

Voices of Valor: Exploring Bhil Contribution in India's Freedom Struggle in the Light of *When Arrows Were Heated Up*

Kirti Sharma

The Bhil community is one of India's major indigenous tribal communities, living predominantly in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Chhattisgarh. With centuries of cultural legacy, the Bhils have a distinct identity defined by their language, rituals, and traditional way of life. The term 'Bhil' is derived from 'Bil' or 'Vil', which means 'bow'. They are the biggest tribe in South Asia, accounting for around 39% of the entire population of Rajasthan. Bhils are also known as Rajasthani bowmen, Mewari tribes, or archers. The Bhil tribe is split into two groups: the Central or Pure Bhils, who live in the mountain areas of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Rajasthan, and the Eastern Rajput Bhil, who live in Tripura. A mention of these tribes also comes up in epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. According to Indian mythology, a Bhil woman (Shabri) provided *ber* to Lord Rama while he was seeking for Sita in the Dhandaka forests. Throughout the history of independent India, these tribes were recognized as combatants in the struggle against the Mughals, Marathas, and the British. They met the requirements of the Princes of Mewar by providing bowmen, provisions, and protecting their families. During colonial times, the Rajputs engaged the Bhils as *Shikaris* and soldiers. During colonial times, the Bhil community played an important role in the Indian freedom struggle, particularly the 1857 movement, yet their contribution to this historic event is sometimes underestimated. The Bhil community, mostly found in central and western India, strongly opposed British colonial control. Their strong attachment to the land and their ancient way of life motivated them to fight exploitation and

injustice. Despite confronting enormous hurdles and frequently incurring violent reprisals from colonial authorities, the Bhil community played an important part in crafting the narrative of India's war for independence, exhibiting the spirit of tenacity and defiance that typified the whole movement.

Hari Ram Meena's novel *When Arrows were Heated Up* is a historical account of the tribal movement on Mangarh Hill, popularly known as the 'Jallianwala Kand'. It investigates the lives, cultures, and concerns of tribals in southern Rajasthan, including Udaipur, Dungarpur, Banswara, and other areas. Hariram Meena's work reveals previously unknown information regarding the Mangarh massacre, which claimed twice as many lives as the Jallianwala tragedy. It also discusses tribal exploitation, famine, living conditions, laws, and women's fights. This research paper examines how the novel may be used as a literary lens to evaluate Bhil participation in India's liberation movement, with an emphasis on their involvement in violent revolts, peaceful resistance, and the greater struggle for social justice.

Historical Account of Bhil Involvement in India's Freedom Struggle

In the 19th century, India's tribal population was disgruntled with British policies, prompting periodic uprisings against the British. Although the British did not directly rule the princely realms, they vowed not to intervene in their internal affairs. Their rulers implemented policies in accordance with British directions, provoking animosity among the tribes who lived in these lands (Mathur 30). In 1818, the five Southern Rajputana kingdoms signed contracts with the East India Company. The Maharana of Mewar implemented steps to regulate the Bhils, but this caused dissatisfaction among the Bhils residing in Mewar's mountainous regions (Mathur 30), who rebelled against the British, rulers, and *Jagirdars*.

The Bhil tribe suffered from British control and the dispersion of foreigners like tax officers and moneylenders. This exacerbated social conflicts and undermined cooperative ownership practices. British legal notions

of absolute private property stressed tribal culture even more, since their free life prevented them from completely realizing semi-feudal and semi-colonial rule. According to V. R. Raghavaiah, “The tribals too initiated struggle to safeguard their honour, to protect their cherished freedom and to get redress against the moneylenders, who tried to deprive them of all they had” (Raghavaiah 13). The Bhil, a group of racial and ethnic minority, were exploited in a variety of social, economic, and political ways because they were conscious of their racial identity. They were compelled to work as laborers in the fields of Rajputs and Brahmins, who profited from their illiteracy by buying forest goods at low rates. After the British established themselves as the dominant force in Southern Rajputana, the Bhil rebelled and joined the 1857 insurrection.

The British landed in Mewar to put a stop to the Bhil’s taxation and duties on merchants traveling between Udaipur and Ahmedabad. This privilege was an important prerogative in pre-colonial Mewar, and attempts to eliminate it, sparked revolts in the 1820s (Sen 2003). In 1881, the loss of this prerogative, discontent over additional levies and taxes, persecution of Bhil villages, *begar* extraction, and the rapaciousness of moneylenders sparked a great insurrection. Following a fight between Bhils from Paduna and Udaipur court representatives, a huge mob of Bhils stormed the nearby police station, murdering five officers, five soldiers, and 16 civilians. The police station was set on fire, as were the baniya businesses in Bara village. Bhils from adjacent regions joined the insurrection, resulting in violent clashes with Maharana and British soldiers that killed more than 70 people (Sen 2000). The Bhils obtained certain concessions as a result of this insurrection, but a British officer protested that the Bhils had extorted unjustifiable concessions by fire and death, as “the Bhils have succeeded in extorting by fire and murder unreasonable concessions and this is sure to have the most mischievous effect, although it may ensure a temporary truce (Singh 49).”

Dungarpur state, located in the Bhil heartland, was expected to see significant turmoil. Under Govind Giri’s direction, the Bhils banded

together in 1911, embracing higher caste traditions and mores while relying on Dasnami Panth rituals. However, Giri's preaching became more radical as he challenged hierarchy and exploitation. He said that the Bhils were not inferior to any other community, and that their poverty was caused by the demands of princely rulers and landowners. He felt that the Bhils were the real proprietors of the country and hence have the authority to reign over it. He preached the establishment of a Bhil Raj in Sunth and Banswara states, with the Bhil monarchy, which existed eight hundred years before, being revived. As Govind Giri and his supporters made success in the princely kingdoms, colonial authorities quickly labeled them as a "disloyal and anarchical movement" (Singh 95). In October 1913, the political agent in southern Rajputana demanded Govind Giri's arrest, sparking fights between Bhils and police officers. Govind Giri gathered his people on Mangarh Hill, where a huge police force and military reinforcements were stationed. However, two days after Govind prayed to "the guardian saint of the people", soldiers opened fire on the Bhils, causing significant casualties. Around 900 Bhils, including Govind Giri, were detained; Govind was later convicted and imprisoned.

Thus, the Bhil tribe's unhappiness and rebellion during the 19th century under British colonial rule concentrated on their complaints against both British officials and indigenous rulers in Princely States. The Bhils who were subjected to economic exploitation and social marginalization, resisted British intervention in their traditional way of life, which was compounded by the imposition of additional levies and the presence of foreigners such as revenue officers and moneylenders. Their resistance culminated in multiple uprisings, particularly in Southern Rajputana, where fighting with authorities resulted in substantial losses for both sides. Furthermore, leaders like Govind Giri rallied the Bhils around issues of equality, land ownership, and the historical restoration of Bhil sovereignty. However, colonial authorities saw such activities as a danger to their authority and quickly repressed them with arrests and harsh crackdowns, demonstrating the complicated dynamics of power and resistance in colonial India's tribal areas.

Analysis of *When Arrows Were Heated Up*

Hari Ram Meena's novel *When Arrows were Heated Up* examines the difficulties and ambitions of the Bhil minority in Rajasthan against the backdrop of British colonial rule. Set in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, the story depicts the Bhils' struggles against exploitation and tyranny by both British authorities and local rulers in princely kingdoms. The story develops through the eyes of several persons, revealing socio-economic situations, cultural traditions, and resistance movements within the Bhil tribe. The figure of Govind Giri, a Bhil leader, is central to the plot and serves as a symbol of resistance to injustice and inequity. The Bhils mobilize against harsh policies under his leadership, demanding acknowledgment of their land rights and autonomy. The story powerfully shows the Bhil people's battle against encroaching on their lands, exploitation by moneylenders, and the destruction of their ancient lifestyle. It also depicts the complexity of power dynamics between the Bhils, British colonial authority, and indigenous rulers, emphasizing the Bhil people's tenacity and fortitude in the face of hardship. Overall, the novel provides an engaging depiction of the Bhil community's struggle for dignity, justice, and self-determination during a difficult moment in Indian history. The novel, with its beautifully developed characters and powerful narration, shines emphasis on indigenous tribes' often-overlooked efforts and tenacity in the battle against colonialism.

The tale is based on the Mangarh movement, also known as the tribal 'Jallianwala Kand', which resulted in the deaths of twice as many men and women. The author, Hariram Meena, found secret details concerning the massacre via considerable research and fieldwork. The story discusses tribal exploitation, famine, living circumstances, laws, and the obstacles that women face. The main figure is Govind Giri, who established Dhuniyas and Sampa Sabha to promote public awareness and provide answers to issues during crises. The Adivasis conducted debates in the Sampa Sabha to protest injustice. Govind Giri had a huge influence on Southern Rajasthan's tribal community, influencing their views and way of life. His teachings had a profound influence on the

Adivasis, and he helped them develop consciousness. When he sees Kuriya producing fire by rubbing the stones, he remarks:

Kuriya produced sparks from the flint. The spark turned into a fire. It means there is fire in the stones. If there is fire in stones, then the hills have fire in them. And if the hills have fire in them, then the Adivasis who live in those hills must have fire inside them, too. I want to light that fire. (Meena 12)

Thus, Govind Giri, cognizant of the subordination of Bhil awareness, employed all means possible to increase their consciousness.

Govind Giri, a remarkable person with a divine aura, summoned tribals to Mangarh Mountain to awaken them. The British authorities used weapons and bullets to dismantle the 'Adivasi Jagrut Sabha' and the Govind Giri, the cult. The tribal movement grew, with Govind Giri under the protection of the defense squad. Poonja, along with other Bhils and Garasias, assaulted the British soldiers, promising revenge once the battle ended. Govind Giri, gazing at Dhuni, suddenly uttered the lyrics of a self-composed song:

We are human beings
Has launched campaign for human rights, if you live
Then you will live with honour,
If you die with respect!
Brave devotees,
This is a fight of generations.
The fight will continue.
Yes,
The fight will continue. (Meena 391)

Thus, Govind Giri shared his thoughts on behalf of the tribals and encouraged them to fight.

During British control, tribals faced a variety of obstacles, including relocation, mineral riches looting, forest closures, tax collection, and land expropriation. Under Govind Giri's guidance, tribals protested injustice. The Adivasis were the first to rebel, attempting to smash tribal

groups. The British administration supplied military help to native kings and Thakurs, but tribal people maintained their independence and refused to accept British control. The local ruling class worked with the British administration, but tribals lived independently and refused to accept British rule. In the narrative, Bhagat, a key character in British government diplomacy, fights against aristocracy and exploitation, guiding tribals to independence and raising consciousness. However, like Joria and Dharmabhai, Bhagat was hung, weakening the insurrection and impeding its growth out of fear. Later, under Govind Giri's leadership, the tribals resumed their protests against the inequities of British authority, resulting in army repression and, at times, warfare. Many tribe members were martyred as a result of these wars. One such conflict has been discussed by Hari Ram Meena in the novel;

Rajgarh police station was the centre of all military action to suppress the tribal rebellion that emerged under the leadership of Joria. Under the leadership of Joria, the tribals decided, why not attack the Rajgarh police station? One day, thousands of people gathered in front of the police station. A crowd of tribals gathered at the door of the police station. A policeman standing in uniform asked the tribal leaders, 'What kind of power does Joria have that all of you are behind him? (Meena 331)

Police insulted a tribal guru, prompting a tribal to take dramatic measures and decapitate the cop.

Joriya was also standing there in front. But that police officer did not recognise him. Joriya didn't say anything, but another tribal hero, Galaliya, came and took out his sword and cut the policeman's neck. Others in the police station, as soon as the officers and their soldiers came to know about this, they all ran away, hiding through different roads. (Meena 331)

Thus, this incidence demonstrates that Govind Giri and Bhagat hold unique significance among tribals.

The tribal movement became stronger after killing a police officer, and the British authorities saw it as a challenge to beat them. A massive

army chased the tribes, killing many of them. The British administration was alarmed and dispatched military forces to put down the uprising. Joria instructed his comrades to return to Badik village, where they were pursued by British troops. The retreating tribals were also fighting the British troops and looking for a safe haven in a woodland or mountain location. They arrived at a body of water, when British soldiers encircled them and opened fire. Hundreds of tribe members were slaughtered, while some fled into the bush. The British pursued and slaughtered the tribals until they ran out of guns, resulting in the deaths of thousands. The tribals' traditional weaponry was outmatched by British firearms, resulting in their defeat and fatalities. The British imprisoned tribal leaders and destroyed the uprising.

Thus, the novel *When Arrows were Heated Up* revolves around the role of Bhils in the Indian freedom war. It demonstrates their opposition to British colonialism and local persecution. The story depicts the Bhils as active participants in numerous movements and revolutions, motivated by a desire for autonomy, dignity, and justice. The story depicts how Bhil leaders such as Govind Giri organize themselves to oppose colonial authority and challenge the exploitation of their lands and resources. They use acts of disobedience, such as protests, strikes, and sabotage, to oppose the enforcement of unjust laws and policies. Throughout the novel, the Bhils' participation in the independence movement is shown as a symbol of their endurance, and pride, and their resolution to restore their rights and cultural identities. Their battle becomes a potent symbol of colonial resistance, as well as a tribute to India's indigenous populations' tenacity in the fight for freedom and equality.

Significance of Bhil Involvement in Freedom Struggle

The lasting influence of Bhil contributions to India's independence demonstrates the perseverance, dedication, and sacrifice of tribes in the country's quest for freedom. Despite being marginalized and oppressed, the Bhils played an important part in resisting colonial rule and defining the course of India's independence fight. One persistent facet of Bhil contributions is their involvement in different revolutions

and struggles against British rule. Historical sources show instances of Bhil communities engaging in armed resistance, protests, and acts of civil disobedience, demonstrating their unwavering determination to establish their rights and autonomy. For instance, the Bhils' participation in the 1857 insurrection and following uprisings in Southern Rajputana demonstrated their readiness to fight colonial rulers and seek justice, as highlighted by Hardiman, "Moral self-reform along such lines provided a potent means for a legitimate and effective form of assertion within the new political order" (Hardiman 264).

Furthermore, Bhil contributions to India's freedom went beyond simple opposition to colonial rule. Bhil leaders like as Govind Giri emerged as symbols of resistance and empowerment, rallying their communities to fight not just British colonialism but also the abuses inflicted by indigenous rulers and elites. Giri's campaign for land rights, cultural preservation, and social justice connected well with the Bhil community, inspiring future generations to strive for equality and decency.

It's no use being crestfallen. If God gives us a lot, he also has the right to take something from us. Learn to fill the places rendered empty. You got nothing from this crop. Never mind. Have patience. The jungle is full of grass and there is no dearth of leaves on the tress. There will be no shortage of fodder for the bullocks, cows and goats. As for your stomachs, go far out into the jungles and collect gum, catechu, honey, dry twig and any other thing useful. Instead of selling these to the village bania, if you sell them at the haat, you will get a better price. (Meena 27)

The preceding quote from the novel reveals the tribes in their true form. In the following remark, Guru Govind is imparting hope to a forlorn tribal guy who has seen all the hardships, giving him hope for equality.

The long-lasting significance of Bhil contributions is apparent in current attempts to commemorate and honor their participation in India's freedom movement. Cultural efforts and grassroots activity have attempted to elevate Bhil voices, recover their historical narratives, and address the current issues confronting indigenous groups in post-independence India.

By acknowledging and honoring Bhil accomplishments, India recognizes the broad and multicultural nature of its independence movement, ensuring that the legacy of Bhil resistance and perseverance continues to inspire future generations in their pursuit of justice and equality.

Conclusion

The lasting impact of Bhil participation in India's liberation movement is a painful reminder of the country's broad and diversified desire for independence. The Bhil community made substantial contributions to the greater fight against British colonial authority via their resistance, sacrifice, and persistence, symbolizing the spirit of defiance and resolve that defined India's war for independence. As this article focuses on their contributions, it is critical to remember and memorialize the Bhil freedom warriors who fearlessly stood up to oppression, often at great personal risk. Their tales encourage us to remember India's rich past and to work for a more equitable and inclusive society in which the perspectives and experiences of all people are recognized and honored.

In modern India, tales about Bhil involvement in the liberation movement continue to shape national identity and develop a better knowledge of the country's past. Engaging with writings such as *When Arrows Were Heated Up*, and other literary works that explain the Bhil experience may provide insight into India's complicated history as well as the current battles for social justice and equality. It is critical to highlight Bhil voices, conserve their cultural legacy, and recognize and integrate their contributions into the larger narrative of Indian history.

Works Cited

- Hardiman, D. "Assertion, Conversion and Indian Nationalism: Govind Giri's Movement Amongst the Bhils" *Religious Conversion in India: Modes, Motivations, and Meanings*, edited by R. Robinson and S. Clarke, Oxford UP, 2003, pp. 255-84.
- Mathur, L. P. *Resistance Movement of Tribals of India*. Himanshu Publication, 1988.
- Meena, Hari Ram. *When Arrows Were Heated Up*. Niyogi Books, 2016.

- Raghavaiah, V. R. *Tribal Revolts*. Andhra Rashtra Adimjati Sevak Sangha, 1971.
- Sen, H. "The Bhil Rebellion of 1881." *Issues in Modern Indian History: For Sumit Sarkar*, edited by B. Pati. Popular Prakashan, 2000, pp. 75-99.
- . "The Bhils in Colonial Mewar." *Negotiating India's Past: Essays in Memory of Partha Sarathi Gupta*, edited by B. Pati, B. Sahu and T. Venkatasubramanian. Tulika Books, 2003.
- Singh, C. *The Sound of Drums: Tribal Movement in Rajasthan, 1881-1947*. Manak Publications, 1995.