

## BHILI SINGS THE FACSIMILE OF VEDIC RITUALS

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### **Abstract**

The indigenous belief systems and cultural practices signify the plural and alternative meanings of human-nature relationship. The earth, trees, animals and spirits are the aesthetic symbols describing the complex and philosophical views of tribal society. However, the articulation of these conventional symbols with a complex tribal structure is fathomed as old fashioned and unintelligible by the post-modern generation leading to crisis in cultural practices in tribal communities. This paper tries to analyse the meaning of cultural rituals from birth to death of Panchmahal Bhils popularly recognized as sixteen Sanskars in Vedic culture and an important emerging gap identified on the past and present of tribal life. The songs and rituals discussed here are collected through ethnographic method of study in the Bhil regions of Panchmahal forest. Thus, this paper provides a prelude way towards interculturalism and inclusivity of tribal religion and indigenous belief system as a cogent and distinct culture.

**Keywords:** Panchmahal Bhils | Nature-Culture Relationship | Indigenous Belief System | Cultural Transformation

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### Introduction

The conception of rituals and the ways meaning are assembled to define rituals diverge in Indian and western theories. The western theories explain the critical intersection of ritual with cultural performance, interactive dramatics and self-transformation. Victor Turner a ritual specialist in anthropology who worked on Ndembu, African and Lunda tribal rituals described ritual as, “a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, symbols and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors’ goals and interests. Briefly, this definition refers to ritual as ‘performance’ involving manipulation of symbols that refer to religious beliefs” (Deflem 1991). Whereas Jack Goody a social anthropologist “pointed out that social scientists use the concept of ritual as a category of standardized behaviour (custom) in which the relationship between the means and the ends is not intrinsic; is either irrational or non-rational (1961: 159; cf Sax, Weinhold, and Schweitzer)” (Sax 2010). These preceding definitions describe a sacred term like ritual in a linear, indeterminate and unattached way that is out of the common in Indian context.

In India the ritual is associated with treasured and intimate devotion that are deep rooted in culture and traditions practiced from generations by the respected ancestors. These rituals are formed by complex and plural belief systems like purification, sacredness, spirituality, transcendentalism, cosmology, ancient science and traditional ecological knowledge that are core towards living a good and principled life. Basically, rituals are a special part of Indian culture that does the hand holding of human being in surviving in the worldly life with all ethics and aesthetics so that one may walk towards the path of moksha. It is a form of knowledge called as Sanskars that is weaved with Hindu philosophy of living life.

In the Indian Vedic society, it is obligatory for all to acquaint with the Sanskars, a kind of ritualistic prescriptions endowed upon each individual at different stages in

life. The history of Sanskars is “very old, probably during the legacies of pre-Aryan India. In ancient times there were about three hundred Sanskars that eventually came down to forty and then to eighteen. The Veda, the Sutra (aphorism) literature, the epics and the puranas mention many Sanskars. The smriti (remembered) literature of ancient India mentioned sixteen Sanskars” (JHA 1976). Each of these sixteen Sanskars have a unique teaching of life. Some are specially given to females and some to males while others are enjoined for male and female both.

Out of sixteen Sanskars the first three Sanskars are given to a female who conceives the pregnancy for the first time. Birth of a child is considered very auspicious in a family and for the females it is even more special because the forthcoming months prepare her to get a new identity from a woman to a mother. And therefore, the first three sanskars are imparted to the mother when her baby is in the womb to enlighten her with the religious, medical and symbolic values of giving birth to a child, so that she can become a good care taker. *Garbhadhan*, impregnation ceremony for birth of a child is the first Sanskar given at the beginning of the pregnancy, *pumsavana* rite is a sacrificial fire ceremony done by the, to be mother and father of the child in the third month of pregnancy. And *simantonnayan* conducted on completion of five months of pregnancy indicating the nearness of delivery of the child is the third sanskar and all these three sanskars are given before the child birth in Vedic culture.

Once when the child takes birth the fourth and the fifth sanskar called the *jatakarma* and *namakarana* sanskars are held for naming the child according to its varna (caste order) to which the child belongs. Then at the fourth month, a sanskar called *adityadarshana* (sun salutation) is given to the child when he is taken for the first outing outside the house to expose him to the rising sun and seek its blessing. As sun is considered to be the source of energy in human life, food is also believed to be equally life strengthening and sustaining. Therefore, to honour the importance of food, the seventh sanskar known as *annaprashana* is given to a child when he tastes the solid food for the first time in the fifth or sixth month after his birth. The *prasadam* prepared out of milk, boiled rice and jaggery known as *kheer* is fed to the baby. This Sanskar also marks the growth of a child when he is no longer only dependent on her mother’s milk but on the grains given by the mother earth.

The eight sanskar is called *churakarma* in which the baby’s hairs are removed

for the first time after birth and the head is shaved fully. The baby's hairs are offered to the clan deity or to the holy water to seek her blessings. It is believed that the baby's first hairs are polluted and mixed with all kinds of fluids and the blood in mother's womb and therefore *churakarma* is performed to do the outer cleansing of the baby's body. The Sanskars four to eight are bestowed to a child from the age of two months to three years signifying the stages of a child's growth from an infant to a toddler.

Succeeding this, the sanskars from nine (*yajnopavita*) to fourteen (*samavartan*) are meant to be practised by the child entering into its studentship journey till the time he completes taking knowledge from all four vedas such as *rigved*, *yajurved*, *samved* and *atharvaved* and getting well versed in various ancient form of skills like astrology, language and grammar, sociology and political science etc. The learning of vedas and its skills are bifurcated between ninth to fourteen sanskar declaring the beginning and the completion of education milestone.

While the most important sacrament, the fifteenth sanskar (marriage sanskar) granted in the adulthood mark the permanent union of male and female for commencing family life and taking forward the family lineage. This sanskar is the most awaited in one's life by the family members and is celebrated elaborately with ceremonies like *grihshanti*, *haldi*, *mehndi*, *sangeet*, *vivah* and *gruhpravesh* that lasts from three to six days. The ritual of marriage in "the Vedas is characterized by its simplicity consisting mainly of the *panigrahana*, clasp of hands, *agniparinayana*, circumambulation of the fire, *lajahoma*, offering of grains, *asmarohana*, standing on a stone, and the *saptapadi*, seven steps, the latter three being additions of the *Atharva* and the *Yajur Veda* (Singh 1992).

And finally, after fulfilling all the social responsibilities at different stages of life a human being enters into old age and the last rites performed on the day of his death is the sixteenth sanskar called *agnidah* sanskar, performed for the peaceful and heavenly abode. Like the *vivah* sanskar, the *agnidah* sanskar is also a prolonged one that lasts for thirteen days in which all family members duly perform the last rites of the departed soul and organise meals for the neighbours and villagers. Special food is kept aside to offer the animals and birds like cow, dog and crow. The *pitru's* (souls of heavenly ancestors) are also invited for the meal and the *pooja* ceremony. Thus, in this way the ritual of sixteen sanskars in Vedic Hindu culture define a path to perform certain duties

and responsibilities at different stages of life in order to lead a righteous life that is bestowed by Supreme God in form of *manav avtar* (human life).

These similar kind of rites of passage are seen followed by the generations of Bhil adivasis of Panchmahal that hail in the districts of Santrampur, Jhalod, Dahod and Limkheda in the “eastern belt of Gujarat running right from north to south and cutting across the border of the three Indian states, viz, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh that is densely covered with forests and mountains (Joshi 2000). These “adivasis routinely cross ontological borders and they do so by means of rituals. In Crossing and Dwelling, Tweed (2006) says that, religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries” (Alles 2012)

Thus, “interaction, supernatural and social become the core ideas of religion and culture. And it deals with the worship of supernatural that comprises in some measure beliefs, rituals, taboos, myths or theology organisation, and codes which are covered by the core philosophies of Hinduism and Animism practiced by the Hindus and the Bhil tribals communities respectively in India (Ahuja 1965). Hence, this paper discusses the songs of the Panchmahal Bhils specially about marriage songs which accompanies ritual performances (from birth to death) in Bhil culture and that are found similar to rituals in Vedic Sanskar proving that the Bhils have some rooting’s with Hindu culture. Thus, precluding a way towards interculturalism and inclusivity of tribal religion and indigenous belief system as a cogent but at the same time a distinct culture.

### **The Songs of Panchmahal**

The songs of the Panchmahal Bhils are like the winter flowers in the sprawling fields that dance in breeze of joy but whose seeds and stems have presented abundant strength to withhold the heat and rains. The songs of Bhil are born out of similar hardships but are sung and enjoyed in the happy moments of life. The Bhil songs comprise of rich collection of birth, marriage and death songs. Out of which the songs of marriage have the wide range of varieties like “*lokgeet, garbi, vagdi shaili, ganesh sthapna, hindoda geet, mamera geet, jamanvar geet, janiyanu geet, mandva nu geet* and many others” (Pargi n.d.).

These songs are composed according to the different rituals conducted in a ceremony. They describe the arrival of the auspicious day and the happiness it brings in

the family, its preparation and setting, where the ceremony is undertaken i.e under the tree, in the *verandah* or at the *haat*, it mentions the bitter and sweet bond shared with the relatives that have joined the ceremony crossing rivers and mountains, it discloses the gifts that are going to be exchanged, it portrays the shy faces of group of young girls blushing under the red and orange *chunris* and the loud whispers of the women echoed from one house to another in the village reciting songs that are by hearted from their grandmothers and other elderly people from generations to one another orally.

Like the Vedic Sanskar the songs of the Bhils present the important aspect such as inviting and doing *sthapana* of the deity and the ancestors in the ceremony, it lays the importance on *pooja vidhi* (the process of conducting the worship) in the ceremony like installing *mandvo*, preparing holy water kalash and decorating it with *asopalav* and mango leaves, arranging *hom-hawan* (fire altar), deciding the place and method of performing the ritual and its worship, the importance of *Sankalp* (oath taking) before beginning the ceremony and the taboos and restrictions that need to be followed before taking part in the ceremony are some of the important aspects that are taken care of in the Hindu and the Bhil rituals.

The closest exemplar is the *vivah* Sanskar. In both the Hindu and in the Bhil tribal culture, “everything seems to begin and end with marriage. Here, marriage is just not viewed a symbolic sacrament but an outward, visible sign of inward, invisible grace. It does something. It changes things. It is necessary for a person’s salvation. And it is necessary for salvation because it changes a person in a way that nothing else can” (HARMAN 1987). To begin with, following are the list of people involved and the types of process and ceremonies performed and combined with dedicated song composed for each ceremony in the Panchmahal Bhil culture:

- 1) **The tradition of arranged marriage-** In the past at the time of Bhil ancestors, the marriage was considered so important that the decision to choose an appropriate bride and groom was a responsibility led on the whole family and the villagers equally. A person called *bajgiriyo* used to bring message (*vaat lavi*), message of requirement of any bride or groom for the marriage in the tribal clan. For eg. The *bajgiriyo* comes with a message at the house that a girl from Pargi family and a boy from Damor family are living in so and so part of the village, having following features (tall, dark, fair etc) is looking for a bride or groom. It

was a kind of traditional matrimony system set up in the tribal social setup to tie a life time knot in a good and reputed family in the clan. And, then if the respective families get interested then they contact each other keeping *bajgiriyo* as the middle man.

After the preliminary exchange of introduction amongst the two families, the second round of approval is given by a group of members called *chulha* (household). *Chulhas* are the number of the houses around the groom's house and people of how many *chulhas* come together in the evening to sit under the tree in the routine life is inquired in order to find out whether the family has cordial relations with the neighbours or not. Thus, members comprising of men and female representations known as *panch* from these *chulhas* are finally called to fix the marriage.

- 2) **Paruna, the feasting of families-** Paruna is the first unofficial get to gather wherein the groom's family visit bride's house and have lunch together. A sacrificial pooja is held in which the bhagat chants mantra and asks the family members to light the diya and agarbaati and break the coconut and sprinkle its water in all the directions. After which a red tikka is put on the forehead of the goat is offered to the deity and its meat is distributed among the members of *chulha* as to inform everybody about the paruna taken place at a particular house. Paruna is a time in which the tithi (dates) for the following ceremonies like tel chadhavu, notra and jaan (marriage procession) is decided.
- 3) **Notro (also known as paaghdi)-** This time in paaghdi, the bride's family visit to groom's place carrying a safo/paghdi (traditional turban worn on the head) and badli (men's earrings) as a token of gift. All the family members apply tikka on the forehead and aarti of groom is performed following a garland and paghdi is offered to the him. On the day of Paaghdi, the most auspicious tithi (date) for marriage is found out with the help of bhagat and the day of jaan (marriage) is decided. Following song is sung when paaghdi is felicitated on the groom's head on the special occasion of notro.

*Aavi paghdi laivo, saala sor*

*Vanila ne baap kahine, laivo haat saala sor*

*Aavi sushma ghadiyo, laivo haat saala sor*

*Soram na sor* (song recorded in the field)

Accompanied with paghdi felicitation done by the bride's family, a special importance is given to 'mama nu mameru' (gifts brought by the maternal uncle for the bride and groom and other members of the family). Following songs are sung when the gifts are presented by the maternal uncle and aunt to the bride and the groom:

*Ghaadi ghaadi mama nai aave,*

*Nana lada ser moj karilo re (2)*

*Ghaadi ghaadi mami nai aave*

*Nana lada ser moj karilo re* (song recorded in the field)

Thus, after exchanging gifts and doing johar the bride's family wish Jai Guru and return back to their respective homes.

- 4) **Phado Feto, the pre- preparations for marriage feast-** It will be an act of stinginess in contemporary times to ask our guests to bring their own dishes and bowls at the party. But, in the olden days in the tribal communities and even in the Hindu households, the *padiya and patrada* (bowl and plates made out of *khakhara leaf*) were brought by the guests themselves on the day of marriage to pour food in it. An estimate of 100 khakhra leaves were given to the neighbouring household to prepare 50 bowls as a help. This system was known as *Phada Feta*. Along with this, since there were no grinding machines or readymade flour available, the grains of rice and wheat were also distributed for *khandaniya* (manual grinding) amongst the chulha member in the village. Thus, the whole village gets occupied in marriage preparations. And this becomes the reason of joy and enthusiasm for the marriage in the village and a marriage of one family becomes joy and involvement of whole community that is reflected in the following song sung by the women that are occupied in the weaving of *padiya patrada* and grinding of grains for the marriage feast:

*Pan nathile re, pan na ma rasile la*

*Ma rasile re mara bai ne guthela*

*Padiya nathi le re, padiya ma rasile la, ma rasile re*

*mara bhai ne vanela* (song recorded in the field)



- 5) **The custom of tedu-** As the preparation for the food begins by *Phado Feto*, the next important thing required in marriage are the clothes. The purchasing of clothes for the purpose of marriage is called '*tedu*'. Be it the small kids to the eldest one in the family, everybody is excited for going to *tedu*. A day is mutually fixed by the family members of the bride and groom for going to *tedu* at the nearest town where good marriage clothes and accessories are available. In those days, there was no transportation services so everybody used to walk and go to market crossing in between mountains and the hills. To make this to and fro journey less tiring the members used to sing songs while walking and to cross the long distance in full enthusiasm and joy making it a memorable one. The songs sung in this journey were light hearted, the first song below warns the boys of the group to be careful from the beautiful girls of the passing by village:

*Hambhado hambhado re, aa nate gaam ni soriyo*

*Vizhdi ma lilo taro zabuke ho (2)*

*Rai na lajja lajja re*

*Ukhreli na seli ho*

*Vizhdi ma lilo taro zabuke ho* (song recorded in the field)

While the second song below describes the long hours taken by the women to select the sari, nathedi (nose ring) from the variety of clothing and accessories collection at the Rampur village:

*Rampur harak se, re ma mane vayro lagyo re*

*Nathedi mulavte, mane vayro lagyo re*

*Sadi mulavte, mane vayro lagyo re...* (song recorded in the field)

- 6) **Mandva muhurat-** It is very important in the Hindu and the tribal weddings to take care of the *mandva muhurat*. *Mandvo* is wedding altar constructed using the natural materials like the bamboo, *halediya* and *khajuri* stems. Usually, the *muhurat* (time) for constructing *mandvo* is one day prior to the marriage or in the early morning of the marriage day as suggested by the bhagat. In the *mandva muhurat*, the permission of mother earth and deity clan is taken and a small pooja is done and after that only the ground is dig to erect the stems of the tree at the

four sides. Mandvi is considered a very sacred place as the bride and groom take the *pheras* (marriage vows) under this *mandva*. Dedicated songs are sung by the family members while raising the *mandva*. The below song is sung when the bride is called to sit in the *mandva* besides the groom for marriage. The *agni* (marriage yajna) is lit and the bride and the groom are asked to follow the rituals instructed by the *bhagat*. At this moment the bride is getting anxious and therefore to calm her down a song is sung that says that dear sister do not fear, see it's just the parrot sitting and reciting the chants on the *mandva*, so do not fear:

*Mandva par popat bolyo, daro nathi re mara ladla  
ben*

*Baine te vajno dehro he, ladla ben daro nathi (2)*

*Mandva par popat bolyo, daro nathi re mara ladla  
ben* (song recorded in the field)

Hence, with these verbal songs sung in the background, the bride and the groom perform the step-by-step marriage rituals. While the guests sit under the tree and behold the sacred rituals being performed. In olden days, the groom's procession used to walk and reach the wedding place that took long days. Today this has changed. Now the procession of groom travel in the bus thereby taking shorter time. The guests are made to sit under the mandap instead of a tree in the earlier times. In one of the interviews, a respondent said, that now the youths are taking education and they have friends coming from towns and cities. So, it does not look good to make them sit under the tree in scorching sun. Hence, the system of raising the mandaps for the guests have started in the Bhils. Otherwise, in the past, the guests from the nearby chulha brought their own *khatla, godadi, bedu, parat, padiya-patrada* etc. And *kansar, dal and bhaat* used to be the traditional menu.

At one side the marriage rituals went on in the *mandva* and on the other side the guests parallelly begin having the meal. The last ritual is emotional known as *vidai samaroh* (when the bride leaves her father's home and joins the groom's family to begin a new journey with her life partner. When the procession finally reaches at the courtyard of the groom's house after having a long journey, the newly wed were welcomed by the *pooja arti*, application of red *kumkum* and showering of flowers. The young couple on

this day is honoured like a king and the queen. Following song was sung by the women of the family and the neighbouring ones:

*Kanku ae vadhavo sori, kanku ae vadhav (2)*

*Kanku ae na hoy, toh vanilla ne ja* (song recorded in the field)

Thus, like the songs on the marriage sanskar, the other remaining sanskars like *garbhadharan muhurat, simant, namkaran, anabhakshak*, installation of *thadu* and *khatri* and *marasiya* on death also prevail in tribal culture. And therefore, any ritual remains incomplete without these songs, making them an integral part of the ceremony. Moreover, by studying the above Vedic sanskars and the tribal rituals and songs, it can be said that “Bhils have had from times immemorial with the Hindus and that the religious faith of Bhils is not utterly distinct from Hinduism. Yet, the Bhils have managed to keep their indigenous mode of worship and the objects of worship intact” (Ahuja 1965).

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