumani Naik and Cheel Naik played an important role in tribal resistance to colonial government (Nilsen, 2015). They initiated a series of rebellions by looting and raiding the British and Rajput villages and demanding what they called their birth *Haks* (rights), which they were denied. They also negotiated with the British authorities and accepted pensions in exchange for ceasing raids, but always rebelled when their demands were not met. The Bhils also took part in the Great Bhil Rebellion of 1857-60, together with Tantia Bhil, and as a result, they played a prominent part in the Indian War of Independence (Rahul, 1997).

Contemporary times have also witnessed the Bhils continuing to oppose projects that have threatening consequences to their land and way of life. The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) led by Medha Patkar highlighted the issues faced by Bhils and other Adivasi communities who were threatened with loss of land from the creation of Sardar Sarovar Dam (Menon, 2024). Initially, the movement of the NGO Arch-Vahini wanted to ensure that those displaced would receive fair compensation while accepting the inevitable resettlement. Yet, under the leadership of Patkar, the focus changed to the anti-dam movement, arguing that the livelihood of the Bhils was incompatible with resettlement practices. The efforts of the NBA were notable as they managed to halt the dam's construction and caused the World Bank to stop funding the project in the 1990s (ibid). This movement encapsulates the contemporary issues of the Bhils and their adherence to cultural values and lifestyles and their strive for rights in the face of pressure from the government as well as international organizations. It builds on the long history of the people and their resistance to exploitation and an offer to sell their culture as a package. The integration of the Bhils into the larger society is complicated by their political involvement being selective. They often vote as an ethnic bloc, which strengthens their solidarity but does not necessarily address social and cultural differences. The people dwell in great unity in their respective villages, as indicated by the tendency for all villagers to join the same political party instead of choosing their leaders individually. The community has maintained many traditional institutions and social arrangements such as the position of *Gameti* (elder) and *Bhopa* (healer) who continue to play a role in social gatherings and elections. Although the community values and appreciates good education and modern health care, it does little to integrate into the larger society through immigration and assimilation. The community holds ethnic solidarity but also has some level of ethnic integration (Doshi, 1978).

The growing demand for “Bhil Pradesh”, led by *ADIVASI PARIWAR* (Bhil's organization) and *Bharat Adivasi Party* (BAP), for a separate state for the Bhil community, arises from a history of its marginalization, land alienation and exploitation. It was given an impetus with the 1913 Mangarh massacre, when the British killed Bhils who had assembled peacefully, underscoring their aspiration for autonomy and independence. Emerging stronger in the 1980s, the demand reflects the desire for self-rule and a politics of recognition of their cultural distinctiveness and rights. The Bhagat Andolan led by Govind Giri and the Eki movement led by Motilal Tejawat were significant movements in this regard. They have articulated a sense of “nationalism”, which is expressed in various aspects of their lives (Sarma, 1993; Xaxa V., 1999). The proposed Bhil Pradesh would comprise areas in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra, to accommodate the large concentration of Bhils in these regions. The proponents of the demand argue that creation of a separate state will enable them to have a development strategy tailored to the Bhil community, besides ensuring their cultural identity while also effectively addressing the historical inequalities faced by the Bhils. Thus, it would address the issues of social justice and equality, which the Bhils have been facing. Sanskritization, Hinduization, modernization and Globalization have influenced the life of the Bhils in many ways. In certain areas of their life, they have adjusted and adapted to these changes, while in others, there is resistance to accepting this, as it would compromise their core values.

Conclusion

The way the Bhil society is evolving today helps to rethink essential aspects of indigenous societies and their cultural traditions. On the one hand, it can be seen that the survival of indigenous cultures and traditions is not always a process of returning to or keeping historical continuity. Instead, it is a dynamic and complex mechanism of readjustment that takes into consideration ethnic and political particularities, as well as the impact of different environmental, economic, and social factors. Their experience illustrates that maintaining cultural integrity does not necessarily mean resisting modernity; instead, it involves selectively adapting to change while sustaining meaningful connections with history, tradition, and collective identity.

At the same time, the described process of readjustment does not happen automatically, smoothly, and naturally and takes place within significant material and structural limitations. It is the result of multiple economic, social, and political challenges that local people and their cultures have to overcome on their way to survival and development. For instance, the evolution of the Bhil community and its culture is directly related to the already existing threats to the survival of the community members and their way of life. For many Bhil communities, the transition from relatively agrarian ways of life towards wage labour and participation in expanding market economies reflects not simply cultural change but also the practical demands of economic survival. From this perspective, the Bhils' ability to modify patterns of work, consumption and way of life can be viewed as a flexible system, while simultaneously revealing the limits imposed by poverty, uneven development, and restricted access to the vital resources of their livelihood. Cultural adaptation, in this sense, cannot be separated from the broader realities of socioeconomic vulnerability.

On the other hand, the Bhils have preserved their cultural heritage through various means like folklore, tales, arts, festivals, rituals, and community institutions. Moreover, despite facing serious environmental, religious, and economic threats from the dominant groups, Bhils have demonstrated a high level of integration, as their cultural practices contained a mixture of Indian and tribal elements. In other words, they could adopt external cultural traits and incorporate them into their existing cultural practices. It is also noteworthy that Bhils' cultural expressions such as arts, music, folklore, and performances have been commercialized and promoted at different forums, thus engaging with contemporary institutions and markets and creating new opportunities for their cultural visibility and economic livelihood. It is important to recognize that such adaptations are not necessarily dilution exercises but can be viewed as cultural recalibration through which traditions are reinvented and reimagined to acquire new meaning and trigger social change.

The question of Bhil identity is similarly marked by negotiation and plurality. The Bhils cannot be understood as a homogeneous or politically fixed community, since different historical and regional contexts have produced diverse forms of self-identification and political assertion. Indigenous, Adivasi, regional, caste-based, and other social identities may be mobilized differently depending upon the political circumstances and institutional structures within which communities operate. This demonstrates the active agency of the Bhils in defining their own social and political position rather than treating identity as a fixed category imposed by the state, colonial classifications, or conventional anthropological frameworks.

Ultimately, the Bhil experience shows that the lives of indigenous peoples in a transforming world are not necessarily conservative or resistant to modernization and social change. Their cultural resilience lies not in complete isolation from external influences but in their capacity to negotiate the boundaries between continuity and transformation. Contrary to the idea of 'noble savages,' isolated from the modern world, Bhils have incorporated various foreign elements into their culture while retaining their core values and traditions. By sustaining ancestral memory, oral literature, artistic traditions, ritual practices, and community cohesion while simultaneously responding to economic, environmental, political, and technological change, the Bhils challenge rigid binaries such as tradition versus modernity, tribe versus the wider society, and cultural preservation versus development.

The central argument of this study, therefore, is that the Bhil community's experience demonstrates that maintaining cultural integrity does not entail rejecting change. Rather, it involves the continuous and conscious negotiation of the space where heritage and progress meet. The future of indigenous cultural preservation consequently depends not only on the adaptive agency of communities themselves but also on policies and development processes that recognise indigenous perspectives, address structural inequalities, and enable communities to participate in shaping the terms of their own transformation. The Bhils thus provide an important example of how cultural continuity can coexist with change, demonstrating that tradition survives most meaningfully not when it remains frozen in the past, but when communities retain the agency to reinterpret and carry it forward into the future.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Dr Akshat Pushpam: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – Review & Editing. Anupriya: Investigation, Formal Analysis, Literature Review, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing. Rajnish Raj: Investigation, Formal Analysis, Literature Review, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing.

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Footnotes

1. The Badwan is an important traditional religious priest among certain Adivasi communities. He is responsible for conducting major religious rituals, ceremonies, and offerings associated with community deities. The Badwan plays a central role in maintaining traditional religious practices and transmitting ritual knowledge across generations. He is therefore regarded as an important custodian of the community's religious traditions.
2. The Bhopa is a traditional priest, ritual specialist, and often a healer within Adivasi communities. He performs religious ceremonies and may be consulted during illness, misfortune, or other personal and community difficulties. The Bhopa is traditionally believed to possess specialized knowledge of deities, spirits, and ritual practices. His role therefore combines religious, spiritual, and healing functions.
3. The Kotwal performs specific ceremonial and religious duties within the traditional community structure. He may assist priests during rituals and help organize or regulate religious and community ceremonies. The Kotwal also performs responsibilities connected with the maintenance of customary practices and community order. Thus, his role is important in supporting the functioning of traditional religious and social institutions.
4. *Pithora* painting is a traditional form of ritual wall art practised mainly by the Rathwa and Bhilala Adivasi communities of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. It is created as a sacred offering to Baba *Pithora* and other deities, often to seek prosperity, health, and well-being. These colourful paintings depict horses, gods, animals, nature, and scenes from everyday life. Thus, *Pithora* painting represents a unique combination of art, religion, mythology, and tribal culture.
5. The Baneshwar festival is one of the most important religious festivals of the Bhil Adivasi community, celebrated mainly in the Dungarpur region of Rajasthan. It is held annually at Baneshwar, where the Mahi, Som, and Jakham rivers meet. The festival involves worship of Lord Shiva and other deities, along with rituals, pilgrimage, and a large fair. It also serves as an important occasion for social and cultural gathering among Adivasi communities.
6. Bhagoria is a traditional festival and fair celebrated mainly by the Bhil and Bhilala Adivasi communities of Madhya Pradesh. It is celebrated shortly before the festival of Holi and is marked by colourful markets, traditional music, dance, and community celebrations. The festival provides an important space for social interaction and the expression of Adivasi cultural traditions. It is therefore regarded as a significant symbol of the cultural identity and collective life of these communities.