

Gavri: Performing Identity through Folk Narratives and Ritual Traditions

Preeti Choudhary

Rajasthan in India is home to many scheduled tribes. Among the twelve listed, the Bhils are prominent. Bhils are the oldest tribe of India (Tripura 2005) and are the second largest tribe in Rajasthan, with a population of around forty-one lakh in the region according to the census 2011 (National Scheduled Tribes Finance and Development Corporation). They hold significant historical importance in the region, with many cities named after Bhil Kings who once ruled the area, such as Kota, which derives its name from Kotya Bhil; Banswara from Bansiya Bhil; and Dungarpur from Dungariya Bhil (IGNCA).

In Rajasthan, the Bhils are primarily found in the southern Aravalli region. This region was once covered in lush forests. The Bhils, regarded as the original inhabitants and free lords of the forests, were considered the rightful owners of the land. Although their customs were viewed as unorthodox by upper-caste Hindus, they were not regarded as impure like outcastes. As autochthons familiar with local spirits and rituals, they conferred their indigenous authority upon the Rajputs through initiation ceremonies, legitimising the latter's rule. (Tod 35)

Bhils, with their primitive connection to nature, worship nature alongside Shiva, Parvati, and Durga. According to common belief, Goddess Parvati created the Bhils and gave them a bull and a bow for farming and hunting. When a Bhil killed the sacred bull for food, Lord Shiva cursed the community, condemning them to perpetual servitude and backwardness, which they consider is the reason for their marginalised status (Kshatriyas 3). The earliest temples are found in remote mountain gorges, thick forests, and near sacred springs, places of natural glory that evoke reverence. Here, the divine energy represented by the

serpent-wreathed *lingam* and its companion, the bull, was among the earliest forms of worship, venerated even by forest dwellers. The cult of Mahadeva, i.e. Shiva, prevailed in these areas, with Udaipur's most magnificent festivals dedicated to his honour (Tod 260). One such festival is Gavri.

Gavri is a forty-day festival celebrated annually in July and September in the Mewar region of Rajasthan, India. In 2024, it was held in Udaipur. The festival, in its ritualistic manner, begins after obtaining the Goddess's consent to perform the ceremonial event and participate in the celebratory activities for forty days. Ahead of the Hindu month of *Shravan*, on behalf of the village, a Bhopa (a folk priest-singer) seeks permission from the Goddess Gorjyan (Chandalia) to conduct the festival, which typically takes three years (Bhanawat 132) for a village to receive. It is believed that the Bhopa receives permission when the goddess blesses him, as this becomes evident when he enters a trance, suggesting that the energy of the Goddess has possessed him. It is a matter of great honour not only for the Bhopa to gain permission but also for the entire village to perform it in honour of the Goddess. Once permission is sought, the village begins preparing for the festival, which includes folk dance dramas and enactments of mythological stories from the oral tradition of this indigenous tribe. There are various series of oral narratives performed during the festival, described as "a synchronized amalgam of ritual, dance, music, myths, folklore, and theatrical plays" (ICHCAP). These performances take place in 25-30 kinship villages over a period (Mewar Gavri). Gavri begins after agreements between two or four villages, and the characters perform it from place to place, observing fasts and abstinence (Sharma 212).

However, invoking the Goddess to seek permission is an essential part of the entire event, and permission is sought each day before the event begins. Each ritual starts with an invocation of the Goddess, and the drama only begins after a visual possession of Devi by one or more troupe members. People from various tribes gather in communities to perform their acts throughout these forty days. (Sahapedia; Ministry of Tourism).

The festival derives its name from Gauri (Parvati) and celebrates her union with Shiva. Stories often depict Parvati's devotion to Shiva, her penance to win his love, and their divine blessings for fertility, prosperity, and protection. Stories often depict Shiva as a protector and Parvati as a nurturing mother, highlighting the community's spiritual values. Tribal songs performed during the Gavri festival often invoke Gavri (Parvati) and Shankar (Shiva) and tell mythological and cultural stories. Bhil folk songs recall tales of Gavri's descent to earth and her blessings for prosperity. These songs highlight themes of love, fertility, and the divine interplay between life and death. Based on an overall trope of victory over evil, the festival revolves around mythological stories that are enacted during the rituals, symbolizing the divine union of Shiva and Parvati and their blessings on the community. Stories of Hindu gods and demons are enacted, often with a blend of humour and moral lessons. Gavri is a tribal dance-drama performed during the festival. The drama includes elaborate costumes, symbolic masks, and rhythmic dances that reflect the cosmic cycle of creation and destruction. Stories of Battles between gods and demons represent the triumph of good over evil.' This subversive performance is also likely to be the longest folk drama performed by any folk community (Chandalia).

The main character in Gavri is an elderly woman who chants Bhasmasur alongside Raya, symbolising Parvati and Vishnu in her female form. Jhamatya recites local poetry and sometimes acts as a clown, with Khatkadya echoing or complementing her dialogue. Other characters are called *Khela*. Gavri includes male characters and game figures such as *Ganpati*, *Bhamaria*, *Bheavad*, *Meena*, *Kan-Gujri*, *Jogi*, *LakhaBanjara*, *Natdi*, *Mata*, and *Sher*. The *Kanha-Gujri* game involves cymbals and tongs, while other performances use drums and plates. Magic, witchcraft, and tantric rituals are part of the performance, with characters healed through *Jhada-Phooka*, which are folk healing rituals and exorcistic practices. Occasionally, the priest also acts to get angry, where he starts posing questions which are purportedly answered by divine powers. (Sharma 212)

The Gavri festival is celebrated for forty-four days, starting from the first day of *Krishna Paksha* (dark fortnight) of *Bhadrapada*. On the first day, the festival begins with the *Bhopa* personally dressing the main characters of Gavri, Raiyan and Boodia, in the Goddess's temple in front of the village's respected *Panchas*. The goddess's *trishul* (trident) is positioned in the centre of a circle, symbolising the hallmark of the tribal community. It features six types of characters: gods, demons, humans, animals, wolves, and aquatic creatures. The actors and performers also mentioned that on the first day, the Gavri dance troupe performs in front of all the village temples, on the second day in the northern part of the village, and on the third day in other invited villages.



1 Consecrating the trident, source: photograph by the author

Bhairav, one of the performers at the festival, said that during the forty-day Gavri season, participants commit to a life of strict austerity, reflecting their deep spiritual connection with the living earth and the omnipresent divine spirit. In a personal interview, he responded, "We do not indulge in any illicit activity that might displease the gods." To mark this sacred period, they abstain not only from sex, alcohol, and meat but also from wearing shoes, sleeping on beds, and bathing. They do not even eat green vegetables to avoid harming even the smallest forms of life, such as insects



2 A performer during Gavri festival, source: a photograph by the author

that might be present in them. Another member of Bhairav's troupe stated, "Even leafy greens can have small insects which might not be visible to the eyes, and thus we completely shun eating them; we only do what is the bare minimum to live by, not harming any life proffered by the divine." Their diet is limited to a single simple meal each day, embodying humility and self-control. These practices symbolise their reverence for nature, their deities, and their pursuit of spiritual purity, fostering a harmonious connection between human and the cosmic.

Among the 10-15 classical traditional tales, with other new ones emerging, the stories necessarily include a few tales. Among their mythological dramas, *BadalyaHindawa* (The Banyan Swing) and *Bhilurana* (King of the Bhils) are two frequent ones. The narrative of *BadalyaHindawa*, central to the Gavri festival, underscores the Goddess's role as both a nurturer and a fierce protector of the Earth. This tale begins with the Goddess re-greening the Earth after a catastrophic, life-erasing flood, symbolising renewal and fertility.

The *BadalyaHindawa* narrative from the Gavri festival highlights the Goddess's role as a protector of nature. After re-greening the Earth post-flood, she fiercely defends it against greed and harm. When a guru, feeling threatened by a sacred banyan tree, convinces the king to destroy it, the Goddess and her Devi sisters, outraged by this sacrilege, infiltrate the king's court disguised as dancers. They reveal their divine identities, condemn the king's cowardice, and end his reign, asserting the sanctity of nature and the consequences of violating its balance. The other story of *Bhilurana* symbolises five centuries of Bhil resistance against external invasions, embodying their resilience and unity under a composite leader. The narrative condenses the historical struggles against Turkic, Mughal, and British forces, portraying them as a single oppressive entity. Inspired by the Goddess, Bhil warriors use daring ambushes, sabotage, and guerrilla tactics to reclaim their land and sovereignty, ultimately driving away the intruders. This tale celebrates the Bhil community's indomitable spirit and strategic prowess in defending their homeland.

A recurring tale is that of Bhasmasur, a demon who was granted a boon by Shiva that enabled him to turn anyone to ashes by placing his hand on their head. Misusing this power, Bhasmasur terrorised the world and wanted to kill Shiva to obtain Parvati until Vishnu, disguised as the enchanting Mohini, tricked him into destroying himself by placing his own hand on him. This story also alludes to gender fluidity, which is evident in the festival



3 Depiction of victory over the demon, source: a photograph by the author

where male performers cross-dress as women. As women are not permitted to travel with these troupes, all characters are played by men. A troupe member disguised as a woman explained, “Women have ‘monthly’ limitations, since the festival runs for more than a month, it is not possible to include women as they won’t sustain the period with all ‘purity’.” In most cultures, menstruating women are prohibited from sacred places like temples, and this is the reason that the Bhil performers give for disallowing women from the festival. Another member reported that women stay behind and worship the goddess by fasting for their family members and the success of the festival. (Chandalia; Sahapedia)

Stories of Kali slaying demons or Shiva’s fierce avatars battling malevolent forces are also the central themes. In addition to Hindu mythology, Gavri incorporates local Bhil legends and folk heroes, reflecting the community’s history, struggles, and victories. These stories often highlight themes of survival, resilience, and harmony with nature. Also, Gavri dramas include humorous interludes with characters like *Panch*, *Mochi* (Cobbler), and other village archetypes. These figures add levity while addressing social issues such as greed, corruption, and hypocrisy. However, the Gavri plays are mainly memory-based, and they have improvised temporally. Though the beginning and end do not

change, the actions in the middle are mutable. Even the stories are evolving to align with contemporary times.

Two days before Gavari ends, *Jawaar* (sorghums) are sown, and on the previous day, a clay elephant is brought from the potter. Once the elephant arrives, the Bhopa's devotional service ends. The Gavari, crop offering, and elephant are immersed in water, or buried outside the village. Navratri starts on the sixth day post-Gavari (Sharma 213). The culmination of this sacred cycle is marked by a ritual immersion, where the Goddess's fertility and blessings are symbolically returned to the waters, ensuring the community's prosperity and harmony with nature. This profound act signifies renewal and gratitude. In the final days of the Gavari festival, each troupe makes its way back to its home village for a grand concluding performance and the closing ceremonies. As the spiritual solemnity transitions into festivity, the village erupts with all-night celebrations, filled with vibrant music, energetic dances, and raucous joy.

Gavri, in this way, is not only a cultural expression but also a collective memory expressed through performative depiction in this theatrical display. Although it is an identity-specific festival of the Bhil tribe, it transforms into a convergence of multiple identities through the participation of Bhopas and other tribal communities. Gavari's Garada and Goma games highlight the roles of the Bhils and Meenas. Kalbelias earn their livelihoods by entertaining the public through exorcism and tantra-mantra, while acrobats impress audiences with various body movements using bamboo and lava. Therefore, it becomes a cosmopolitan representation of diverse identities coming together for this celebration.

Despite this glorious tradition, this oral heritage is on the verge of decline. However, locals and stakeholders are working to preserve it, and the Gavri festival is gradually gaining global recognition through national and international research collaborations. Ironically, Gavri's inclusion in UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage has helped safeguard it, securing a brighter future. Yet, modern interventions challenge this

folk art's ability to retain its charm even among the indigenous community. Many respondents reported that the country's landscapes are shrinking, which compels the community to seek other sources of subsistence. Once a person becomes disconnected from the community, their migration also weakens the belief system in these ethnic practices. Modern interventions conflict with these traditional and indigenous expressions, as one of the cross-dressed performers stated: "You can only preserve these rituals if you stay rooted in the community. Once you go out, you never find time to commit yourself to such events. It's sad; I think we are the last generation to perform and preserve this." Therefore, it is crucial that studies are inspired for the cultural preservation of this important ethnic practice of India's oldest tribe. Hope this oral tradition gets the light it deserves in literature by further studies and research.

Works Cited

- Bhanawat, Mahendra. *Janjatiyon Ke Dharmik Sarokar*. Udaipur: Mukta Prakashan. 2006.
- Chandalia, H. S. Tribal Dance-drama Gavari: Theatre of Subversion and Popular Faith. Academia.edu, https://www.academia.edu/31877270/Tribal_Dance_drama_Gavari_Theatre_of_Subversion_and_Popular_Faith.. Accessed 9 Oct. 2025.
- ICHCAP. *Gavari: The Unwritten Epic of a Mewari Tribe*. UNESCO ICHCAP, https://www.unesco-ichcap.org/board.es?mid=a10501020000&bid=A112&act=view&list_no=13779&tag=&nPage=52.. Accessed 9 Oct. 2025.
- Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts. *The Bhils of Rajasthan*. IGNCA, <https://ignca.gov.in/divisionss/janapada-sampada/tribal-art-culture/adivasi-art-culture/the-bhils-of-rajasthan/> . . Accessed 8 Oct. 2025.
- Mewar Gavari. *Gavari Introduction – Mewar Gavari*. <https://www.gavari.info/gavari-introduction/> . . Accessed 9 Oct. 2025.
- Ministry of Tourism, Government of India. *Gavari*. Utsav Portal, <https://utsav.gov.in/view-event/gavari-1..> Accessed 8 Oct. 2025.
- National Scheduled Tribes Finance and Development Corporation. *Population Data*. Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, <https://>

nstfdc.tribal.gov.in/(S(ujra4xfrzbcfwct301ozdga))/frm_population.aspx.
Accessed 8 Oct. 2025.

Sahapedia. *Gavari: A 40-Day Mystical Theatre Celebration of the Goddess Among Rajasthan's Bhil Tribe*. <https://www.sahapedia.org/gavari-40-day-mystical-theatre-celebration-goddess-among-rajasthans-bhil-tribe>. .
Accessed 9 Oct. 2025.

Sharma, Dr.Gopinath. *Rajasthan KaSanskritikItihas*. Rajasthan Hindi Granth Academy, 2022.

Social Justice and Empowerment Department, Government of Rajasthan. *List of Caste ST*. <https://sje.rajasthan.gov.in/Default.aspx?PageID=66>. .
Accessed 8 Oct. 2025.

Tod, James. *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan: Or the Central and Western Rajput States of India*. Originally published 1829–1832. Reprint, Yale University Press, 2023.

Tripura Tribal Research and Cultural Institute. *Bhil*. Government of Tripura, <https://trci.tripura.gov.in/bhil>. . Accessed 8 Oct. 2025.