

**RECOUNTING TRIBAL LIFE ALONG NARMADA VALLEY:
AN ARTIST'S INSIGHT**

DR. APARA TIWARI

PROF. OF ENGLISH

GOVT. SHYAM SUNDER AGRAWAL P.G. COLLEGE,

SIHORA, JABALPUR, INDIA.

ABSTRACT

An artist transformed writer, Amritlal Vegad, wrote three travelogues drowning his readers into the beauty of a multi-faceted river, the Narmada. This pupil of Nandlal Bose of Shantiniketan embarked on a parikrama (circumambulation) of river Narmada in stages and walked more than 4000 kms on foot with the purpose of seeking themes for his canvas. But travel narratives were also the result. Among other themes, there is the most often veiled section of society that of the diverse tribal communities, that have found expressions in the incredibly artistic and significant portrayal of Vegad's collages as well as in his writings. Bringing together unknown facets of tribal life and customs, especially those of Gonds, Baigas and Bhils from the three books and pictures by Vegad, the paper attempts to bring about an awareness of an indigenous culture on the verge of extinction as evident in the temporal journeys performed by the author. It is an undeniable fact that loss of tribal cultures cannot be recovered completely. Yet to salvage and revive the synthetic and interminably ailing human existence today, the artist has remarkably exemplified with his own way of life on how much can be garnered from the richness of tribal life and customs for a more natural and wholesome well being.

Keywords: *River Narmada, tribal life, culture, Gond, Baiga, Bhil, parikrama.*

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Narmada is a river of beauty flowing across central India from east to west. The splendour of her serpentine course along the mountains, plains, through forests and rocky terrain has been captured by AmritlalVegad, who embarked on a *parikrama* (circumambulation) in stages and walked more than 4000 kms on foot.

Vegad had started his Narmada journey with the sole purpose of seeking new subjects for his canvas. To this pupil of the great painter, Nandlal Bose of Shantiniketan it had not occurred then, that he would write. By the age of 82 three travel narratives also got underway transforming an artist into a writer. The foot journey of the south banks is narrated in the first book, *SaundaryakiNadi* Narmada and of the north banks in the second book, *Amritasya Narmada*. The third book, *TeereTeere Narmada*, centres its description on the second *parikrama* of the three tributaries, Budhner, Banjar and Shakker.

Vegad's primary aim to bathe his readers in Narmada's flowing charm has been effectively portrayed through glimpses of surrounding culture and environmental vibrancy strewn in its entire course. Etched by myths, anecdotes and by the richly coloured rustic verve, a loveliness felt and found in the tender hearts of men living in its surroundings, Vegad has proved his ingenuity which has reached deep down the hearts of many. He has sketched his penchant for the arts most befittingly in his article *Narmada Tum Kitni Sunder Ho*, and has now returned to his original vocation, his canvas of collage making at the age of 85.

The flow of Narmada is multi-faceted; comprising nature and life surrounding it. But the most often veiled section of society that of the diverse tribal communities of *Gond*, *Baiga* and *Bhils*, is the one that has also found expressions in the incredibly artistic and significant portrayal of Vegad's collages as well as in his writings.

Among subjects that are very dear to him and on which he has repeatedly made collages, each time with a fresh outlook, shape and new colour combination, are of tribes. In good humour he says:

Sketching women bathing in the river or changing on the river banks happened to be the trickiest job. Due to the charm of being fit and in good physical shape; well in proportion, some of these women (especially *Gond* and *Baiga* women) appeared to be live icons of loveliness. I would draw them stealthily; very secretive and sneaking. A constant fear lurked, lest someone smashed my bones. (Trans. Vegad *Narmada Tum Kitni Sunder Ho* 159)

Bhil men and women also surpass many in physical beauty. Witnessing many such lovely people on his way Vegad has described in his writings *Bhil* women passing through villages of the most hazardous terrain, ShoolpaanJhadi.

He relates how once he was saved from getting thrashed, while sketching a tribal man. Initially Vegad did not pay heed at his bellowing at him to discontinue but seeing him in rage Vegad stopped drawing. Later a queer belief was discovered; whosoever made their sketch will inadvertently make the tribal's soul flee from his body and thereafter the tribal would die. Had Vegad not stopped, the tribal would have spanked him to such severity, says Vegad again in delightful humour, 'It would have been my soul that would have taken flight from my body.' (Trans. Vegad. NTKSH 159).

Vegad's writings are live sketches of unknown facets of tribal life, besides other subjects. Most of these relate to tribal customs and lifestyle that is on the verge of extinction. Modern education and technological advancement is reaching out to them with encouraging results. This is a necessary step towards development of a nation, yet the flip side of it prompts that unavoidable debate which questions an ancient indigenous culture getting virtually wiped out.

Some of Vegad's memorable experiences with them are illustrated in this study. One of the most ancient tribes, the *Baiga*, is mostly found in and around Mandla district of Madhya Pradesh. On moving from Mandla to Chingaon, the author took a break for a meal at Pipariyatola village. Residents of a *Baiga's* house initially withdrawn, became curious onlookers when Yadvendra, Vegad's assistant, lit the kerosene stove; a curio. Vegad's humorous style strikes a double chord; that of ignorance and contentment. He states, 'The increasing audience got Yadvendra all set and he dramatically started pumping and pinning the stove as though he was a street performer staging monkey dance.' (Vegad Trans. VegadSaundaryakiNadi Narmada 30). It is desirable to bring to attention here a sense of happiness and satisfaction with the meagre resources they manage even without things like an ordinary kerosene stove, something that has long been obsolete in urban life.

A deep sense of art in *Baiga* culture is part of their daily life. At a small settlement, Pherisemar, beyond the Saal forests near the foothills of a small village Bilaspur, Vegad recounts his visit to a *Baiga* dwelling where he had admired artistically painted walls. Art existed even in the body of women that were 'overflowing with tattoos'. (Trans.Vegad SKNN 37). 24 years later he happened to pass through the same location, while performing *parikrama* of a tributary. He has recorded his disappointment at the absence of art in his third book *TereTeere Narmada*. There were no painted huts, no tattoo, no traditional attire, nor those folk songs sung in the praise of the river that used to be a part of their lives then. Instead, there was ear-jarring scream of the loudspeaker in full blast. Vegad feels sad on how the dangerously powerful city culture has taken over and pushed back the folk-culture mercilessly.

Verrier Elvin, in his book *Myths of Middle India* quotes from Campbell's, *The Indian Antiquary*, xxvi,126, which expresses curiosity at so little association of a universal custom with mythology, and also that the tattoo figures have so little meaning:

The *Baiga* consider that tattooing was instituted in order that mankind should have something to take beyond the grave. Some *Baiga* believe that one of the tattoo figures is a riddle which is intended to be beyond Bhagwan's capacity to solve. (Elvin 472)

According to a Brahmin story, Laxmi, the wife of Vishnu felt frightened whenever he left her alone. So Vishnu pressed his weapons on her body saying that the marks of his weapons would guard her against all evil. Similar beliefs are prevalent among another tribe; the *Gonds* of Mandla. Elvin in the same book mentions another interesting myth about a *Gond* God who happened to visit Mahadeo's feast with other Gods. The goddesses were seated on the ground. When this *Gond* God went to take his wife away he couldn't recognize her among others. By mistake he took hold of Parvati's shoulders to drag her away. Disturbance ensued. Parvati was angry.

However, in the end Parvati arranged that to distinguish the women of different castes, they should be tattooed in different ways, and since then the custom of tattooing has come into the world. (Elvin *Myths of Middle India* 478)

Experience with various tribes in different set of circumstances found in settlements along the banks of the river valley either became satisfying or astounding. It so happened that while travelling from Dindori to Maharajpur, another tribal belt of *Gonds*, Vegad was eager to reach home for *Diwali*. At Ramnagar he visited the palace of *Gond* kings; an attraction of splendour once. It will not be out of context to mention that *Gonds* were rulers and are known in the region to have given their lives fighting against the *Mughuls* and British Raj. Travelling from Maunimata ashram to Karondi village Vegad met an old *Gond* man who had put up a modest hut near Narmada banks deciding to spend the rest of his life in the laps of nature. There were several *Gond* families residing there. He was the nephew of the last *Gond* king of Madanpur, whose palatial residence existed at the very spot where this *Gond*'s hut stood now. The man's devotion to his mother touched Vegad. He had refused to be the caretaker of the *Gond* heritage as long as his mother was alive. His priorities were to serve her. Only when at the ripe old age of 90 she passed away that he decided to comply; a man of genuine morals and principles.

Regarding the marriage customs of *Gond* tribe, there was an interesting practice narrated by the old *Gond* man. He said, earlier the *barat* (marriage procession) from the bride's family would visit the groom's house for the solemnization. According to the ritual the bride's father would go and offer the girl's hand (*kanyadaan*). No one should come to his doorsteps begging for the girl's hand. This is a divine custom or *Brahmarshi Vivah*. The one in

which the groom goes to the bride's house, as is common and a trend in their community now, is *Rajarshi Vivah* or royal custom.

In an interesting episode at a place, Dagona, Vegad came across a marriage custom of the *Bhil* tribe, distinct from what is generally practiced in Indian civilized society. In the course of social interaction young *Bhil* girls and boys choose their life partners. The girl's choice would be final in case four friends like her. Devoid of spite or envy the groom's friends would 'abduct' the girl one fine day and bring her to his house. 'Do not take the literal meaning of the term abduction', says Vegad. 'This deed is performed with mutual consent between the two families.' (Trans. VegadTeereTeere Narmada 153). She finally decides to be his legal wife after having stayed in the boy's family for some time. There's no dowry system. On the contrary, the boy's father has to entertain the girl's family with alcohol. An 'abducted' girl from Chaanra village pleaded with Vegad to negotiate with her father, to cut down his demands of 4 canisters of raw alcohol from her father-in-law, as he could hardly afford it. Vegad was amazed at such a thoughtful outlook.

While performing '*jilhariparikrama*' of Narmada (circumabulating in the reverse) a 75 year old *parikramavasi* informed Vegad that this weird custom was prevalent owing to the prohibition of crossing the sea while on the go. This double *parikrama* performer related a heart curdling episode of being robbed by a group of *Bhils* at ShoolpaanJhadi. *Bhils* are a sect of warrior tribes that abound around ShoolpaanJhadi; the toughest and the most dangerous terrain along the valley, bordering Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat. A popular anecdote goes; one cannot get across the area without being striped of all possessions by these tribes. If you refuse to surrender, your throat will definitely be slit. This old man faced similar consequences and was left stark naked to fend for himself. Suffering from cataract, when he pleaded for his eye glasses, they retorted back saying they would break it but not leave it with him. As a result he had tripped and fallen several times.

While moving from Kolamba to Hathnisangam in a surprisingly pleasant sight, he had met some *Bhil* folks, creatures of few words, catching fish in the river in Hapeshwar, located in ShoolpaanJhaadi at the confluence of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. Vegad had a memorable experience while treading the prohibited track. He was warned by a *sadhu* and local residents, of an impending menace of being robbed by *Bhils* on his way from Khalghat to Borkhedi. Regardless of the warning, at Barwani he promptly produced a letter of recommendation from the divisional headquarters of Indore Commissioner to the police station in-charge there. Arrangements for walking through the Jhaadi to Borkhedi were made. He reached unharmed by noon the next day aided by two armed police escorts and two other escorts, who took over from Pali station up to Jhalsangam. And all this was undertaken with utmost dexterity; Courtesy, wireless communication. On his way Vegad met a *Bhil* man from the village, Bhilkheda who was engaged in charity of looking after the belongings of the *parikramavasis*, free of cost. When the travellers returned after crossing from the other side of the river-bank, they took their belongings back. This remarkable deed was undertaken because his ancestors from last 3 generations as *parikramavasis* were all robbed by the *Bhils*. So, while Vegad was

trailing through the fearful rocky terrain in scorching and sweltering summer heat, the escorts suddenly pointed to a small group of *Bhils*, leaping and hopping along the narrow river bed towards them. The sooner they saw armed *jawans*, they disappeared in a split second. On vigil from a distance, if they get the slightest clue of the traveller's intention of reporting the encounter to the police, they lose no time in slicing the person into pieces. Their terror is confined to about 25 miles stretch of the 80 miles Jhaadi, and there is no alternative way out. Three *babas*, who had made fun of Vegad earlier for attempting the feat, appeared on the scene a day later at Shoolpaneshwar stark naked, with miserable rags of loin cloth covering them. Having robbed of all possessions by the *Bhils* they had tread barefoot in blistering heat, without either clothes or water in the desolate, shadow less blazing earth around.

Further on, being escorted by a *Bhil* of *Chaarani* sect through the ill famed villages of ShoolpaanJhadi from Hathnisangam to Dharampuri, Vegad came across two hamlets of Dasana and Kashta, notorious for *Bhils* of *Nayak* sect, who robbed the travellers. On seeing the group being escorted by a *Chaarani* 'They vanished as swiftly as they had emerged.' (Trans. VegadAmritasya Narmada 121).

The paradox of how members of the same cult can be charitable beyond measure, at the same time be inhuman and horrifying, was what Vegad realized while free mass meals were being served for all passing travellers in this *Bhil* village. At a recent discourse with Vegad he said, the *Bhils* killed in cold blood; all the same, they never hesitated to surrender to the police. They owned it as their inherited custom but not every aspect is acceptable.

A similar heart tearing incident was related to him when he had reached the mouth of the Narmada; from Vimleshwar to Mithitalai. Here a *sanyasi* named Abhay Muni related how he was robbed of everything at the Jhadi and when at last he reached a hut in a *Bhil* village almost dead with hunger and thirst, the owner went in and brought out a chapatti for him. The *sanyasi* gobbled up the entire chapatti and waited for more. The *Bhil* came out and said:

I know you are hungry. There were only four chapattis. I gave you one, I took one, my wife one, and one was divided between two children; and there is neither chapatti nor any flour left. You remain hungry, and we too remain hungry. (Trans. Vegad SKNN 147)

Here lies the beauty of a rich culture; charity with a moral of sharing seen with endearing and sensitive eyes of the author! Elvin narrates a related myth about the *Baiga* tribe:

When he is overwhelmed by his own poverty, he comforts himself and his own family by reminding them that to be poor and to live close to the earth was the voluntary choice of his great ancestors, their glory and not their shame. (Elvin Myths of Middle India Introduction xiv)

A sad incident was narrated by a boatman, who had ferried Vegad across the river on journeying from Kolamba to Hathnisangam. He had failed once when he had ferried across 3 male oxen bought by two *Bhils* at a recent fair. The boatman had tied them one each at the

farther ends of the boat and one in the centre, as oxen are prone to fights. No sooner did the boat reach the middle of the river; the oxen tore themselves free and rammed into one another. The boat bobbed up and down violently with water filling in rapidly. The boatmen jumped into the river suggesting the two *Bhils* to follow suit. Only one of them complied. All swam to safety save the one who clung to the boat. He was washed away by the current. Since that fatal day the boatman considered ferrying uncle-nephew duo in the same boat as ominous. Later it became known that the nephew after a bitter exchange of words with his wife had left in a state of fury declaring she would see his dead face hence.

Describing his second *parikramma* around the tributaries Vegad has elaborately sketched the vocation and life of *Baigas* along one such tributary, Budhner. At Dagona, he came across *tarai* lowland. *Baigas* had surrounded their clay dwellings with raw logs. Breathless and with parched throats, as the fleet scaled the forested hills, a group of *Baiga* men and women were plucking leaves to make *pattal* (disposable plates) under the canopy of saal trees. On request for a demonstration, they promptly obliged. Vegad's wife offered them snacks on those *pattals* like an 'adept host.' (Trans. Vegad TTN 139)

Towards the end of the first break journey of Budhner, Vegad observed simplicity and distrust for city dwellers among *Baiga* families in Silpidi hamlet. When his wife tried to offer some token bangles and *bindis* to the married women folk, they shied away. Convinced on considerations of auspicious offerings they accepted. Extreme poverty, yet the graciousness of a *Baiga* man was a memorable incident that was etched out in Vegad's mind putting any so called civilized city dweller to shame. A *Baiga* man's request to be seated on spread out jute bag on the floor was ignored by Vegad's wife who was taking a curious look at their modest dwellings. Removing the wrapped up shawl from his shoulders he at once spread it, taking the worn-out and dirty look of the jute bag as the cause of her hesitation. Touched at the gesture she quickly sat on the jute bag. On enquiry he disclosed that his child was weeping because of hunger. Vegad's wife asked if she could feed him. Pat came his answer, 'You will give food today, what about tomorrow? He has to learn to remain hungry. He has to get used to it.' In a state of shock Vegad says, 'I had an idea of penury defeat penury. But this was beyond all imagination. My eyes voluntarily welled up with tears.' (Trans. Vegad TTN 143).

Travelling from Dindori to Chaanra, a chief village of *Baigas* and then Tharpathra, near Budhner's source, Vegad reached an isolated plateau devoid of greens. Among a few houses with hens loitering, he once again witnessed a beautiful young girl with tattooed forehead. Considering her parents' entirely ordinary looks, he blurted out amazed at her remarkable magnetism, 'I had never seen such extreme defiance of the principles of genetics. Divinity loves to break its own rules sporadically.' (Trans. Vegad TTN 146). An extraordinary act of strength and laboriousness of these *Baigas* also astounded Vegad at the weekly bazaar.

Travelling around Banjar River he witnessed another tall heightened *Baiga* beauty at Damoh weekly bazaar. He remarks:

She had an appearance of royalty in her mannerisms. Her laughter lent a pleasant glow to her face. Her movements created currents in the breeze – just as it would when a swan swam in the water. Her main attraction was in her sweet, slow, curvy footsteps as she walked. Such a hypnotic affect that I could not find ends, metaphors or illustrations. Like a waft of wind she was lost in the crowd in an instant. As though a raincloud appeared and drenched me with a spell of shower. (Trans. Vegad TTN 174-175)

A conspicuous question on the conservation of tribal life and culture becomes perceptible from such experiences. Well intentioned policy makers are doing their bit in bringing them into the mainstream, little aware that they are inadvertently posing a threat in wiping out an entire culture in a single sweep. This is best understood in the own words of Verrier Elvin, 'Has the primitive any message for the modern world, or should we try to bring him, as soon as possible, into the main streams of civilization?' (Elvin Leaves from the Jungle 27).

Well known alternative measures have individually been practiced since long. Awareness in this regard is required to follow those precepts. Verrier Elvin was a British missionary sent to India for spreading Christianity among the tribes. Elvin not only refused to conform; overwhelmed by their culture and life, he became one of them, lived with them, became a Gandhian, focusing his whole life to a social cause. Elvin's devotion is praiseworthy yet, it is not practically applicable to everyone. Presenting his solution he furthers the cause:

There are many elements in the Gond ethos which should be conserved – their simplicity and freedom, their love of children, the position of their women, their independence of spirit (no silly ducking observant these!), their freedom from many of the usual oriental inhibitions. (Elvin Leaves from the Jungle 27)

Practicing Gandhian ideology and believing in simplicity, Vegad's life too has become the best precept of a happy, wholesome life. He believes in that primitive stage of man when he was nearest to nature, from where the foundation of human culture took shape. Due to this, his appreciations of certain facets of tribal culture have inadvertently influenced him. In the truest sense, the cause can be taken up, at least by learning from their life. By temperament as Vegad was drawn into attachment with the beauty of simplicity in nature, so was he by his modern and progressive outlook of tribal culture.

Fitness, beautiful physical bodily form of tribal women comes from *shram* (tough physical labour) he says. Not from artificial beauty commodities. Satisfaction from meagre resources and lack of greed is another example of harmony with nature. Economy and avoidance of wastage should be learnt. Similarly marriage customs like the choice of the girl for her life partner is also very convenient. Moreover, love for their children, honesty of the *Bhils*, community feeling, sense of art and offering selfless service are other qualities that are now rare in the civilized world and can be imbibed and revived again. This is the least by which not only conservation of tribal life can take place but their culture could live too.

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