

Tracing the Identity and Culture of Dungri Garasiya Bhils through Selected Folk Tales

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Dungri Garasiya Bhils lived on either side of the state border between Gujarat and Rajasthan today, but earlier they all used to live in one state. It is a subgroup of the Bhil ethnic group located in Gujarat, India. In the Rajasthani dialect, “Dungri” translates to hills, and “Garasiya” refers to forests clearer. They moved from Mewar to Gujarat approximately 300 years ago to seek refuge from Muslim forces. They reside in the talukas of Meghraj, Bhiloda, Vijayanagar, and Khedbrahma within the Sabarkantha district of Gujarat. They were divided into clans based on geographical location, but they all were united and friendly.

Marija Sres is a Slovene Catholic anthropologist who has dedicated much of her life to studying and working with the Dungri Bhils, a tribal community in western India. Her deep respect marks her relationship with the Dungri Bhils for their culture, tradition, and language.

First, There Was Woman is a tale that draws upon the idea of how God created woman first. He made a woman’s bones named it *Pruthvi* (Earth) and decorated it by planting trees of oak, bamboo, and teak. And he fell in love with his creation, *Pruthvi*. Then he created animals and birds to amuse and keep *Pruthvi* happy. On the eve of *Aamli-melo* (Fair), God took some soil and shaped a murti, an image of the most beautiful creation and it was a woman. He called her ‘sati’. And since then, unmarried women have been denoted as sati. She used to live in the lap of nature surrounded by animals and birds but she felt very lonely as there was no one like her so *kudrat* (Nature) put a serpent into the forest. Upon seeing it sati thought of giving birth to someone like her and so she embraced the snake and the woman conceived through the power of the serpent. The blood that fell during delivery

took the form of Kesuda flowers and the cord evolved into teak leaves. And this is how man came into the world. In certain adaptations of this myth, a woman is depicted as the original entity, who ultimately gives birth to humanity. This woman represents the source of all life, and through her existence, the human race emerges. In this tale, the male figure often appears afterward, yet it is the woman who plays a central role in the origin of humanity. This belief highlights the significance of women in creation, underscoring the reverence for feminine strength and fertility that is prominent in many indigenous societies. In these cultural narratives, the connections between gender, creation, and the natural environment are frequently interlinked, influencing social structure, ceremonies, and cultural traditions that remain meaningful for the Bhil people today. Himmat Ben shares her story where she tells how women were labelled as “Witch”. She was accused of killing her brother’s grandchild and eating his liver. Although women may occasionally be categorized as witches or thought to have supernatural abilities linked to witchcraft, they also play an important role as spiritual leaders and healers. They held a women’s meeting where they discussed and decided that the myth of devouring witches came out of men’s hatred for strong and independent women. They also have superstitious beliefs as a tale sung during Diwali narrates the story of King Hudo, in the small town of Shamlaji. He had seven queens but none had children. So, the people of the village considered the king as inauspicious and barren. They held him responsible even for the barren fields and thought it was because of the curse on King hudo. Even the poor people and birds didn’t accept his offer. But later he performed penance in deep forests and his wish was fulfilled at the end as three sons and four daughters were born to his seven queens. And he was freed from the curse upon him.

They lived in real harmony with their environment including birds, animals, and trees. It was classified as the golden age of harmony. They believe in supernatural elements and ghosts. They are of the view that bhoots reside on pipal trees and watch over the Adivasi villages. It is a well-known truth that these spirits protect the Adivasi and never harm them.

During rainy season and heavy showers, they suffered due to floods and the village drowned and were cut off from vegetation. After the deluge, there were very few who survived among whom Kavi and Kava were the ones, saved from the flood. They believe in the presence of *Kudrat* (Nature), God as the abiding force in nature, permeating and providing for everything. They believe it is the dark side of God, *Deva* who created this deluge and on the pleas of God, he left Kava and Kavi alive. They both lived happily discovering their new surrounding but *Deva* tried to complicate their relationship by organizing a competition among them. And Kavi was a young and vibrant girl she always outmatched him and won. *Deva* poisoned Kava's mind saying that if he loses, he will have to serve Kavi throughout his life and he asks him to use trickery if he is not able to win using strength. The tale reflects how women were bright, strong, and powerful but men used tricks to distract her and defeat her. Even today Dungri Garasiya tribe pays for the bride a *Dapu*, a bride price. Another tale titled *Brother and Sister No More* narrates the story of a *Goval* and his sister, *Rama* living in *Ramera* Village. They lived a simple and comfortable life in the lap of nature. They considered *Kudrat* (Nature) as their mother who allowed the spirit world *Bhoots* (Ghost) to act the way they will. When *Goval* was married it led to the change in relation of the brother and sister. *Rama* was humiliated by his wife was not given food and was kept aloof. Later she was forced to leave the house and she left cursing her brother and sister-in-law. She walked towards the field looking at the sky she prayed, "Kudarat, oh merciful god, help me! Please give me shelter! I'm dying of hunger, send someone to save me" (Sres 69). There was thunder and lightning, and it rained heavily but she was guarded by an angel *bhoot* (Ghost). They also believe that each spirit is assigned to an *Adivasi* man who protects them. In the morning, she had food and plenty of water. She thought of who helped her and she heard the sound of men approaching her on horses. They were from the royal family out for hunting and asked for water from *Rama*. She offered the pot she had. The young man, *Vaghela*, a prince of Rajasthan was influenced by her beauty and asked her for marriage. She replied, "I will, if it is the wish of Kudarat" (Sres 71). And suddenly two devil birds flew down on

the perch of her hut as if it were a sign from heaven. It shows how tribal women had the right to choose their husbands. When they moved towards the palace, she saw her house where she used to live with her brother, Goval, which was destroyed by storm. This tale also shows the relations of Dungri Bhils with the royal families in Rajasthan.

Animals such as snakes, tigers, and birds often can speak and form relationships with human characters. This reflects the Bhil view of animals as equals and companions rather than mere resources. Bhil folktales often personify natural elements, attributing human-like qualities, emotions, and intentions to them. In numerous Bhil folktales, snakes are depicted as guardians of sacred locations, including forests, rivers, and ancestral lands. The snake can act as a protector, guarding sacred traditions or knowledge from outsiders. This symbolism of guardianship relates to the snake's function in nature as a being that traverses between realms, residing in both the earth and the underworld. Trees like Mahua and Banyan are considered sacred, and their human-like qualities symbolize their spiritual importance. In a tale, *Karmabai the daughter of Seshnag* (King of Underworld), was the queen of King Harishchandra. She was his favorite queen, so other queens used to conspire against her because of jealousy. They accused her of poisoning the king. When she realized that her husband didn't trust her purity and dedication, she took seven grains of black beans and chanted Bhairav Mantra. She used this spell to call upon her father. She warned and cursed the king that if she left, it would be the end of the world for him and he would lose his kingdom. After she left, a flood broke the land and because of the anger of the snake king, he left Shamlaji and went to dwell in the Arabian Sea. Even today his tail remains in Shamlaji while his head is in Mumbai. *The Serpent's Gift* highlights the theme of co-existence between nature and humans. In this tale, a serpent becomes a saviour and benefactor to humans. The story often begins with a poor Bhil family where a girl encounters a Serpent and saves it from danger. In request Serpent bestows a gift upon them that if she chants the magic mantra, she will get the food she desires and it transforms her life. By using the magic spell, she also saved the life of the king and later the king married her. There are several instances of the Bhil tribe

having contact with royal families. *The Cobras Under the Oleander Tree* also depicts the snakes as protectors and saviors. In the story, a couple living in Jethwa village lost their first child as she was killed by the tiger and taken to the forest. Later they were blessed with a second child. But Mangli, the mother was frightened because of an experience and so she prayed to her guardian *Bhoot* (Ghost) to keep the snakes under the oleander tree she planted to protect her child. Once she planted the tree king and queen cobra started residing under the oleander tree and when after a few days the tiger again came looking for the child he could eat. He hid himself from Mangli's sight but he couldn't hide from the cobras under the tree. They bit him on his legs and killed him. In this way, her child was saved by the cobras. Since then, the Oleander is a special plant and is worshipped by the Dungri Garasiya Adivasis and it is found in front of their homes.

The Dungri Garasiya believed that the first being to be created was a woman, and so in their society, women were accorded equal respect as men and inheritance was from mother to daughter. There is a folk tale titled *Alkhi and Dhulki* which has instances of how the entire village celebrated and danced on the birth of two girls. Everyone was given a mouth full of jaggery. It reflects the time when girls were as much desired as sons. The girls were twins and so were very close to each other. When Alki died due to fever and when she was buried Dhulki jumped in the fire claiming she could not live without her. The villagers were shocked seeing this but they later celebrated the love of sisters by dancing with swords in their hands. They believe women were the first creators and give an example of love too. And so, every year during spring equinox the Garasiya Bhil gather at night and sing and dance around the bonfire. Men and women walk in procession around the bonfire remembering the two twin sisters who died long ago. They used to rely on *Bhopa* (a traditional priest) and *Bhagat* (a spiritually enlightened healer or mystic) to cure diseases. They are central figures in this community and are believed to possess spiritual wisdom and connection to deities and spirits. When Dulki got a high fever, her parent took her to Bhopa and Bhagat. The Bhils believe in ghosts, spirits, and ancestral powers that inhabit natural features such as forests, rivers,

and mountains. These entities can provide protection or cause harm leading to rituals designed to appease them or seek their favor. Unfortunate events or supernatural occurrences like sickness, accidents, or agricultural failure are linked to the effects of spirits or curses, and magical practices are employed to confront these difficulties. They have deep-rooted traditional healing practices.

The Dungri Garasiya Bhils mainly depend on rainfed farming and forest resources for their livelihoods, which causes them to suffer from crop failure and food shortages during droughts, famines, and dry spells. Such circumstances resulted in starvation and compelled them to work as bonded laborers and migrate, resulting in a disconnection from their cultural and social connections to their ancestral lands. This situation is illustrated in the story *Bhaliya and Priya* where they reside in a village called Gamdi. For two consecutive years, there was no rain, leading to the drying up of their crops. This harsh period of drought was referred to as famine of 56. In their desperation, the Adivasis resorted to slaughtering their farm animals for sustenance, but this food supply quickly ran out. The Dungri Bhils sought assistance from King Siddhraj of Udaipur, who ruled Gujarat but had influence over parts of Rajasthan, including the area where Bhils lived. This reflects the interactions between tribal communities and the royal authorities during the medieval era. King Siddhraj proclaimed that food would be provided in exchange for labor, resulting in the Dungri Bhils being employed as laborers. They endured great struggles for survival, as the absence of work meant a lack of food. The women faced greater hardships, as shown in the tale of Priya, who was forced to become the king's bedmate due to his admiration for her beauty. The voice of Kaliya, the main character, represents the perspective of an Adivasi speaking about their hardships during the times of Famine and drought when they had to abandon their homes and fields to work as slaves in an unfamiliar city. Priya became Raja Siddhraj's favored concubine. Later, the king met his demise in a hunting accident. Following the King's death, his wives and concubines chose to commit sati, but Priya managed to escape from the palace and found refuge in the Aravalli forests. There are also rumours that Priya's husband, Kaliya, avenged the king's death.

Conclusion

By examining these folk tales, this study has revealed that these stories were not only as entertainment but also as vital cultural artifacts that express the values, traditions, and social norms of the Garasiya Bhil community. These narratives embody themes of living in harmony with nature, the wisdom of ancestors, their belief in witchcraft, and the significance of community unity, all of which are fundamental aspects of Garasiya Bhil culture. Additionally, folktales provide insights into how the Garasiya Bhils view themselves, their role within the wider social-ecological landscape, and their struggles during famines. These can be seen as records of history having illustrations of Dungri Bhils having ties with the royal families of Rajasthan. These tales represent a community's vibrant cultural expression and their experiences.

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