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of her people and culture

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Historical personality

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Akbar was a complex personality with a deep mystical nature. After politically stabilising his empire he turned his attention to art and culture. Consequently literature, painting and music flourished. Great edifices were built. The emperor encouraged new innovations and trends, initiating a harmonious blend of many styles and forms. Finally his quest for spiritual truth led him to unravel the mysteries of religion. Farida Ali on this great Mughal emperor



People

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The Bhils are a group of tribals who live along the bordering areas of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. Once spread over a wide geographical region in India's central northwest, the Bhils are today scattered, with a predominant population in southern Rajasthan. With much of their homeland gone, their means of livelihood are few. This tremendous pressure to survive has placed the Bhils in a very precarious position. Nihal Mathur on the Bhils



A threatened identity

The Bhils of southern Rajasthan



He looked deep into my eyes and for a few fleeting moments our vision was locked in empathic understanding. He realised that although it was a materially superior culture that had invaded his privacy by photographing his poverty and questioning his existence, I was a friend. As for me, I had finally come to grips with the meaning of silent suffering and the agony of a people imprisoned in their own land where the kingdom of Nature had been replaced by the State. Its petty servants had become the governing gods of their world. However much I wanted to believe in the romantic imagery of tribal life with its song,



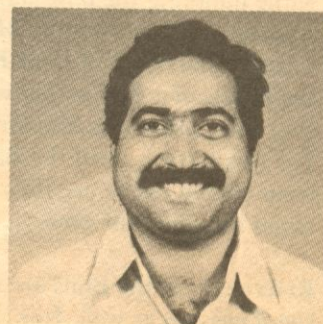
dance, drum and ritual I could not when I faced the reality that pierced me from those dark eyes of Dhano, the Bhil.

Bhil is a generic term for the tribals who live along the bordering areas of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. Once spread over a wide geographic area in India's central northwest, the Bhils are today scattered and in pockets, with a predominant population in southern Rajasthan. This terrain is where the Aravallis create a topography of rock and stone interspersed with a network of *nullahs* and rivers. The Mahi gently flows alongside other smaller rivers like the Jakham and

Arav that run their torrential course during the monsoon and remain but a trickle through the year.

This moderate monsoon region with its miscellaneous tropical dry deciduous forests has been ruthlessly exploited for its fuelwood, bamboo and teak. The green cover has gone and what one sees today is the painful landscape of degraded habitat. That once this land had fine forests is borne out by the fact that the major towns were named after trees; Banswara for *baans* or bamboo, Sagwara for *sag* or teak, Kherwada for *khair* or *Acacia catechu* and Seemalwara for *semal* or the silk cotton. Today there is no *baans* in

*Written and photographed by
Nihal Mathur a freelance
photographer and film researcher*





Banswara, no *sag* in Sagwara, or *khair* in Kherwada and no *semal* in Seemalwara. And strange though it may sound, there are no Bhils in the adjoining district of Bhilwara.

Who are the Bhils? Where did they come from? Our understanding of their origins is either through our rich mythological heritage or from the insights of anthropologists. There are tomes of information but surprisingly few conclusions.

In Indian scriptures there are many a myth and legend about the origin of the Bhils who are described often as the offsprings of a Brahmin father and a Sudra mother, and at other times as the descendants of a tyrant king. Siva is also considered the progenitor of the Bhil race. The *Mahabharata* ascribes the origins to the famous Bhil archer, Eklavya, who is said to have cut his thumb off and given it to Dronacharya as *gurudakshina*. This is why it is said that the Bhils do not use their thumb while handling the bow and arrow. Another version from the *Mahabharata* refers to the death of Lord Krishna at the hands of a Bhil archer who fatally shot him, mistaking him for a deer. For this terrible deed the Bhils have been cursed not to use their thumbs when handling the bow.

References to the Bhils are found in the *Ramayana* as well. It is said that

the celebrated author of the epic, Valmiki, was himself Valia the Bhil — a notorious dacoit who after the divine *darshan* turned his *shoka*, or sorrow, into a *shloka*, or poetry. At Baneshwar, in the heart of tribal Rajasthan, there is a place where Valmiki is worshipped. It is also the site for the largest tribal fair in Rajasthan.

The Bhils trace their ancestry to the Rajput tribes of Rajasthan. However, the traditional accounts of the Bhils in Ghantali near Banswara, state that they were the earliest settlers on earth. Perhaps not the first arrivals on our planet they certainly were the first in the lands they occupy today. This emerged from anthropological studies that were conducted to determine their racial identity. The enormous data points to racial integration through time since the Bhil did not live in complete isolation. This made it difficult for the anthropologist to find a pure racial label for the Bhil. However, they venture to broadly categorise the Bhil as a Proto-Austroloid who was a pre-Aryan and a non-Dravidian first settler on this land.

What must have happened after this till the advent of the Aryans when history came to be recorded, is a matter of conjecture though not completely unfounded. In southern Rajasthan there are archaeological

sites with evidence of the Stone Age man rambling across this area. It is intriguing however, that the sites indicate microlithic cultures co-existing with food producing ones — carbon dated around 4480 BC. Can we then deduce that the other races that came later gradually advanced into being food producing and settled agricultural societies while the Bhils remained aloof from this mainstream development, continuing their primitive hunting and foodgathering lifestyles. This is reflected in their society and cultures even today.

The Aryans penetrated into the sub-continent, colonising vast areas and displacing the indigenous races — ancestors of the Bhils and other such tribes. In Sanskrit literature, the word *bhilla* has been used almost synonymously with other forest dwelling tribes like the Nishadas and the Shabars. In the Aryan world, these people were outside of the caste system, which is believed to have emerged between 1500-1000 BC. They were referred to in contemptuous terms as being essentially beastly and cruel, to be shunned and kept away.

Thereon, the Bhil began to lose his heartlands. The incoming races with superior technology overpowered them and pushed them away from the fertile plains. The vast span of

Left and right: Scenes at the
local village haat

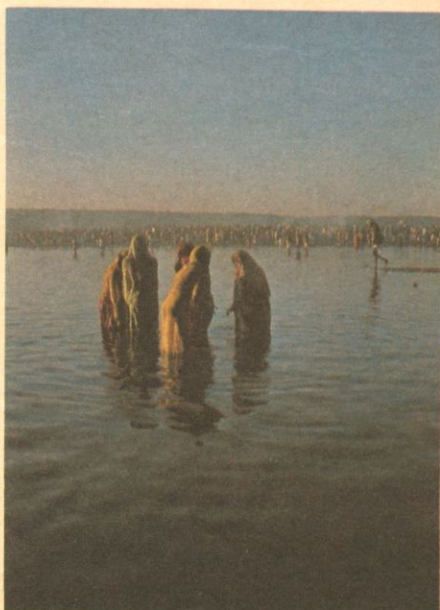


Below: Archery is the Bhils
most popular sport and they are
skilled in the art of shooting
arrows without using their
thumbs. This practice owes its
origin to legends which still
dominate their lives





The Baneshwar Fair, the largest mela in the Bhil world which is held once a year in February on full moon nights



country where the Bhil once held sway began to shrink as the victorious invaders appropriated the open lands, settled down and became agriculturalists. It was indeed a large continent with room for everybody but not for long.

Between the seventh and the seventeenth centuries AD. the contiguous range of the Bhils got fragmented and isolated from one another as Rajput kingdoms were established in what was the Bhil domain. Rajput clans seized power from the Bhils and carved their kingdoms in Dungarpur, Banswara, Kushalgarh and Kota, all believed to be named after the Bhil chieftains from the Dungaria, Bansia, Kushala and the Koteah communities. However, the most important such Rajput kingdom was Mewar and its rulers maintained close ties with the native Bhils. Not only did the Bhil perform the *teeka* at the crowning ceremony of a new prince, but he also found a place of honour in the royal insignia of the house of Mewar for the valuable assistance he rendered to the vanquished Rana Pratap when fighting the great Mughals.

The cultural impact of all this was inevitable on the Bhils who began to assimilate some of the Rajput traits on the one hand but on the other, developed prejudices and a social distance from the more 'superior' race. Relationships between the Rajputs and the Bhils remained uneasy because an essentially agrarian society was greedy for more land and this was in conflict with the free ranging indigenous landowners. The feudal chiefs exacted levies and taxes and subjected the Bhil to humiliation and forced labour. Later, at the time of Maratha ascendancy, it is said that the Bhil was treated brutally, almost hunted down like a wild animal. With his back to the Aravalli wall, he was pushed further and deeper into the inhospitable mountain reaches from where he occasionally swooped down onto the plains, plundering and pillaging and then swiftly escaping back into the sanctuary of the hills.

Then the British arrived in the beginning of the nineteenth century. They controlled this 'Bhil nuisance' by organising the Mewar Bhil Corp at Kherwada in 1838. Sporadic and scattered uprisings were ruthlessly crushed by the powerful military machine of the British. The 'Law' as introduced by them came to the increasingly enforced in the tribal world, imposing various restrictions on the Bhil way of life. Profound changes occurred in the socio-political organisation of the Bhils as the fundamental structure of their economy was compelled to shift towards agriculture. Perhaps the greatest damage to Bhil identity and society came in the wake of the Government Forest Act of 1865 which made the princely states virtual owners of the forests and the tribal was denied his almost natural right to hunting and fishing. This was the final usurping of the lands that truly belonged to the Bhil. Once a master of all that he surveyed, the Bhil was reduced to a tenant on his own land at the turn of the century.

Meanwhile, with growing stability in the region, commercial castes had made inroads into tribal strongholds acquiring low lying lands. Contact with the Bhil became closer as the trader developed a peaceful but exploitative relationship with him at the weekly markets — the *haats*. Here the Bhil came to trade and was introduced to the new necessities of life and the money market. The moneylender, of course, was not far behind. Mainstream society which the Bhil had shunned for thousands of years had now come to knock at the door.

Finally, the Bhil was at the mercy of that mainstream society which grew rapidly around him, devouring the natural wealth of the forests. A new class of administrators, managers and intermediaries arose to exploit this resource as the tempo for a railway network, ship building and urbanisation grew during the period between the two World Wars. Block by block were felled as the traditional home of the Bhil was

commercialised to meet the increasing demand for wood. Always managing to hide under the cover of the jungle, the Bhil was now exposed and vulnerable to a systematic exploitation by society. And then came Independence in 1947 with great promise and hope for a new lease of life.

Despite constitutional safeguards and protective legislation, the dream of the tribals was belied as an infant nation became preoccupied with other priorities. Plan after Five Year Plan was implemented with diffused attention towards the tribal areas. These became colonies in a free republic. It was with the Fifth Five Year Plan that concerted action was focussed on their deteriorating condition and the Tribal Sub Plan was executed. Since then, enormous amounts of money have been spent on a wide spectrum of development programmes and schemes as varied and imaginative as social forestry on one hand and as ludicrous as distribution of bucks and ducks on the other. Fortunes, it has been alleged, have been made by those who comprise the power nexus while only a trickle filtered down to the lot of the Bhils.

Change there has been but what is open to question is whether this change has essentially improved the quality of life for the Bhil or not. What is the condition of the Bhil today?

The rich habitat intrinsic for tribal life has gone and the Bhil lives on broken rocky land in precarious agricultural conditions which, ironically, is the mainstay of his economy. With barely a hundred years of agricultural experience and with primitive farming techniques, the Bhil tills his land which is not only of poor quality but also marginal, unirrigated and difficult. He is almost entirely dependent on the rains. If the rains have been merciful then he is able to stave off despair but if they fail, which they recurrently do, it spells disaster. Bhil agriculture is in fact a below subsistence level



Hoads of baskets woven from the local grass are sold everywhere. The Bhils use them for a number of purposes, in the home, the fields or on construction sites



Right: A mendicant begs for alms in one of the smaller towns in Rajasthan

economy. The small landholdings make agriculture, despite the inputs, an uneconomical activity. In his struggle for survival, the Bhil must have other occupations to fall back on. Agro based occupations are virtually non existent as a viable alternative, suffering as they do from many a problem. Unfortunately, the Bhil has no traditional crafts that he can successfully market and so he turns to the forests where indeed he has traditional skills to exploit. He collects minor forest produce, a right legally organised and protected by the state for the benefit of the tribal. But in terms of real earnings, this is negligible. In desperation he takes to illegal felling of bamboo and other trees as he does charcoal making. He carries the produce on his head over long distances and at great personal risk, dodging and bribing the powers that be, to nearby towns and cities to sell for a pittance.

His only real choice is to become a labourer for various state agencies doing developmental or relief work. When this option is not available, the

Bhil leaves his land for nearby towns and cities in search of work usually with disastrous consequences on his family life. For the marginal farmer, this is a seasonal migration during the lean period but for the very poor and the landless, dependency on some sort of *mazdoori* increases.

The Bhil lives hand to mouth. Far from having any savings, he is in a state of perpetual indebtedness either to the *khalal*, *sahukar*, *bania*, *thakur*, cooperative banks and societies and of course, the moneylenders, who get their pound of flesh many times over.

While the old institution of the moneylender continues along with *sagri*, or bonded labour, in a disguised manner, other forms of exploitation and a newer breed of exploiters have emerged and despite the controls, have managed to multiply, becoming more subtle and complex.

Government, the single most important machine for their development has also become an instrument of oppression and harassment. The Bhil stands today



*Sadhus playing the panchtara
outside the Baneshwar temple*

surrounded by *sarkar* which is out there either to enforce the law or administer their 'development'.

The logic of this target oriented development is quite incomprehensible to the Bhil. It is an alien structure which has been imposed without taking his realities into consideration. Curious as it may sound, some studies show that 'development' brings in its wake the interrelated problems of indebtedness and land alienation. This does not mean that there are no beneficiaries of the development programmes. Indeed there are. The real recipients are the non tribals and a miniscule section of the elite in Bhil society — essentially those who already have a token place in the power structure. There are stray cases of those who have made it — a government job, a small shop, a skilled factory worker and suchlike. But considering the enormous inputs funneled into development, the output certainly seems to be a matter of debate. However, in the tribal areas, one does see what are deemed symbols of development — a diesel water pump here, a defunct bio-gas unit there, coffin like cemented structures that

supposedly function as community health centres without doctors, schools without teachers....

Meanwhile the 'mainstream society' continues to invade Bhil culture and identity, abusing their social norms and customs, threatening the community with extinction. Particularly pitiable is the plight of the Bhil woman who is considered 'easy' and syphilis, an urban disease, is rampant in the tribal areas of darkness. Equally miserable is the condition of the Bhil child for whom there is no adolescence, only an injection into the realities of the adult world. Crime is high amongst them because of the tremendous economic pressure to stay alive. There is bound to be friction between people vying for limited resources.

Dhano is hungry, malnourished, illiterate, indebted, insecure and living an uncertain life in the shadow of fear. A fear about what will happen tomorrow. And so he drinks his *mahudi*, tries to forget, to bury his past and his unending story of sorrow. He celebrates his present — the here and now 🌿