



SOCIOECONOMIC ASPECTS AND CULTURAL PRACTICES OF THE BHIL TRIBE IN SITAPURI PANCHAYAT, DHAR DISTRICT, MADHYA PRADESH: CHALLENGES AND PATHWAYS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the socioeconomic aspects and Bhil tribe culture in Sitapuri Panchayat, Manawar Block, Dhar District. The study focuses on understanding the social, and cultural dimensions of the village. It explores the demographic composition, caste and religion dynamics, education scenario, language usage, family structure, health dimension, and cultural practices prevalent in the community. The findings reveal that Sitapuri village faces challenges in terms of educational infrastructure, with a low literacy rate and limited access to higher secondary schools. Migration for employment and seasonal work contribute to high dropout rates among students. Gender discrimination is observed, where girls are often engaged in household chores and prioritized for early marriages. Traditional institutions such as temples and rituals play a significant role in the cultural fabric of the village, including the worship of specific trees and belief in superstitions. The study highlights the health dimension, emphasizing the limited availability of medical facilities in the village and the dependence on nearby towns for healthcare services. Festivals such as Ghanghor, Makar Sankranti, Holi, and Diwali hold cultural significance and are celebrated with unique customs and traditions, fostering community cohesion. Understanding the socioeconomic conditions and cultural practices of the Bhil tribe in Sitapuri Panchayat is crucial for identifying development issues and formulating strategies for upliftment. The research paper provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by the community and emphasizes the need for targeted interventions in education, healthcare, infrastructure, and gender equality. By addressing these issues, sustainable development can be fostered, leading to improved livelihoods and overall well-being in Sitapuri village and similar contexts.

KEY WORDS – Bhil tribe, Dimensions, Sitapuri, Practices, Indigenous, culture.

INTRODUCTION

Bhil Tribe

The Bhil tribe holds a significant position in India and is recognized as one of the oldest tribes, particularly in Madhya Pradesh. In ancient times, they exerted authority over various regions in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Malwa, Madhya Pradesh, and Bihar. The Bhil tribe represents a diverse segment of the Munda race and is considered a primitive tribe in India. They are believed to have ancestral roots in the Dravidian tribes, which are also found in the West Indies, and their language is believed to have originated from the Dravidian family of languages.

The Bhil tribe is primarily located in the central and western regions of India, specifically in the states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra. While the majority of the Bhil population resides in Madhya Pradesh, there are also a few villages of the tribe in the northern and eastern parts of the country.

Population - Based on the 2001 census, the Bhil population in India was recorded at 12,705,753 individuals. They constitute approximately 10% of India's tribal population, ranking second after the Gond tribe.

Religion - The majority of Bhils, accounting for 97%, follow Hinduism as their religion. Their traditional customs and rituals are heavily influenced by Hindu practices. However, Bhils are often portrayed as outsiders or outcasts within the Hindu community, as reflected in their folklore and mythological stories. Bhils have a deep reverence for nature and their religious beliefs are animistic in nature. They hold strong superstitious beliefs and place great faith in supernatural forces. The Bhils worship various deities associated with nature, including gods related to the sky, trees, water, and rain. Fire holds a sacred significance in their religious practices, and they consider certain animals like horses, tigers, wild boars, peacocks, and sparrows as totemic symbols. Animal sacrifice is a common ritual observed by Bhil families.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study uses qualitative methodology to understand the Socioeconomic Aspects and Cultural Practices of the Bhil Tribe. The data is collected from primary and secondary data sources and personal observation during the field visit

SOCIAL DIMENSION

Demography of Sitapuri Village

Sl. no.	Particulars	Number
1	Total population	1584
2	Male	786
3	Female	798
4	Household	340
5	Total literacy	54.05%
6	Male literacy	63.25%
7	Female literacy	45.40%

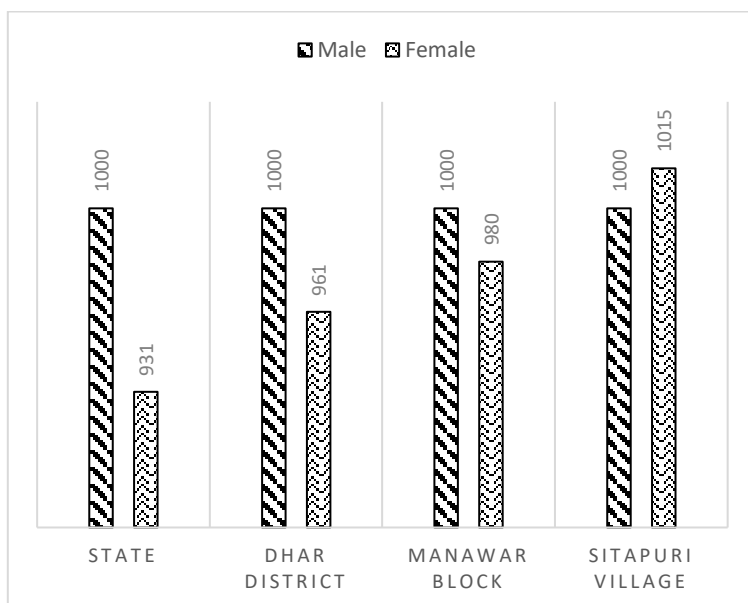
Caste and Religion

In Sitapuri village, Out of 340 Household, 320 households are part of the Bhilala tribe, which is a sub-tribe of the Bhils tribe. The people belonging to the Bhilala tribe follow the Hindu religion. Within the Bhilala tribe, there are different surnames such as Vaskel, Chauhan, Patel, Bhabbhar, Rawat, Baghel, Ajnore, Solanki, Dawel, Bhilala Darbar, and Jamra, among others.

Gender

The Bhilala tribe is the main and only tribe existing in the Sitapuri Panchayat. Typically, tribal areas have a higher sex ratio compared to non-tribal areas, and in this panchayat, the sex ratio is 1015 females per 1000 males, which is higher than the district and state sex ratio. Based on the Focused Group Discussion, it was found that most decisions in households are made jointly by both males and females. Traditionally, men hold a dominant role and make decisions with the assistance of women. The practice of Pardah, where women must compulsorily cover themselves in front of their husbands, elders, family members, and relatives, still exists in the village. This Pardah system is followed by women of all ages as it is a longstanding tradition. However, women in their area are allowed to be without Pardah when they are with friends or in marketplaces. The average age for marriage among women is 16-17 years. Many girls do not continue their education due to various reasons. The quality of education is often poor, leading to lower grades in 8-10 standard exams, and if they fail, they tend to discontinue their education. Additionally, early marriages at the age of 16 or 18 also hinder their educational pursuits. Some parents do not allow their daughters to pursue higher secondary education due to the fear that they might run away. Another significant reason is the allure of earning money by working, where they can earn around 150-200 rupees per day. This temptation sometimes leads to a preference for work over education or engagement in household chores. Women are typically confined to their homes, with occasional outings for work or essential errands.

Sex ratio





The sex ratio in Sitapuri village is favourable, with 1015 women for every 1000 men. This ratio is higher than the sex ratios observed in Madhya Pradesh, Dhar district, and Manawar block, which stand at 931, 961, and 980 women per 1000 men, respectively.

Language

Language plays a significant role in identifying individuals in a specific geographic region. The Bhil community primarily communicates in their native language, Bhili. However, the common language used among the people is Nimadi. For written communication, Hindi is predominantly utilized. As many individuals have received their education in Hindi medium schools, they are proficient in speaking and reading Hindi

Family structure

Mostly nuclear families are seen. As soon as the sons began to work and get married, they began to live separately with their families. However, the family farms collectively and splits the profits. When the parents get older, they move in with one of their sons, who looks after them till end. Before the death of their parent’s the son receives the small parcel of property that they owned

Education

Sitapuri village exhibits a lower literacy rate in contrast to the state of Madhya Pradesh. As of 2011, the literacy rate in Sitapuri village was recorded at 54.05 percent, whereas Madhya Pradesh had a higher literacy rate of 69.32 percent. Within Sitapuri, the male literacy rate was 63.25 percent, while the female literacy rate stood at 45.4 percent.

Sitapuri village panchayat is equipped with two aaganwadi, one primary school, and one middle school. According to the teachers, parents who recognize the importance of quality education prefer to admit their children to private and English medium schools. Only students who have poor academic records or come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are enrolled in these schools. Unfortunately, there is a lack of awareness among parents regarding the importance of education, leading to a lack of motivation in encouraging their children to pursue education. During the harvesting season, school attendance suffers as parents often take their children to work for more than 30 days. This situation has been further impacted by the education policy implemented by the Government of Madhya Pradesh, which promotes social promotion and prohibits the failure of students until the 8th standard. This policy has had implications for the quality of education in both rural and tribal contexts.

Health facility, 3A, and sanitation

A vital aspect of human life is health. Therefore, the availability, accessibility, and cost of health services are crucial for both the poor and the extremely poor. There are some signs that can be used to indicate the current state of health.

Mobility toward the health

s.no	Health Care Centre	Distance From Sitapuri	Transportation Facility	Access For Poor	Affordable For Poor
1	Government Hospital Manawar	16km	Own Vehicle	Yes	Yes
2	Health Care Centre	6km	Own Vehicle	Yes	Yes
3	Primary Health Care Centre	0km	Not Functioning	Not Functioning	Not Functioning
4	Private Clinic	6km	Own Vehicle	No	No
5	Medical Shop	16km	Own Vehicle	Yes	Yes
6	Government Hospital Barwani	40km	Own Vehicle	Yes	Yes

The primary health care center in the village is not functioning, and the nearest government hospital is located in Manawar, which is 16km away. While transportation facilities are available through own vehicles, the accessibility and affordability of healthcare services for the poor in the village are still a concern. The presence of a private clinic within a 6km distance indicates some availability of medical services, but the lack of transportation options hinders accessibility for the villagers.

Sanitation

In this village, the main problem is sanitation. Despite the fact that the majority of households were eligible for Swachh Bharat Mission toilet construction subsidies. However, nobody is using their toilet; instead, people are using it as a storage space for items related to their homes.



DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

Migration

In the village, the Bhil community is predominantly engaged in migration, with at least one member from each household migrating to Gujarat. The primary reason for migration is the lack of sufficient land for cultivation in the local area, coupled with the inadequate and irregular wages received by small and marginal farmers in Sitapuri. Many individuals migrate along with their families. Another factor contributing to migration is the low wages offered under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in Madhya Pradesh, where the daily wage is only 190 Rs. This wage is considerably lower compared to what laborers can earn by working in factories. Hence, individuals prefer to work in manufacturing units in Gujarat and Indore, where they can earn higher wages ranging from 400 to 500 Rs. per day.

Alcohol

In the village, there is a prevalent addiction to liquor made from the Mahua flower, which is readily available. Both men and women in the village indulge in consuming this Mahua liquor.

Lack of Education

In the village, a significant number of individuals have completed their education only up to the fifth grade. Parents in the village show limited interest in educating their children as they engage them in farming and household chores. Additionally, Sitapuri village lacks educational facilities beyond the eighth grade, and students have to travel to Manawar for higher secondary education. The absence of transportation options and the 14 km distance discourages regular attendance at school.

Open Defecation

In Sitapuri village, the majority of households have constructed toilets; however, they are not being used for their intended purpose. The toilets were primarily built to avail government schemes and subsidies, and as a result, they are merely symbolic structures. Instead, these toilet structures are used as storage rooms or for other purposes. This prevalent practice of open defecation poses significant challenges for women, as they have to wait until early morning or after 7 o'clock in the evening to find a suitable time for open defecation.

Lack of Drinking Water

The residents of Sitapuri panchayat live in dispersed settlements, and they face challenges in accessing drinking water sources. The panchayat has a limited number of water sources, including 7 hand pumps and 4 wells, which are used for obtaining drinking water. However, during the summer season, these hand pumps become non-functional due to the scarcity of groundwater. As a result, women bear the responsibility of fetching water from the wells and carrying it on their heads, which further adds to their daily workload.

Health Care Facility and Transportation

the healthcare facility in Sitapuri village is limited and inadequate. The village lacks proper medical infrastructure, and accessing healthcare services is a challenge for the residents. The primary health care center in the village is not in working condition, and the nearest government hospital is located 16 km away in Manawar.

In terms of transportation, the villagers rely on their own vehicles or have to travel on foot to reach the healthcare facilities. This indicates a lack of public transportation options, which further hinders their access to medical services.

Inaccessibility to formal credits

People are highly depending upon agriculture. Crops like soybean, cotton, and maize are main crops for the village. But the ultimate challenge is all these crops sowing time is almost same or near to each other (May-June and June-July). And this is the time when village people need credits (Sources: crop cash flow study and FGD with farmers). Due to inaccessibility to formal credit system they use to lend money from informal sources at high interest rate (according to participants an average of 10- 15percent per month) that in turn create vulnerability to village people and these factors increases more to people in case of crop failure situations.

Early Marriage

As per the villagers, boys in Sitapuri typically get married at the age of 15, while girls get married at 17. The prevailing belief is that marrying a girl at a relatively younger age is advantageous for the family as she can assist with domestic and agricultural tasks, reducing the family's burden and potentially improving their economic status. This also allows the girl to stay at home and take care of household responsibilities if the family engages in migration. However, early marriages have negative consequences, including larger family sizes, increased health risks for both the child and mother due to their low maturity during pregnancy, and various implications such as girls dropping out of school and assuming family responsibilities at a very young age.



CULTURAL DIMENSION

Marriage

The tribal community follows a distinctive marriage system where they solemnize their union by taking a vow to nature. They can only marry individuals from outside their own surname, as marrying within the same surname is considered incestuous. In the Bhilala tribe, it is customary for the groom to provide a dowry to the bride's family as part of the marriage arrangement.

Inter-caste marriages and love marriages are generally not accepted in the village. If such marriages do take place, the girl is subjected to certain restrictions. She is prohibited from visiting her parents' home, communicating with them, or even visiting her relatives. These restrictions do not apply to boys. In the case of a love marriage within the same caste, the groom's family must pay a fine to the bride's family. Typically, the fine amount is around Rs. 2 lakhs. The bride's family receives 1.5 lakhs from this sum, while the remaining 50,000 rupees is used for purchasing goat meat and alcohol.

Parda system

In a unique cultural practice observed in this tribal area, women never remove the saree from their heads, which signifies that they do not reveal their faces to any male other than their husbands, especially if the male is older than married women. Despite progress in the 21st century, women in tribal families still face backwardness, largely influenced by these traditional norms and practices.

Gatha

Gatha is a distinctive custom observed in the village where people create stone structures in remembrance of individuals who have died in accidents. These structures are worshipped as a form of reverence. The belief behind this practice is that if someone passes away due to an accident, they are revered as a deity. During the 14 days of Diwali, goats are sacrificed near the Gatha structure on a specific day known as Gatha Choudas. This occasion is marked by a fair organized by the villagers, which is named after the ritual itself, Gatha Choudas.

Belief in superstition

Superstition refers to beliefs that cannot be rationalized or explained by logic or scientific reasoning. In the village, there is a belief among the residents that certain women possess the knowledge of witchcraft (jadu tona) and have the ability to cause illness in individuals or harm animals through their supernatural powers. These women are commonly referred to as dakini or witches. Some people seek the assistance of these witchcraft practitioners to resolve their problems. When conflicts arise within households, such as disputes among family members or between spouses, individuals attribute these issues to the influence of witchcraft. The witchcraft practitioners provide a powder-like substance, resembling medicine, and instruct the recipient to secretly administer it to the person they wish to control. In return for their services, the witchcraft practitioners accept offerings of chicken and goat meat as payment.

Mannat

Mannat is a form of prayer where individuals express their desires and seek blessings from their deity for future events or personal improvement. They perform this ritual at specific religious sites. When someone's wishes or goals are not fulfilled, they resort to Mannat and make a vow to their deity. Once their wish is granted as per their Mannat, they offer offerings such as goats, roosters, and coconuts to express their gratitude to the deity.

THE MAIN FESTIVAL OF THE BHIL TRIBE

Bhaguria Fair

Festivals hold significant importance in the lives of Bhil tribal communities as they provide a much-needed respite from their daily routines. Among these celebrations is the vibrant carnival known as 'Bhaguria,' which is enthusiastically observed by tribes such as Bhil and Bhilalas.

This age-old festival is highly cherished in regions including Jhabua, Dhar, Alirajpur, and Khargone. It takes place just before Holi, during which people joyfully apply colored powders to each other, while dancing and singing to traditional tribal melodies. Also, young tribal individuals adorned in colourful attire, showcasing their cultural instruments, singing melodiously, and engaging in regional dances at the local marketplaces.

Bhaguria holds historical significance, particularly in relation to agriculture. It signifies the culmination of the harvest season, and the local community celebrates this festival as a way to acknowledge the completion of their agricultural activities.

Divasa

Divasa is a tribal festival observed on the final day of the initial fortnight of Shraavanmaas. It is a celebration where the tribal community worships and bathes bullocks and other animals, considering them as manifestations of the divine.



Ghanghor

Ghanghor is a widely celebrated festival of the Bhil tribe, in the village, marked by a visit to the nearby village temple. At this temple, wheat is grown in numerous pods, known as "Mata ka sthan." These pods are then taken back to the homes of the villagers, where they are cared for over a period of nine days. During Ghanghor, people engage in the worship of the nine forms of Durga, namely Shaila Putri, Brahmachari, Chandra ghanta, Kush Manda, Skanda Mata, Katyayani, Kala Ratri, and Mahagauri. Some individuals observe a fast for the entire duration of the nine days. It is common for marriages to take place before or during the Ghanghor festival in the village.

Akhateej

The Bhil tribe observes Akshaya Tritiya in their own distinctive manner. They follow a number of rites and traditions on this auspicious day in an effort to attract blessings and wealth. Members of the Bhil tribe assemble at a predetermined location, typically a temple or other sacred spot, to give prayers and carry out customary rites. They present their gods with presents of flowers, fruits, and other fortunate objects.

Traditional institution

Sitapuri village is home to various local deities, including the revered Bhilat dev (God of Bhils). Among the significant temples in the village, the Sati Mata temple holds particular importance.

Tree worship

In the Bhil tribe, each family has a designated tree that holds great significance for them. This tree passed down through generations, is worshipped and revered by the family. Throughout their lifetime, they hold a deep reverence for this specific tree and never engage in the act of cutting it. Instead, they continue to worship and cherish the tree as a sacred symbol of their ancestral heritage.

Bhad

Bhad is an individual responsible for maintaining ancestral records in the village, with each family having their own designated Bhad. Originating from Chittorgarh, Rajasthan, the Bhad visits the village every 3-4 years to narrate the stories of ancestors. Following this, they meticulously document the names of new family members and those who have passed away. As a gesture of appreciation, family members contribute monetary donations or offer items such as clothes, cows, goats, chickens, and bulls to the Bhad based on their personal discretion.

Jajmani system

The Jajmani system is a unique feature of rural Indian villages. It involves members of different castes providing services to members of other castes. Those who receive the services are known as Jajmans, while those who provide the services are referred to as kamins. For instance, a barber may offer his services to landowners, making the landowners the Jajmans and the barber the kamins. The kamins are compensated with crops or grains, typically on an annual or semi-annual basis. This system helps to ensure job stability within the village community.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research paper sheds light on the socioeconomic aspects and cultural practices of the Bhil tribe in Sitapuri Panchayat, Manawar Block, Dhar District. The study identifies key development challenges including limited access to education, gender discrimination, inadequate healthcare facilities, sanitation issues, and the prevalence of harmful cultural practices. It emphasizes the need for targeted interventions in education, healthcare, infrastructure, and gender equality to uplift the community and foster sustainable development. The findings underscore the importance of understanding the socioeconomic conditions and cultural practices of the Bhil tribe in Sitapuri Panchayat to formulate effective strategies for improvement. By addressing these challenges and preserving their cultural heritage, the community can experience improved livelihoods, enhanced education, better healthcare, and overall well-being. This research provides valuable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and organizations working towards the development of marginalized communities, not only in Sitapuri village but also in similar tribal contexts, ultimately striving for inclusive and sustainable development.

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